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VERGE OF HARMING

EXPLORING ABUSE IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HARM

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, 8,577 professionals received our training. Over 75,000 adults at risk of serious harm or murder and more than 95,000 children received support through dedicated multi-agency support designed by us and delivered with partners. In the last six years, almost 3,000 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to the two philanthropic funders who have generously supported this project.

Our thanks go to all of the young people and practitioners who shared their views and experiences as part of this research and the pupil referral unit who gave us the opportunity to work with their students.

Particular thanks go to:

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Executive summary

Overview

SafeLives received funding from two philanthropic funders to address the evidence gap around young people's use of harmful behaviours in their relationships.

Funding for this project was split into three phases. Funding for the initial phase of the project, which included the creation of a young people's co-creation panel, desk-based research, and a large-scale survey, came from two philanthropic funders. The second stage of funding covered the qualitative research methods outlined on this page and came from the Home Office. The full report produced for the Home Office **can be found here**. Extensive analysis pulling together all datasets from across the project was then carried out, funded by the two philanthropic funders. This analysis, which formed phase three of the project, is presented in this report, as well as a set of recommendations based on the research findings.

The aims of the research project are:

1. **To explore why and how young people begin to use abusive behaviours in their relationships**
2. **To better understand what it means to be on the 'verge of harming'**
3. **To explore what support for young people who harm should look like**

The following methods were undertaken to address these aims:

- **A desk-based literature review**
- **A digital survey for young people aged 11-25**
- **One-to-one interviews with young people worried about their behaviour**
- **Interview-style surveys with young people worried about their behaviour**
- **One-to-one interviews with practitioners**
- **Focus groups with students from a pupil referral unit (PRU)**
- **Workshops with young people in secondary schools**
- **Workshops with a panel of young survivors and advocates**

"...early teens.... you're not thinking about whether things are healthy, you're just doing stuff... from around my age...a lot of people want to be better, but they don't know how... I just hope that the next stage is we figure out how to be better."

22-YEAR-OLD
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Key Findings

THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS AND WORKSHOPS

The following four themes were developed through thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected during the period of the project funded by the Home Office. A detailed discussion of each theme can be found in the **research report** produced for this phase of the work. As stated in the research report, the views expressed within the current report are not necessarily representative of those of the Home Office.

1. INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF RELATIONSHIPS

This theme outlines the interconnectedness of relationships across a young person's life, and the way in which these relationships can normalise abuse and then reinforce this normalisation. The young people's narratives highlight how relationships within the **home and family** environment provide an initial framework for relationships that can lead to an intergenerational cycle of abuse, particularly when there is a lack of love and nurture, or healthy boundaries. However, they also provide examples of how young people who experience domestic abuse in childhood may have an increased level of awareness of abusive behaviour and its impacts, which leads them to a commitment to do no harm in relationships.

Following the normalisation of abuse in the home, many of the young people discussed the reinforcing of this normalisation across their **peer relationships**. Data presented within this theme suggests that even when young people are opening up about their own use of harmful behaviours to their friends, and in some cases seeking support and advice, the responses from peers serve to normalise and maintain these behaviours. This normalisation was also reinforced by **the media**, which data suggests young people turn to as a surrogate role model when this hasn't been available to them elsewhere.

For many of the young people in this study, their **earliest romantic/dating relationships** also reinforced the normalisation of abuse, and a number described their progression from victim to instigator, leading to the conclusion that young victims need support to ensure they do not go on to either experience or instigate harm in later relationships.

2. A GENDERED EXPERIENCE

This theme outlines the importance of gender in shaping young people's experiences of relationships, of harm/harming, and of consequences for abuse. When it comes to relationships being a gendered experience, data collected for this study evidences the continued existence of institutionalised heterosexuality and the way in which a gender hierarchy, built on acceptance and expectation of male violence and female responsibilisation, continues to shape young people's relationships. For the girls and young women interviewed, this gender hierarchy framed relationships with males as a necessity, and therefore led to the maintenance of unhealthy and abusive relationships by positioning singleness as a worse fate than victimisation. This theme also explores the way in which gender intersects with culture to shape attitudes to abuse, and with ethnicity/race to shape experiences of relationships and harm, demonstrating the need for an intersectional approach to understanding the dynamics of abuse, and to support for those experiencing and instigating harm.

It is important to acknowledge that, aside from practitioner data, data discussed within this theme comes from interviews with young women and a non-binary/gender-queer young person. Though none of the schedules (interview, focus group or survey questions) directly asked about gender, the majority of young women and the non-binary/gender-queer young person chose to discuss issues such as gender hierarchy in detail, while the topic did not feature at all in the survey responses of, or focus group discussions with, young men included in this study. This gendered pattern mirrors that seen in existing

research, in which there was an absence of coercion and overt dominance in boys' accounts about their own and other boys' relationships with girls, yet coercion was a dominant theme in the girls' accounts[1]. This pattern has been reflected on as being: While no boys or young men took part in semi-structured interviews for this study, feminist and critical race theory suggest that even if they had participated in interviews, narratives of gender hierarchy and coercion are likely to have been absent from their accounts, and therefore the data presented within this theme may have remained the same.

'Consistent with feminist and critical race theories, which describe how those in positions of less power in a hierarchical system need to understand how those with more power act and think, while those in positions of greater power are not compelled to comprehend the outcomes of their own dominating behaviour.' [1]

3. IMPROVING RELATIONSHIP LITERACY

Data discussed within this theme highlights the perspectives of practitioners and young people on the existing gaps within education and support provision. Many of the young people who participated in this project expressed a desire to experience healthy and happy relationships, and discomfort when this wasn't the case. The data suggested that young people's lack of knowledge around what a healthy relationship looks like was often a barrier to them experiencing healthy relationships, both as a victim and as someone causing harm. Practitioners reflected on the challenges around providing support for young people, and why attention needs to be focused on increased education. Overall, both practitioners and young people felt like more education around domestic abuse and healthy relationships was needed both for young people and across society, as well as a focus on ensuring specialist interventions are available for young people who need them.

4. THE FOUR PILLARS OF SUPPORT

The data in this theme highlights four elements of support that practitioners and young people felt were fundamental to successful support with young people who harm. The conversations emphasised the importance of the **approach** practitioners took to support, and how this needed to be holistic, working with the 'whole person' as well as the whole family. The data also highlighted that support must occur in an **environment** in which the young person feels safe, in order for them to open up and engage. The importance of the practitioner's **response** to the young person's behaviour was also discussed, with conversations highlighting the possible damage that could be caused by a solely punitive approach, and instead calling for a supportive approach which facilitates accountability rather than forcing it. Finally, the **relationship** between the young person and the practitioner was described as an important foundation for support, especially for those with complex or limited support networks. It is clear from previous themes that young people who harm face numerous barriers to support, in some cases despite a desire to engage and address their behaviour. Therefore, when they do access support, we need to ensure that their first experience of support is right for them, both for the benefit of the young person and their future relationships.

The following key findings and recommendations have been developed from the data collected across each of the methods undertaken for the Verge of Harming project, including data from interviews, focus groups, workshops, and the digital survey.

Key Findings

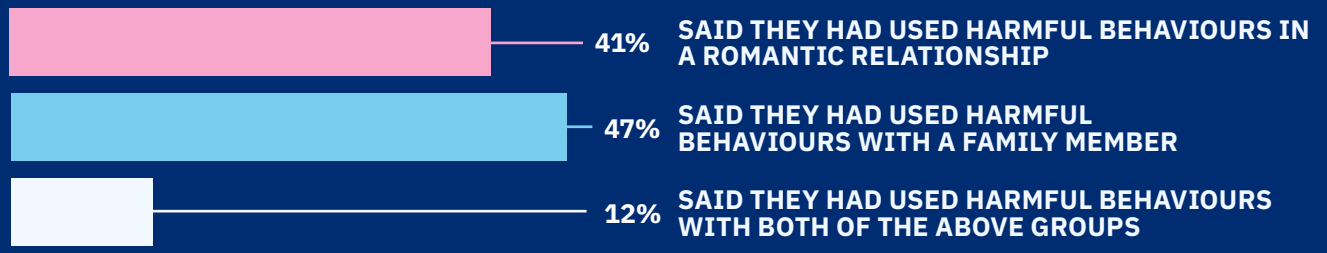
1. Young people may not view the label of 'abuse' as relevant to them until this is expanded upon with specific behaviours and context

A. When asked to choose a term to describe unhealthy relationships, young people most frequently chose the term toxic, however data from this study shows young people view the terms toxic and abusive as having different meanings, so they cannot be used interchangeably

B. Though they initially showed a preference for the term toxic, when young people in this study were provided with an example of an abusive relationship and specific behaviours, the term abusive became the most frequently used term in their responses

2. 30% of young people completing the survey said they had used harmful behaviours in a relationship

Of these 245 young people:



The only factor significantly impacting who young people described using harm towards was age

3. Young people were significantly more likely to describe the use of emotional/ psychological abuse (48%) than behaviours within any other grouping

A. The type of abusive behaviour described was affected by age, gender identity and the type of relationship

B. Despite the prevalence of this form of abuse, data from young people and practitioners emphasised how prevailing societal understandings of abuse often limit it solely to physical behaviours. This has led to less recognition of emotionally/psychologically harmful behaviours as abuse

4. Young people provided a range of reasons, justifications and motivations for harmful behaviour across their survey responses and within interviews. These were grouped into five themes:

Trust issues – young people frequently described their use of harm being linked to insecurity, suspicions that their partner was cheating on them, and fear of rejection. Some saw controlling behaviour as a means of maintaining their relationship

Emotional dysregulation – many young people described being unable to process or manage big emotions and using harmful behaviour as a kind of emotional release. For neurodivergent young people and those with mental ill-health, there were extra complexities around emotional regulation

Adverse experiences – a number of young people linked their harmful behaviour to their own experiences of trauma, and many discussed the normalisation of harm across their home and family environment, their peer relationships, their early romantic/dating relationships and the media

Reaction/response – some young people described their use of harm as a response to the behaviour of another. In some cases this appeared to reflect violent resistance, and in others it was about using harm to punish someone for unwanted behaviour

Power and control – some young people described the use of harm as a means to gain feelings of power and control, sometimes to compensate for a lack of control in other areas, and sometimes because they found it enjoyable

5. Young people described anger, followed by jealousy, insecurity and sadness as the feelings most linked with the use of harmful behaviour

6. Data from young people and practitioners placed young people using harm at various points on a spectrum of awareness, with some unaware of their behaviour and its impact, some aware of their behaviour but not of its impact, and others both aware of their behaviour and its impact

SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HARM

7. Most young people felt that a young person using harmful behaviour should be offered support, however younger individuals were less sure about whether support should be offered

A. Over half of the whole sample (58%) felt that Frankie (a character instigating harm in a vignette used in the survey) should be offered support

B. When participants were grouped by key stage, those aged 11 – 13 years old were the only group more likely to say they were 'not sure'

8. When asked about what support for young people who harm should look like, young people most commonly discussed the need for support to be non-confrontational; the importance of the young person feeling accepted, and the importance of a relationship of trust with the person delivering support

9. Young people and practitioners emphasised a current lack of support for young people when they are first entering romantic/dating relationships, despite young people expressing a desire to engage in such support

A. Young people and practitioners felt that conversations around healthy (and unhealthy) relationships should start before young people begin to have romantic/dating relationships

B. The combined views of practitioners and young people advocated for an at school but not by school approach to support for young people beginning to engage in romantic/ dating relationships

10. Young people completing the survey described what they felt would have helped them to not use harmful behaviours, the most common themes across their responses were:

A. Having a space to discuss their behaviours and get advice

B. Being able to reflect on their own thoughts and actions

C. A change in the relationship dynamic

D. Increased education/awareness

11. Many young people expressed a lack of understanding of how to have a healthy relationship and a desire for guidance around this

A. Young people reflected that this was in part due to a lack of modelling of healthy relationships by those in their life and across the media

B. Where there were examples of healthy relationships modelled by the adults in their lives or provided through education, these were predominantly heteronormative. This therefore led to a narrow view of what healthy relationships can look like and provided an additional barrier for LGBTQ+ young people to navigate their relationships healthily

12. Young people and practitioners emphasised the significance of the working relationship between a support worker and a young person using harm, and the need to establish this relationship before doing behaviour change work. There was also a focus on the need to build relationships with those in the young person's support network, including family and other professionals

13. There are numerous elements of a young person's experiences and identity which may shape their experience of harm and harming and their engagement with support. These include:

A. The intersecting elements of who the young person is, including their ethnicity and culture, their sexuality and gender identity, and any mental ill-health or neurodiversity

B. What harmful behaviours the young person is using and what impact this has on themselves and others

C. The motivations and underlying reasons why the young person may be using these behaviours

14. Young people felt the following elements should be included in behaviour change work:

A. Understanding contributing factors – how a young person's past experiences, underlying beliefs, or emotional dysregulation could contribute to their use of harmful behaviours

B. Facilitating reflection – helping young people to reflect on their own behaviours

C. Building empathy and understanding – supporting young people to understand the impact of their behaviours and 'de-normalise' harmful behaviours

D. Providing a framework for healthy relationships and behaviour – young people felt they needed to be given a framework for healthy relationships and behaviours which includes a focus on healthy communication and boundaries

E. Behaviour modelling and guidance – in addition to having a framework for healthy behaviour and relationships, young people and practitioners felt that these dynamics should be modelled to the young person by those offering support, as well as those in their wider support network

F. Domestic abuse awareness – healthy relationship education needs to be accompanied by unhealthy relationship education, so that young people are able to identify abusive behaviours

15. Young people showed a preference for informal support networks over formal support

A. The five options of support chosen most often were their closest friend, their partner/the person they are seeing, a parent/carer, a therapist/ counsellor, and looking online

B. The proportion of young people who felt they would confide in a parent or carer, their partner, and online support differed with age

C. The only professional non-binary young people stated they would be most likely to speak to was a therapist or counsellor

16. Young people found the endings of relationships particularly turbulent and felt they needed more support around how to manage this stage of a relationship in a healthy way

17. Over half (56%) of the young people who took part in workshops said they would not seek support if they were worried about their own behaviour. The most frequently described barriers were around fear and embarrassment

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Healthy relationships education and prevention work needs to:
    - Work towards expanding current understandings of abuse to include behaviours that aren't solely physical
    - Equip young people to respond well and safely when their friends share concerns about their own behaviour
    - Develop young people's emotional literacy so that they feel able to identify, understand and express adverse emotions in a healthy way
2. Resources and education relating to healthy relationships and domestic abuse need to expand beyond heteronormative depictions to ensure visibility of LGBTQ+ relationships
3. Domestic abuse awareness campaigns that want to reach young people need to ensure terminology (such as domestic abuse) is explained in a way that feels relevant for young people, using examples with characters/actors in this age range and behaviours that take place in young people's relationships
4. This research identified a need for support that exists between the levels of prevention (before harm is used) and specialist domestic abuse support. In order to better understand this level of support and what it should look like, research is needed mapping out what currently exists, the gaps, and young people's views and experiences of this provision
5. Partnership working between specialist domestic abuse services and organisations working with young people (such as schools) needs to be strengthened in order to increase the visibility of such services and improve referral pathways
6. Research focused on the new relationship and sex education (RSHE) curriculum should be carried out with a domestic abuse lens in order to explore the impact of this new curriculum on young people's views around, and experiences of, romantic/dating relationships
    - SafeLives are currently undertaking research exploring how the new curriculum is being received in secondary schools, however further work is needed focusing on primary schools
7. Specialist training focused on domestic abuse and young people should be made available to professionals working with this age group. As therapists/counsellors were the practitioner group young people said they would be most likely to share concerns about their own behaviour with, training should be made available to them as a priority

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HARM

These recommendations reflect the early intervention model of support outlined in the findings section of this report (pp. 47-61), which has been created based on data from this study.

8. Support for young people who harm should be holistic, working with the whole person (intersecting identities and overlapping needs), whole family, and whole community (family and other professionals working with the young person)
9. The response to young people who harm should be supportive rather than solely punitive, ensuring that when consequences/punishment are a necessary response to such behaviour, this does not happen without support and behaviour change work also being provided
10. Those providing support should seek to build and maintain strong working relationships with the young people they are supporting, as well as family and other professionals, and take time to end these relationships well
11. Those working with young people who harm should seek to tailor the support environment so that each young person feels that they are in a judgement-free, non-confrontational, and safe space

Background, aims and methods

Background

While the current definition of domestic abuse includes those aged 16 and over[2], and research has suggested that those aged 13-19 may experience the highest rates of abuse of any age group[3,4], abuse in adolescent relationships has been paid comparatively little attention in the literature. Historically, young people's relationships have been categorised as trivial and fleeting[5] and research exploring domestic abuse has solely focused on this phenomenon within adult relationships. Over recent decades, however, a growing body of researchers have begun to highlight the need for research specifically focusing on harmful behaviours in young people's relationships. Research responding to this call has emphasised the significance of young people's relationships and the long-term negative impacts of experiences of abuse in adolescence[5,6]. It has also highlighted a number of factors which may influence the likelihood of young people experiencing or instigating abuse. While peer and family relationships are discussed within such research as important in influencing attitudes and behaviour in young people's dating/romantic relationships[7,8], there is some disagreement as to the level of influence and how one relationship shapes the other[8,9]. Gender is another significant factor highlighted within the literature, with many studies reflecting higher levels of both victimisation and instigation reported by girls and young women. There are several explanations given for this, including gender differences in the appraisal of behaviour[10], but further exploration is needed around exactly how gender shapes experiences of harm and harming. Existing research also suggests the need for any future research to take an intersectional approach, which considers how other factors intersect with gender to shape experiences of domestic abuse and support around it[11,12]. When it comes to support for young people who harm, while there appears to be agreement on the need for a holistic approach which is context specific[11,13], there are conflicting perspectives on the response to harmful behaviour, and whether it should be supportive or solely punitive[11,14,15.] This research aims to explore some of these issues through mixed-methods research with young people who harm and practitioners working with this group.

Aims

The Verge of Harming research project aims to explore the use of harm in young people's romantic/dating relationships and the implications for support. While there is a growing body of research in this area, this predominantly focuses on the experiences of young victim-survivors. SafeLives are a survivor-led organisation and seek to centre these perspectives at the heart and start of all we do; however, we also recognise that to better understand domestic abuse we need to include those who are responsible for causing harm in these conversations. This research therefore aims to focus on young people who are using/have used harmful behaviours in their romantic/dating relationships, and is guided by the following three aims:

1. **To explore why and how young people begin to use abusive behaviours in their relationships**
2. **To better understand what it means to be on the 'verge of harming'**
3. **To explore what support for young people who harm should look like**

Methods

The findings outlined in this report reflect data collected through the following methods:

Surveys

Mixture of open and closed questions

Completed by 749 11-25 year olds

Interviews

Six 1-2-1 interviews with young people worried about their behaviour

Five interview style surveys completed by YPs worried about their behaviour

10 Practitioners

Workshops & focus groups

19 young people attending a pupil referral unit

70 young people attending secondary school

Panel of eight young survivors and advocates

THE 'HAVE YOUR SAY' SURVEY

Following a literature review, the first method of data collection for this study was a digital survey designed to capture the views and experiences of young people aged 11-25. This survey asked young people about their thoughts on an example scenario, before asking about their own use of harmful behaviour (if any), and their views on support for young people who harm (a full list of the questions asked can be found in Appendix 1). Social media was used as the primary platform for promotion of this survey, with content being shared across SafeLives' social media platforms, as well as a paid Instagram campaign. This campaign (in addition to the survey itself) was co-created with a panel of young people who developed the #IsItOk?' hashtag. This hashtag accompanied a video made up of short clips of young people in relationships, which encouraged those watching it to complete the survey and share their views:

The role and contribution of the panel is discussed further in the section on Authentic Voice.

SafeLives also partnered with a TikTok influencer, and an actor with a large following on Instagram, including many within the age range under study. Both created videos focused on promoting the survey and included the link on their accounts. In addition to promotion across social media, SafeLives shared the survey link with their network, as well as advice for promoting the survey if they wished to do so. The Verge of Harming team also attended two events run by the **Her Centre** focused on domestic abuse/healthy relationships and young people, and promoted the survey with both the practitioners and young people in attendance at the first event.

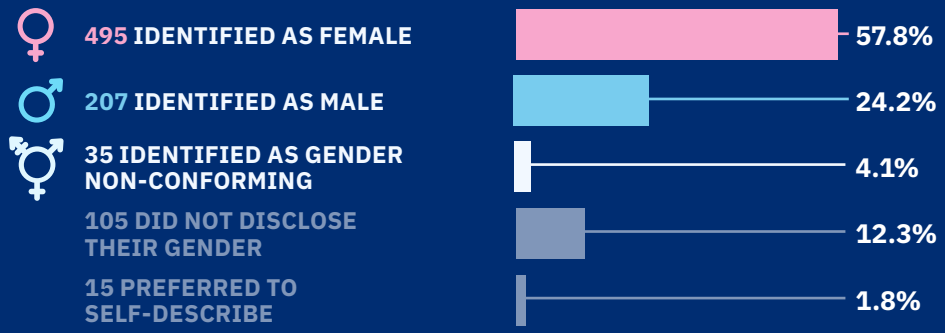
More information about the interviews and workshops can be found within the **previous report**, including documents such as the consent forms and interview schedules used.

Demographics

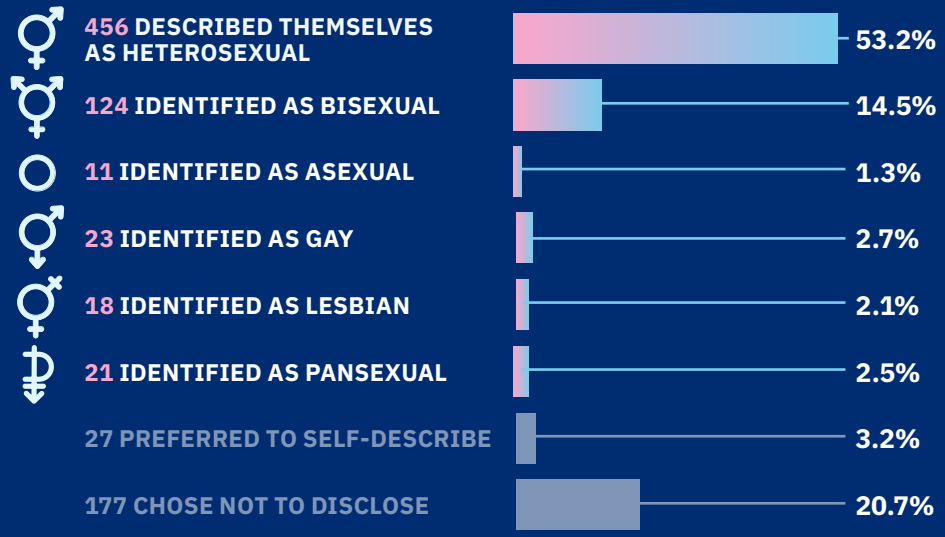
A total of 857 young people and 10 practitioners took part in the project.

YOUNG PEOPLE

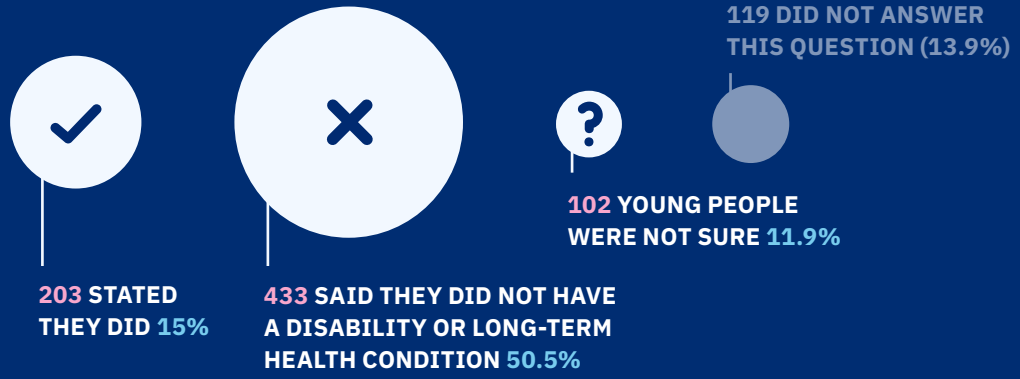
Of the 857 young people



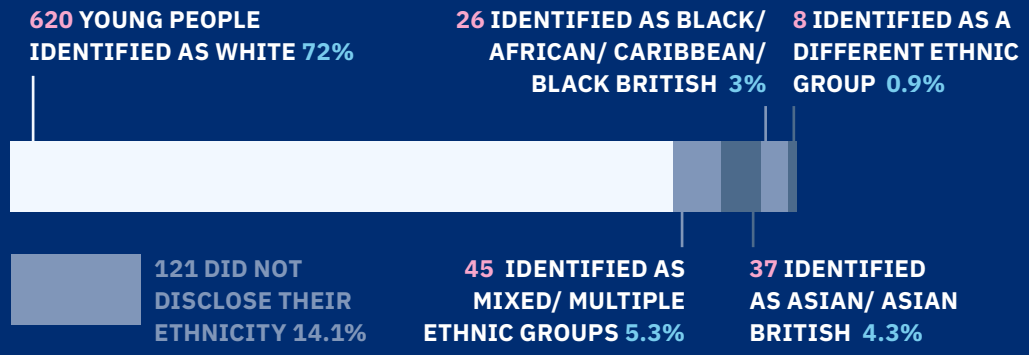
Of the 857 young people



Young people were asked if they considered themselves to have a disability or long-term health condition



Young people were also asked about their ethnicity. Of the sample:



YOUNG PEOPLE

Due to the different data collection methods, age related data was collected differently across the methods, with exact ages collected in the survey and age ranges collected across the other methodologies.

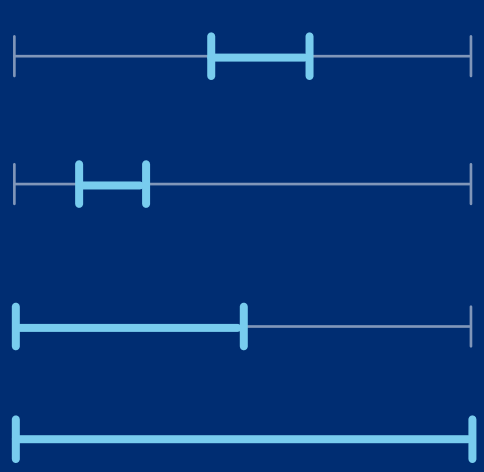
The spread of ages of young people in the sample was from 11 - 25 years old.

THOSE PARTICIPATING IN THE WASSUP PANEL WERE BETWEEN 17 - 20, THOUGH TWO DID NOT GIVE THEIR AGE

THOSE PARTICIPATING IN THE FOCUS GROUPS IN THE PRU WERE BETWEEN 13 - 15 YEARS OLD

THOSE TAKING PART IN THE HER CENTRE WORKSHOPS WERE BETWEEN 11 – 18

THOSE WHO TOOK PART IN THE SURVEY WERE AGED 11 – 25 YEARS



Those who took part in the survey were further grouped by age, based on key stages.

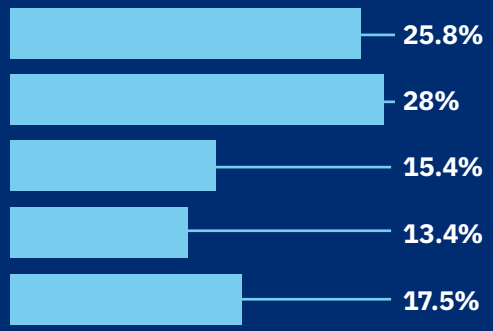
193 YOUNG PEOPLE WERE AGED 11-13 YEARS OLD — 25.8%

210 WERE AGED 14-16 YEARS — 28%

115 WERE AGED 17-18 YEARS — 15.4%

100 WERE AGED 19-21 — 13.4%

131 WERE AGED 22-25 — 17.5%



Where statistical testing has been carried out based on age, this reflects the key stage groupings detailed above.

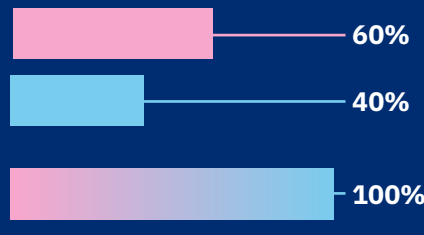
PRACTITIONERS

Of the 10 practitioners

6 IDENTIFIED AS FEMALE — 60%

4 IDENTIFIED AS MALE — 40%

ALL 10 OF THE PRACTITIONERS IDENTIFIED AS HETEROSEXUAL — 100%



Practitioners were all aged between 20 – 69 years old.

2 PRACTITIONERS WERE AGED 20 – 29 (20%)

2 WERE AGED 30 – 39 (20%)

3 WERE AGED 40 – 49 (30%)

1 WAS AGED 50 – 59 (10%)

2 WERE AGED 60 – 69 (20%)

Practitioners were asked about their ethnicity. Of the 10 practitioners,

5 FIVE IDENTIFIED AS WHITE BRITISH 50%

5 FIVE IDENTIFIED AS WHITE OTHER 50%

This reflects both the lack of diversity within the sector, but also possible gaps in the SafeLives network. We are already working to address this through deep project work and by creating new links with **specialist/by and for organisations**, but this is a clear limitation of the current study and a gap which future research should aim to address. This will be central to any future phases of the Verge of Harming work.

Authentic Voice

This section has been adapted from the previous report, with more detail added around the contribution of the young people's panel.

"We've walked through fire to get our voices back; we're not going to give them up now."

URSULA, SAFELIVES PIONEER

SafeLives are committed to placing people with lived experience at the heart of all we do to end domestic abuse. We believe engaging the expertise of victim-survivors is fundamental in ending domestic abuse for everyone, and for good. We are committed to consulting survivors nationally to build a wide and diverse voice, while also providing a platform for their independent and authentic voice.

SafeLives works closely with a group of victim-survivor volunteers referred to as 'Pioneers' who influence and develop our work, representing us and their voice to the media, events, and Politicians etc. Pioneers chose this name to reflect their purpose as active pioneers for change. We also work with a larger group of victim-survivors who are contracted and reimbursed to deliver specific work and projects, referred to as 'associate experts by experience'.

WASSUP PANEL

Women against sexual exploitation and violence speak up (WASSUP) is an award-winning youth social action project created and delivered by local young people since 2017 in Ipswich, Suffolk, expanding to Southend, Essex and more recently since 2021 in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, London.

The Verge of Harming team reached out to the panel after hearing one of the group facilitators speak at an event, and two virtual workshops were arranged. The focus of these workshops was to obtain expert feedback from the group on some of the preliminary research findings, as well as to gain their insight on how experiences of marginalisation can shape harm and harming in the context of domestic abuse.

Panel members were compensated with a voucher for each workshop they attended. While monetary compensation is frequently used as a thank you for experts' time, the Verge of Harming research team were keen to offer additional forms of reimbursement alongside this. In this case, some of the WASSUP panel members were considering undertaking a research project, so a session was arranged for the Verge of Harming research team to answer questions and offer some guidance around this.

Since the creation of the group in 2017, WASSUP have:

- Delivered 200 volunteer hours a month
- Delivered workshops and toolkits to over 6000 school children across Suffolk and over 200 in Greenwich
- Delivered community-based events including flash mobs and created 4 films and hosted 12 art installations/ exhibitions
- Created a toolkit endorsed by Suffolk Safeguarding Board, which forms part of Suffolk Child Sexual Exploitation Plan
- Developed a new project focused on engaging boys in these issues called 'We are Patrick'.
- Submitted evidence to various Government departments and interviewed an MP for the BBC
- Received an accolade of nationally recognised awards, including the Third Sector Award
- Delivered professional workshops across Suffolk to social care practitioners

ASSOCIATE EXPERT BY EXPERIENCE

In order to ensure that the Verge of Harming project was led by victim-survivor voice, a young associate expert by experience in the age range under study worked alongside the researchers throughout this project, she has chosen to be referred to as Zoey. Zoey's role was broad and involved consultation and co-creation at each stage, including co-creation of the mixed-methods survey, co-creation of the interview schedules and other interview documents, and co-creation of social media campaigns. As an undergraduate researcher, she also carried out quantitative analysis of the survey data, qualitative analysis of workshop data, and worked with the researchers to develop the findings presented in this report.

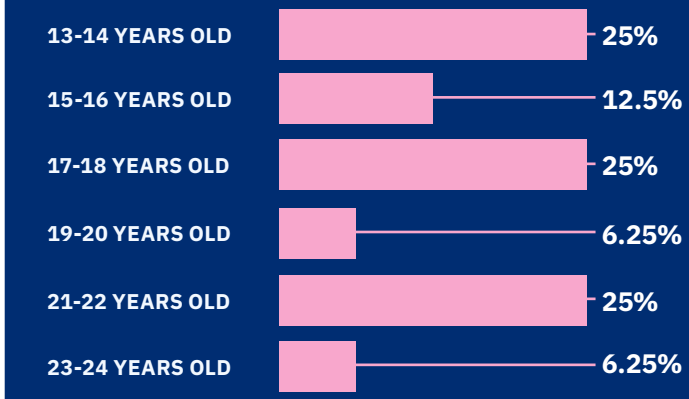
It can sometimes be the case that victim-survivor's identities are reduced to solely that of a survivor, and we therefore feel it is important to acknowledge both the insight offered by Zoey as a survivor of abuse, as well her expertise as a qualifying researcher and academic. We are incredibly grateful to have had her input on this project and to consider her a member of the Verge of Harming team.

'HAVE YOUR SAY' PANEL

In addition to the input of the associate, co-creation also occurred with a group of young people referred to as the 'Have Your Say' panel. This group began with a smaller number of young people who had been involved in previous SafeLives' projects, and then grew through contacts within SafeLives' network and those on the panel inviting other young people to join. This resulted in 15 panel members, plus the associate who attended each panel meeting and fed in as well as co-facilitating.

Of the panel members, nine identified as female, six as male and one as preferring to describe their gender in another way, which they did not disclose. Ten described themselves as heterosexual, two as bisexual, one as gay, two as other/queer and one as unsure. Eleven described their ethnicity as White British, two as Mixed – White and Asian, two as Mixed – White and Black and one as Mixed – Other. Three of the panel identified as disabled or having a long-term health condition. Four of the panel had experienced domestic abuse and a further four said they were unsure if they had.

Figure 1 – Age of panel members



The panel met 11 times over the course of the project and were compensated with a voucher for each panel meeting they attended. These sessions included:

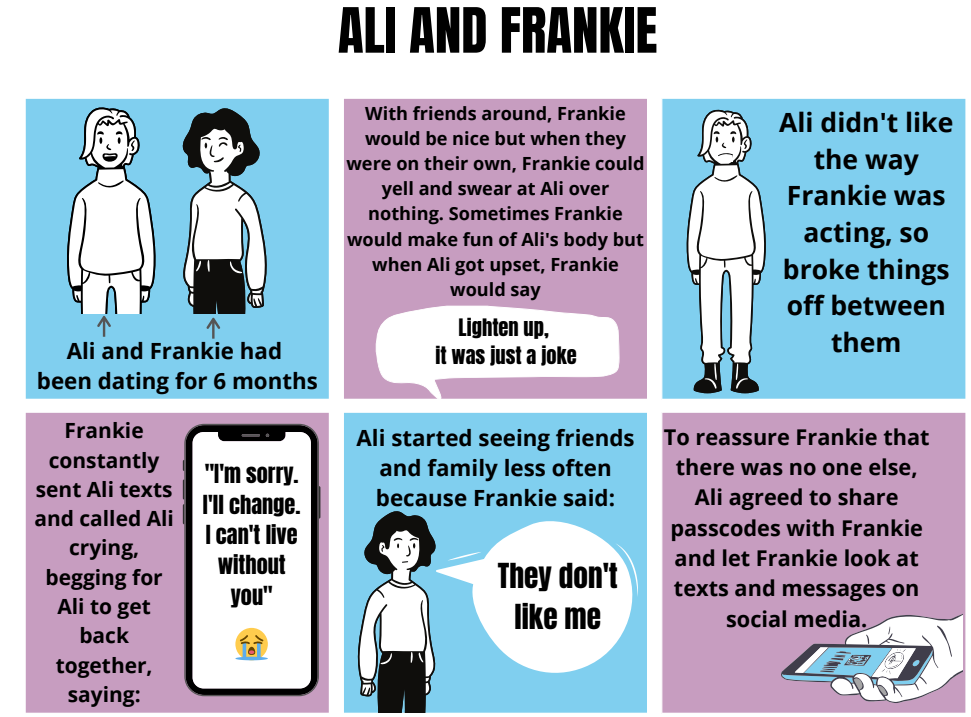
- Co-creation of the questions and design of the digital survey
- Co-creation of the recruitment campaign for the survey
- Co-creation of interview schedules
- Co-creation of the recruitment campaign for the interviews
- Co-creation of the report design
- Discussion around sharing the findings of this study

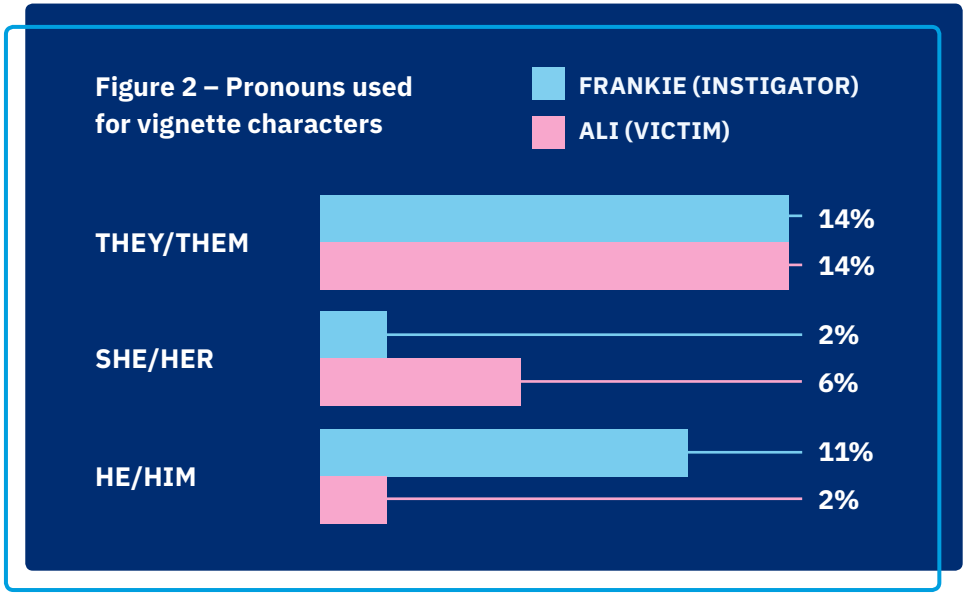
One of the most notable contributions of the panel was in the co-creation of the content and design of the digital survey for 11-25 year olds. The panel suggested topics to include within the survey, provided guidance around the wording of questions, and instigated the use of an example scenario. They felt strongly that young people would feel more comfortable answering questions about their own use of harm if they had been eased into this by being asked about a character's use of harm first. Through discussions with the panel, we decided to use a vignette created for '**Your Best Friend**', another Safe Young Lives project that began before Verge of Harming. The young people in the Have Your Say panel chose to remove all pronouns from the vignette in order to make the characters gender neutral, as they felt this would enable young people with varying gender expressions and sexual orientations to feel they were represented in the characters. They also decided to create a comic strip version of the vignette to make the story more accessible and engaging within the survey context, and chose characters they felt were visually gender neutral. Survey respondents were given the option of seeing the vignette in text-form or as a comic strip.

Analysis carried out on the first survey question asking about the characters in the vignette showed that the panel's approach had been successful in providing space for the survey respondents to gender the characters differently. Of the 701 responses to the first question asking about Frankie and Ali, 563 used pronouns to describe one or both of the characters. As Figure two shows, They/Them, She/Her and He/Him pronouns were used for each of the characters, though They/Them pronouns were used most often.

There were also a range of different relationship dynamics represented within the responses, with some respondents using pronouns which suggested an opposite sex relationship and some respondents using pronouns which suggested a same sex relationship.

The **previous report** outlines feedback from the panel on the positive impacts of participation, including feeling listened to without judgement and being involved in something they wouldn't usually take part in.





What we've learnt about young people and harming

This section will outline the findings of the research which relate to research aims one and two:

1. **How and why do young people begin to use abusive behaviours in their relationships?**
2. **What does it mean to be 'on the verge of harming'?**

It will begin by exploring the language used by young people to describe abuse, and the impact of this on their perceptions of their own behaviour. It will then move on to discussing the questions who, what, and why? Who is using harmful behaviour and who are they using it towards; what behaviours are they using, and finally, why do they feel they are using these behaviours?

Language

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND HARMING

Previous research carried out by SafeLives asked young people to choose which term they would use to describe a teen relationship that seemed unhealthy or harmful. The term chosen most often was 'toxic' (38%), however the other terms (controlling, manipulative, harmful, coercive, intimate partner violence, domestic violence and other) were all selected by a percentage of the survey respondents (from 1% to 17%)[16]. The Have Your Say panel of young people collaborating on the Verge of Harming project felt it important to reflect this variation in young people's preferences around language, and as a result our survey respondents were asked at the beginning of the survey which of the following terms they would be most likely to use to describe a relationship that seemed unhealthy: toxic, abusive, or harmful.

As was the case in the previous research, the term 'toxic' was chosen most often, with **545 of the 749 respondents opting for this term.**

The chosen term was then inserted into all relevant questions in the survey. For example, those who chose toxic were asked 'do you feel you have ever used toxic behaviours?' Those who chose harmful were asked 'do you feel you have ever used harmful behaviours?' Finally, those who chose abusive were asked 'do you feel you have ever used abusive behaviours?'

Statistical testing was carried out to determine if the term chosen impacted whether young people said they had used this type of behaviour. This found that those who described using harm were significantly more likely to have chosen the term toxic than the terms abusive or harmful. This finding suggests that the language we use when describing abuse is important and linked to appraisal of behaviour. While young people seem most comfortable with the term 'toxic', data from this study suggests we cannot substitute this for 'abuse' as it held a different meaning for the young people participating in this study.

Before being asked any questions about their own experiences, young people completing the survey were shown an example scenario (vignette) depicting a relationship between two young people in which one of them (Frankie) was using harmful behaviour towards the other (Ali) (see p.17). The young people were then asked some questions focusing on the character instigating harm (Frankie), including:

- **What feelings do you think Frankie experienced in this example?**
- **Do you think Frankie used any toxic/harmful/abusive behaviours? (If the young people answered yes, they were then asked to expand on their answer)**

When discussing this finding, Zoey (associate expert by experience) offered this reflection from her own experience:

"I think language is an essential part when having discussions and conversations around domestic abuse.

From both a young person's and victim's perspective, I have personally struggled with the word abuse, as it always seemed like a word which was used to describe what was happening to other people.

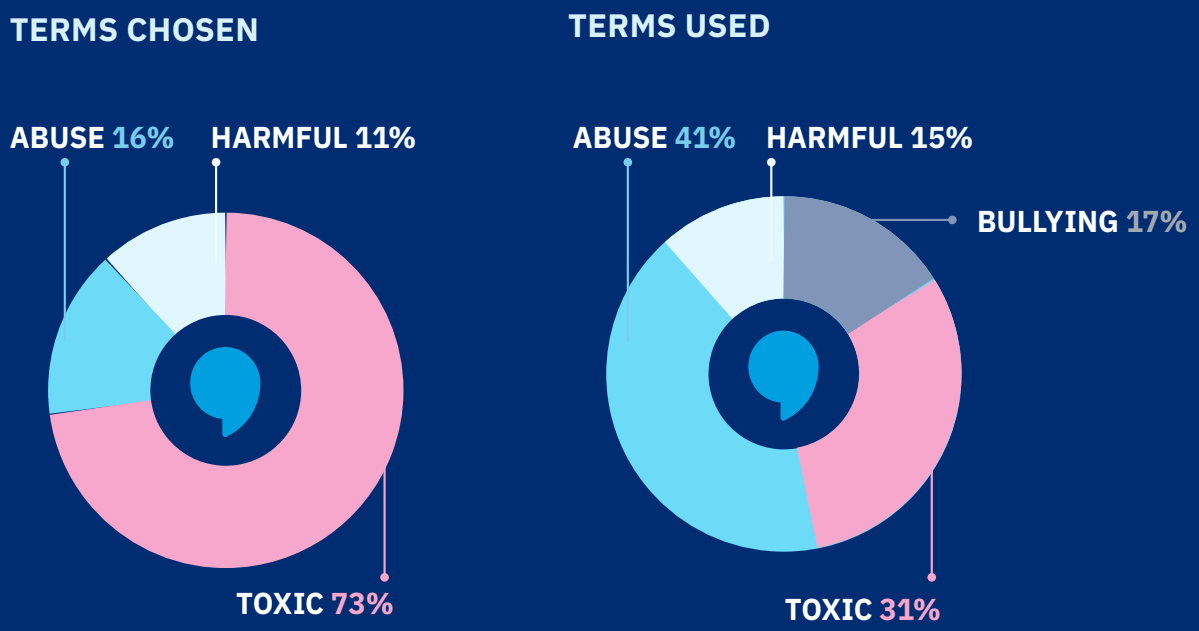
However, when real scenarios were used, which described behaviours that I had witnessed or experienced, I was able to more easily recognise my experiences as abuse."

When analysing these open-text questions, the team made note of the terms used in responses to describe Frankie's behaviours. The four terms used by the young people were toxic, abuse/abusive, harmful, and bullying.

While Figure four shows that almost a third (31%) of responses which included a term used the term 'toxic', it also shows that the terms abuse or abusive were used most often (41%). This means that while the young people in this study said they would be most likely to use the term 'toxic' to describe unhealthy relationships, they actually used the term 'abusive' more frequently. This is perhaps due to these questions referencing the vignette, which described specific unhealthy behaviours and provided some context around these. These findings suggest that young people may not view the label of 'abuse' as relevant to them until this is expanded upon with specific behaviours and context, which may provide a possible explanation for the low numbers of young people and young adults accessing specialist domestic abuse support, despite the government definition of abuse including those aged 16+. This finding has implications for both healthy relationships education and domestic abuse campaigns. In the case of the former it emphasises the need for schools, and other organisations providing education, to define what is meant by 'abuse' and explore exactly what this might look like in young people's relationships. When it comes to the latter, this finding suggests that campaigns using language without context or definition, such as those asking questions like 'are you experiencing abuse?' may be less effective with this age range than those which describe specific behaviours and provide examples that feel relevant to the young people themselves.

"...I think that because young people are being given language such as 'toxic', 'unhealthy' and 'abuse', but may not fully understand what these terms mean, they can use these words in situations which are not applicable, which then trivialises them and as such, they lose original meaning and instead develop a new meaning amongst young people."

ZOEY (ASSOCIATE EXPERT BY EXPERIENCE)



Who

Statistical testing was carried out to see whether gender identity or age had a significant impact on who young people said they had used harmful behaviours towards. While gender was not found to have a significant impact, age was, with the likelihood of reporting use of harm towards a partner continuing to significantly increase from age 11-13 up to age 17-18.

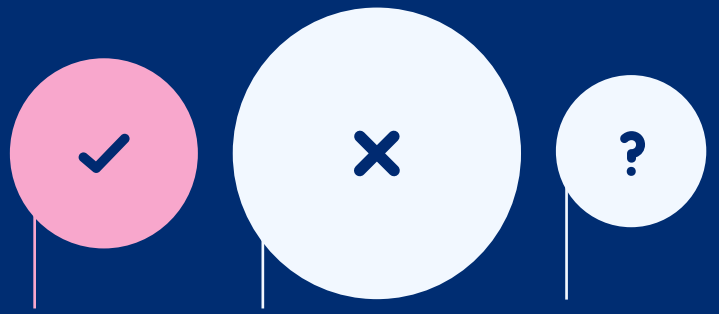
As shown in Figure five, older participants were more likely to report the use of harmful behaviour in their romantic/dating relationships. This is likely to reflect more young people entering into romantic relationships with age, but also a possible increase in awareness of harmful behaviour.

Young people who said they had used harmful behaviours towards a family member were asked which family member. The person most often mentioned was their mother (31%), then both parents (24%), then a sister (21%). Interestingly, only 10% of young people said that their harmful behaviour was directed at their father. This reflects current literature which shows that mothers are the most likely victims in cases of child-to-parent violence[17].

We asked the 749 young people who completed our survey:

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND HARMING

Do you feel you have ever used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours?



Of the 245 young people who said yes:

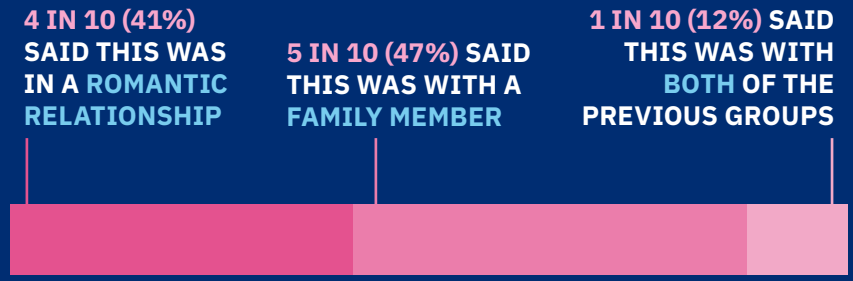
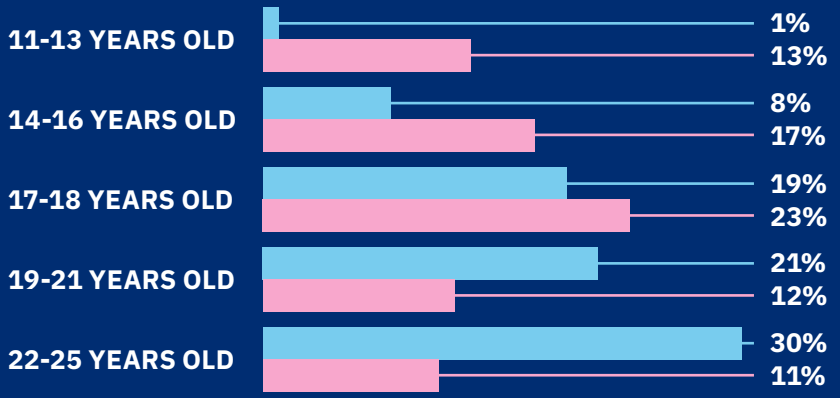


Figure 5 – Impact of age on who young people used harm towards



What

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND HARMING

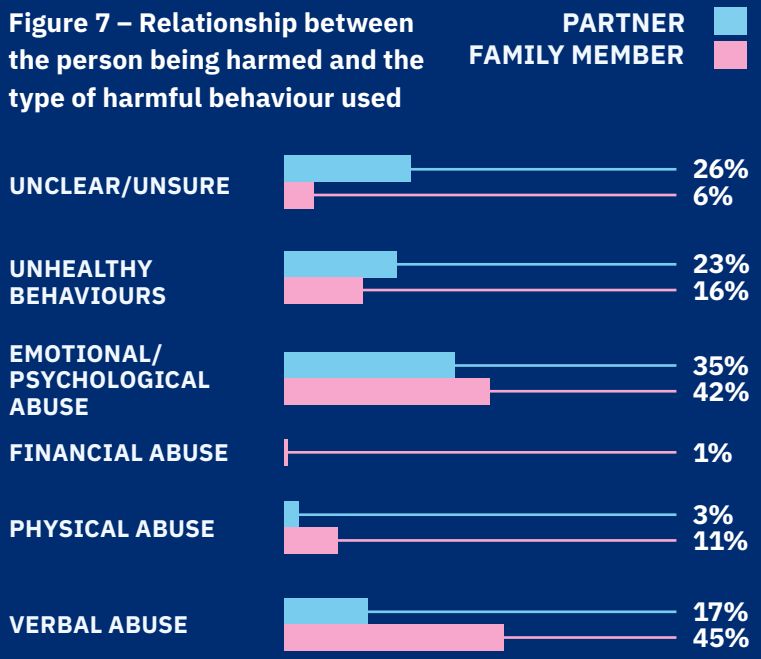
The **245 young people** who said yes to having used harmful behaviours were then asked what these behaviours were. Content analysis was used to identify groupings of the behaviours and then to measure frequency. Responses were grouped into widely recognised categories of abuse: verbal, emotional/psychological, physical, and financial. There were no responses describing the use of sexual abuse, which reflects current research suggesting that young people are unlikely to discuss issues surrounding sex, including sexual abuse, unless directly asked about it[18]. In addition to descriptions of abusive behaviours, there were also responses describing behaviours that appeared unhealthy, but not inherently abusive, such as lying and arguing, and therefore a grouping of 'unhealthy behaviour' was created. A final grouping of 'unclear/unsure' was created to include responses from those who answered 'not sure' or where the response was too unclear to include within another grouping.

Statistical testing found that behaviours grouped under emotional/psychological abuse were reported significantly more than behaviours in any other grouping. The above chart shows that almost half (48%) of the young people described behaviours that were grouped under emotional/psychological abuse, with the next highest grouping of responses being those describing verbal abuse (26%).

Statistical testing was then carried out to see if age, gender, or relationship to the person they were using the behaviour towards had a significant impact on the type of behaviour used. Testing showed girls were more likely to describe behaviours grouped under emotional/psychological abuse than verbal abuse, whereas boys described both with a similar frequently. In the youngest age group (11-13 years old) verbal abuse was more likely to be described than any other form of abuse, whereas for the three oldest age groups (17-18, 19-21, 22-25) a higher proportion described using emotional/psychological abuse than any other behaviour. Finally, those reporting the use of harm towards a partner were significantly more likely to describe the use of emotional/psychological abuse than verbal abuse. The suggestion that the dynamics and pattern of abuse differ depending on relationship is also supported by interview data from practitioners, with one practitioner suggesting that the grooming or 'honeymoon' phase is much more crucial in intimate partner violence than child/adolescent-to-parent violence. Children are less likely to fear the relationship with their parents ending, and therefore maintenance of the relationship is less of a motivating factor for abuse than in romantic/dating relationships.

Figure 6 – Types of harmful behaviour described by survey respondents

Figure 7 – Relationship between the person being harmed and the type of harmful behaviour used



"...an adult perpetrator sort of goes above and beyond to get that honeymoon period, and make sure they don't leave...but for the young person, they know their parent is not going to leave"

PRACTITIONER

VERBAL ABUSE

26% of the young people who said they had used harmful behaviour described verbally abusive behaviours such as swearing, shouting and insults:

"Swearing at my brother when I'm angry at him"

12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"Shouting when angry"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"Screaming, shouting and swearing"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"The behaviour specifically that I used was, I called him names. So, I asked like, 'Oh, are you dumb? Are you stupid? How do you not know this, blah-blah-blah, like it's so obvious?"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Some young people even named their behaviour as verbal abuse:

"I have been verbally and physically abusive to my brothers when we were all younger..."

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

5% of the young people who said they had used harmful behaviour described physically abusive behaviours such as kicking, punching, and hitting:

"Yelling, hitting, punching"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Beating my brother up"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

As seen in an earlier quote, some of the young people labelled their behaviour as physical abuse, and others used the language of "physical assault" (23-year-old survey ppt.).

None of the young people who took part in interviews or the interview-style survey described the use of physical violence, however some of the practitioners reflected on violence used by the young people they supported:

"In terms of physical, that again varies. Most of the times, there's sort of 'pushing' involved, sort of lower-end violence. And then sometimes...whether it's punching, there was even one young person – we ended up closing the referral – but he would spit on Mum through his bedroom window, when she was outside having a cigarette, which is obviously, it's assault, isn't it?"

PRACTITIONER

While the lack of young people describing the use of physical abuse in interviews/the interview-style survey may reflect some of the limitations of recruitment discussed in the previous report, it may also reflect social desirability bias and a feeling that physical abuse is less 'acceptable', leading to a reluctance to disclose the use of physically harmful behaviours. Interview data suggests that campaigns designed to raise awareness of domestic abuse have been successful, but in limited ways. One of the practitioners interviewed as part of this research reflected on the evolution in knowledge of domestic abuse and how society has shifted from a place of ignorance, but that this evolution is still limited to the recognition of physical abuse as wrong:

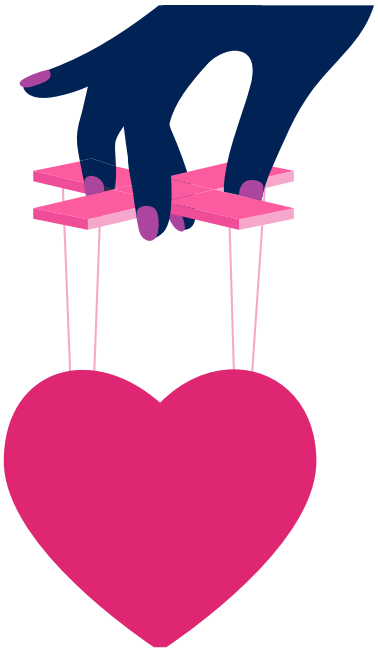
" If you look at 30 or 40-year-olds, when they were younger, domestic abuse maybe was more not talked about, or not recognised as an issue, or maybe ignored, almost... today, it's very much it's unacceptable to hurt another person...with young people now, they'd be like 'No, no-no, I wouldn't hurt... I'd never hit a woman' or 'I'd never hit another person', but there's other things that you can do to harm people, isn't there? It's not just physical abuse, it's other harming behaviour."

PRACTITIONER

Data from young people suggests that this learning has been internalised. When asked what an unhealthy relationship might look like, the first response given by a young man in a focus group which took place within a PRU was 'violence'. If societal understanding of domestic abuse is limited to physical abuse, this may lead to people using other forms of harm not recognising their behaviour as abusive, as had been the case for one young person who took part in an interview:

"I didn't know that like calling someone names is like 'verbal abuse'... And it sounds obvious, but like [laughs awkwardly] I had no clue!"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.



This limited understanding may also lead to those experiencing other forms of harm feeling less able to report or access help. This impact was also seen within the interviews conducted as part of this study, with one young person reflecting on an experience of abuse in an early romantic/dating relationship, and describing feeling unable to report it due to being unsure it was assault:

"We get taught about like assault and stuff in school, but being taught that it's still serious, even if they haven't actually like [physically] assaulted you – or you don't think it's assault, because I was confused; I didn't really understand...I didn't know if it was a serious thing or not, or if I should be like as upset as I was about it. It should be spoken about, that actually there can be like abusive behaviours in a relationship that can still affect you – it doesn't just have to be like a physical assault"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Not only did a limited perception of abuse and assault act as a barrier for this young person in reporting, it even caused them to question their emotional response to the behaviour and whether or not it was valid. Findings from this study suggest that further awareness and education is needed around the different forms of abuse and their impacts.

FINANCIAL ABUSE

There was only one survey response describing financial abuse (and this did not feature in interviews):

" Me and my mum, we never get on with each other, I even forgot how her smile lights up my whole world because I never get to see it anymore. I may have taken £445 out of her bank account and spent it all but that's because I don't really know how to act anymore, I don't how to be a daughter because I don't get the love and attention I should do if I was one "

16-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

While this response demonstrates that financial abuse can occur as part of child/adolescent-to-parent violence, the lack of discussion of financial abuse in romantic/dating relationships within this study, coupled with the gap in existing literature suggests the need for further research exploring this form of abuse in young people's romantic/dating relationships.

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

The biggest grouping of responses was under emotional/psychological abuse, with this making up 48% of responses. The behaviours coded to this grouping were further broken down into the following five sub-groupings, plus a sub-grouping of 'other':

INTIMIDATION

4% of the responses grouped under emotional/psychological abuse described intimidating behaviours such as aggression and destruction of property. In some cases the behaviour was not described as escalating to physical aggression, and in other cases it was discussed alongside physically abusive behaviours:

> **"Aggressive & angry, without being physically aggressive"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Smashing things, breaking doors, shouting , screaming, hitting"**
>
> 18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Similar behaviours were discussed by the practitioners and young people interviewed as part of this study, with a number of interview-style survey respondents saying they had been 'aggressive' and some practitioners describing aggressive behaviours as more common with young people than physical abuse:

> **"My experience with young people is there's a lot of aggression towards, like, punching walls, or throwing things, rather than the actual hitting of another [person]"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

> **"I think damaging property is quite common among young people, as a way of kind of showing frustration"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

TECH-BASED ABUSE

8% of the responses grouped under emotional/psychological abuse described the use of technology to facilitate harmful behaviour, often focusing on the use of tech to monitor and control. All responses coded under this sub-group were from young people who had reported the use of harmful behaviour towards a partner, and many discussed accessing their partner's phone (with or without their knowledge) to check their messages, as well as monitoring social media use. In some responses, young people described excessively texting and calling partners and family members of partners:

"Exchanging passwords"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I was insecure so I would check my partner's phone as I didn't trust them"

23-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"It was a long time ago - when I was around 15/16. When me and my (then) boyfriend would fall out, I would call him lots, text his mum and send him messages saying how he'd made me feel. I also asked him for his Instagram and Facebook log in as I didn't trust him"

21-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I refused to stop messaging and calling my partner after they asked me to. I also said things that might make them feel guilty or worried about me - this was manipulative, I also said things like 'I want to die' which is guilt tripping and not ok"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

The role of technology in young people's use of harm was also discussed within the interviews, with some of the interview-style survey respondents describing going through their partner's phones, and an interview participant talking about sending accusations over message that she wouldn't make in person:

"I'd just have an outburst... and just like sometimes it would be anger and like very accusatory... like even if I wasn't sure anything had happened, I'd just be like, 'I know it's happening'... 'How can you do this?' Text, Snapchat... I think if things got serious... it was just on the messages thing, because like I couldn't face them"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

When discussing young people's attitudes to social media, one young interview participant suggested online behaviours are not seen as 'real' and are therefore minimised or excused:

"The way that we all interact with one another on social media, and our different views of what cheating is...we have such a big access to social media now – some people are like "Oh, yeah, well if they're flirting a little bit online, it doesn't really count – it's online"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

52% of the responses grouped under emotional/psychological abuse described the use of emotional manipulation, which included many mentions of gaslighting, and other behaviours designed to minimise, dismiss or blame:

"Invalidating her feelings and taking jokes too far"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I think I've victimised myself to gain sympathy"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Blaming them for something that was my fault"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Gaslighting before I understood what the term was and changed the way I reacted to things"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Responses also described inconsistent or "hot and cold behaviour" (19-year-old). While 'hot' behaviour was not described further, 'cold' behaviour was often described as ignoring the other person either as punishment or to gain their attention:

"Ignoring him because I felt he had done something wrong"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Ignoring someone, acting unbothered/cold for attention"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Silent treatment for days -weeks at a time when living with my boyfriend when he specifically said he didn't like that/it was affecting his mental health when I ignored him"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR

Two of the young people who took part in interviews to talk about their use of harmful behaviours also described using threats of self-harm and suicide:

"I think there was one occasion where I'd sort of said to somebody, oh, if they'd like leave me or whatever, then I'm going to self-harm, or, you know. I think there was probably a time where I said that I would overdose, or something, and I think that was when I was about 14/15"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

" I think I said something that sounded like I might have been going to harm myself in some way, and then decided to not reply to the guy, for like several hours"

23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Across both the interview and survey data, there were many examples of controlling behaviour being described by young people as a response to relationships ending and/or the real or perceived threat of rejection. This can be seen in the first quote where the interview participant describes threatening to harm themselves if their partner were ever to end the relationship. While this mirrors existing knowledge of adult abusive relationships, which highlights the end of the relationship as a high-risk time[19], it also reflects discussion in the **previous report** around the pressure felt by young people to be in a relationship, and the link between this pressure and the use of abusive and controlling behaviour to try and maintain relationships.

In addition to the link between controlling behaviour and the threat of a relationship ending, there was also crossover between the role of tech and the use of threats and controlling behaviour, with messaging and social media used as tools to elicit reactions from partners and ex-partners.

25% of the responses grouped under emotional/psychological abuse described the use of controlling behaviours such as isolation:

"Telling someone to focus only on me, getting them to change plans to visit family/friends to spend time with me"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Controlling behaviour, being manipulative and trying to isolate them from friends who I thought were a 'threat'"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

'Blackmail' was described by a number of young people, as was the use of threats, which included threats of harm to the other person and threats to harm themselves:

"Threatened to hurt them"

12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"...when I broke up with them, threatening to hurt myself if they didn't talk to me"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

OTHER

11% of the responses grouped under emotional/psychological abuse were coded under 'other'. This sub-group included responses describing belittling or mocking as well as possessive behaviour, and other behaviours that didn't fit neatly into one of the existing sub-groupings:

"Being rude by insulting their intelligence in witty ways"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I think sometimes having trust issues can cause one to be quite territorial"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I can be a bit possessive"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Obsessive"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

UNHEALTHY BEHAVIOURS

9% of the responses appeared to describe behaviours that were not healthy, but also not inherently abusive. A number of these were one-word responses such as 'lying' (25-year-old), 'cheating' (16-year-old) and 'arguing' (15-year-old), while others described bullying behaviour rather than that which would come under the definition of domestic abuse.

Due to the nature of survey data, even open-text responses are often short and lacking context, and it is therefore possible that with additional context, some of the behaviours coded under this grouping would be revealed as part of a pattern of behaviours within an abusive relationship. This lack of context also means that some of the responses coded under different forms of abuse may be more reflective of unhealthy behaviours than how they have been interpreted within this analysis, however these findings still provide useful insight into the kinds of behaviours young people perceive to be toxic, abusive, and harmful.

Why

REASONS, JUSTIFICATIONS, & MOTIVATIONS

Across the responses to the survey and the discussions had within the interviews, young people described a range of reasons for why they felt they, or others, use harmful behaviours in their relationships. The young people taking part in interviews and the 245 young people who said yes to using toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours in the survey were asked about this directly, and their responses were grouped into themes. In addition to describing reasons, justifications, and motivations in their responses to questions directly asking about this, we saw discussion around this in responses to questions about:

- The feelings Frankie [the instigator of abuse in the vignette] experienced (asked of all survey respondents)
- Whether Frankie had used any toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours and what these were (asked of all survey respondents)
- What young people gain from using toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours (asked of all survey respondents)
- What toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours young people felt they themselves had used (asked of survey respondents who said they felt they had used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviour)
- What young people felt might have stopped them using these behaviours (asked of survey respondents who said they felt they had used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviour)

In other words, young people provided us with a range of reasons, justifications, and motivations for abusive behaviour even when they were not being asked to do so. The relevant responses have been analysed and grouped into the following five themes:

TRUST ISSUES

Trust issues were mentioned by two of the young people being interviewed about their own use of harmful behaviour, as well as a number of the young people who said yes to using such behaviours in the survey. These responses generally centered around insecurity and suspicions of their partner cheating on them, as well as fear that their partner would leave them for someone else. When asked what harmful behaviours they had used and why they felt they had used these behaviours, the survey respondents said things like:

"I was insecure so I would check my partners phone as I didn't trust them"

23-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I am incredibly insecure - and my biggest fear is people leaving me for whatever reason. I find it difficult to trust people and need a lot of reassurance"

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

One of the interview participants described her partner messaging other people as a catalyst for her harmful behaviours, and how this led to a lack of trust in her subsequent relationships:

"I don't think he ever cheated, but he was like messaging other girls and stuff, and yeah, the behaviours started again then. And then, I think, then, I became like highly suspicious of people and I'm not sure that they actually ever did anything wrong, but I just really didn't trust"

23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

When reflecting on the behaviours used by Frankie in the vignette (p.19), many of the survey respondents described trust issues as the reason for Frankie's behaviour:

"I think Frankie is experiencing trust issues and that's what leads him to have a possessive nature"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"He thought that she was cheating on him"

11-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"He made her share her passwords with him because he didn't believe her when she said that there wasn't another person"

12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

With some appearing to justify the use of control as a way of managing Frankie's fear and insecurity:

"If he didn't control Ali then he would lose her. If he didn't know when and where Ali was at all times he might assume Ali was with another person that Ali loved more"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

A common thread across both survey and interview responses was the use of harmful behaviours as a kind of emotional release. When asked what they felt young people gain from using toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours, many of the survey respondents talked about these behaviours being used as a way to 'let out' difficult emotions or 'escape' them:

"A release"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"A way to let out emotions and deal with mental health problems"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"An escape (outlet for anger or other feelings)"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

This was also seen within the responses given by young people who said they had used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours, when asked why they felt they had used these behaviours:

"I probably had different things bugging me on the inside and let it loose"

13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"As I was an angry teenager that felt like I had very few ways of expressing myself"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Within interviews, a number of the young people described feeling unable to process or control big emotions they were having, and how these emotions often preceded harmful behaviour, which then felt like a release:

"It would almost be like, the feelings were like so much that I couldn't really process them myself...I couldn't do anything – I felt paralysed by it...I couldn't control my emotions"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

"I feel like I experience emotions like way bigger... [my partner] doesn't understand why the way he talks – the way he says something – could make me like completely like break down inside, and I feel like my world is collapsing, and I feel like he hates me, and I feel like my friends hate me, and I feel like all of this, because of the way something was said. Right before [using harmful behaviour], I feel so sure in what I'm about to do, and I feel so full of like an emotion, it's huge and it's like a physical reaction...and then, while I'm doing it, I think it feels kind of like a release"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

For some interview and survey participants, being neurodivergent and/or experiencing mental health issues added another layer of complexity to identifying and managing emotions, particularly when conditions were undiagnosed. When asked why they felt they had used harmful behaviours, a number of young people talked about conditions such as borderline personality disorder (BPD), bipolar disorder and eating disorders:

"I was just starting recovery from my eating disorder...I was just feeling very anxious, and like "Does he still like me; does he still want to talk to me; am I doing enough? Am I enough?" I'd check things [like his Snapchat scores]"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

"I was undiagnosed with BPD and unmedicated"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

While these findings are not deterministic, and do not suggest a causal link between neurodivergence and/or mental health issues and use of harm, they are important for us to consider when working with young people. As this section has outlined, young people told us in their responses to the survey and in interviews that they sometimes use harmful behaviour as a way of releasing emotions they don't know how to manage or express healthily. For neurodivergent young people and those experiencing mental health issues, identifying and managing emotions can be even more complex, especially when issues are undiagnosed and young people are not receiving the necessary support or accessing any necessary medication. This finding, and its link with the need to provide tailored support, is further discussed within a later section.

ADVERSE EXPERIENCES

Many of the responses giving reasons, justifications, and motivations for harmful behaviour were grouped under adverse experiences. When asked about the feelings they felt Frankie experienced around their use of harmful behaviours, some of the young people's responses suggested that problems at home or in previous relationships had led to these behaviours, despite there being no mention of this in the vignette:

"I think Frankie was an angry person who might have gotten annoyed easily. There may have been things that go on at home, or their last relationship wasn't healthy and they haven't healed yet"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

When asked what they felt young people gain from using harmful behaviour, a number of survey respondents described such behaviour as a result of previous trauma:

"They have unhealed issues"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Trust issues/ traumas from previous relationships"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Due to life events that have happened - parents divorcing, bereavement"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In addition to seeing harmful behaviour as a result of past trauma, many of the survey respondents also described such behaviour as learnt; a thread which featured in many of the interviews. The way in which harmful behaviour is normalised across a young person's lifetime and relationships was discussed in depth within the theme 'interconnectedness of relationships' in the previous **research report**. This theme explored how, for the young people taking part in interviews, harmful behaviour was normalised across the following four areas of their life:

- HOME AND FAMILY
- EARLY ROMANTIC/DATING RELATIONSHIPS
- PEER RELATIONSHIPS
- THE MEDIA

These four areas were also discussed within responses to the survey, both those reflecting generally on young people's use of harm, and those reflecting on their own use of harmful behaviour.

HOME AND FAMILY

Many of the survey respondents who shared that they had used harmful behaviour, as well as many of the young people who took part in interviews, described exposure to abusive behaviour in childhood. Some talked about learning from this that abusive and harmful behaviour was normal, and the way you were supposed to behave in relationships. This can be seen in the below responses to young people being asked why they felt they had used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviour:

"As a child my dad would react the same way over small things"

15-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I think one of my parents used those behaviours when I was little and I have echoed them"

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"The rest of my family are somewhat emotionally and sometimes physically abusive with each other- I think it is learned behaviour from those around you"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Some of the interview participants described using the specific harmful behaviours they had witnessed parents/carers using:

"[My parents would] argue quite a lot... and my Mum would...either pretend that something bad had happened to her –so, like throw herself on the floor –and like pretend that she was having some sort of medical issue, or, had died, so I always saw that–from like a really young age, from like 3, I think –so, I guess I thought that when something was going wrong, you had to, respond in a way to get someone's attention. So, on that night [with my first boyfriend] I think I said something similar to what my Mum had done, where, I don't know if I said I was going to kill myself, or that I'd had, like, some sort of medical issue"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

However, as emphasised in the **previous report**, while there was evidence for an inter-generational cycle of abuse, there was also evidence of young people who had experienced abuse in childhood questioning their own behaviours out of a desire not to repeat this cycle or behave in the same way as their abusive parent/guardian. This supports critique of the use of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in a deterministic way[20], and the need to avoid reducing those who have experienced abuse in childhood to this experience and nothing more, recognising the nuance surrounding ACEs and their impacts.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the impact of the home environment, many responses across the survey and the interviews highlight the influence of peer relationships in the normalisation of harmful behaviour. When asked why they felt they used such behaviour, many survey respondents referenced peer relationships:

"because of my friends"

13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I was younger and that's what everyone else did"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

When asked why they felt Frankie (the instigator of harm in the vignette) used harmful behaviour, some of the young people suggested a lack of healthy relationships with those in their life, including their peers:

"They may not have had healthy relationships with other people in their lives such as family relatives or friends. And they maybe learnt these behaviours off them"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

A number of the young people who took part in interviews also discussed the normalisation of harmful behaviours by their peers. In some cases this happened through witnessing their friends engage in harmful relationships, and in others the interviewees described sharing concerns about their own behaviours with their friends, only to have these reinforced as normal. This is explored further in the following findings section within the sub-section on 'informal support'.

Overall, the data suggests that young people are seeing harmful behaviour in their friends' relationships and therefore learning that such behaviour is the norm. It also highlights that young people are talking to their peers about their use of harm, but that these conversations are further reinforcing and maintaining this behaviour.

EARLY ROMANTIC/DATING RELATIONSHIPS

As discussed in depth within the **previous report**, five of the six young people who took part in semi-structured interviews (a further five completed interview-style surveys) described experiences of victimisation in their earliest romantic/dating relationships and how they developed harmful behaviours themselves as a result of these experiences:

> **"Eventually, I learnt to kind of 'match' him, like, 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!', but now, I've noticed that those behaviours I'm bringing into our relationship where I don't actually need to. I'm not responding to anything anymore, I'm instigating"**

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

This same cycle was seen within some of the survey responses:

> **"I think I had a bad relationship experience that used toxic behaviours against me so I learnt how to use them to my favour"**

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Data from this study highlights the use of harm as a possible long-term impact of victimisation in early romantic/dating relationships, and the need to provide young victims with support that enables them to have healthy, happy relationships in the future, both promoting trauma recovery and addressing any harmful behaviour they themselves may be using.

THE MEDIA

A lack of modelling of healthy relationships within their own lives meant some of the young people within the study looked to the media. While there were a small number of examples of the media providing a positive framework for relationships, most young people discussed the reinforcement of harmful messages that glamorised abuse:

> **"The media tends to glamorise unhealthy attachment styles in relationships (The Notebook)"**

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

These same damaging messages were described across social media:

> **"On social media, sometimes over protective and damaging behaviour is glamorised"**

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

While data from this study reflects the awareness of some of the young participants around the impact of the media on views of relationships and behaviour in them, it also demonstrates the prevalence of harmful messaging and the need to empower young people to recognise and unpick such messaging.

REACTION/RESPONSE

When asked why they felt they had used harmful behaviour, a number of the survey respondents described doing so in reaction or response to the behaviour of another. As in the 'early romantic/dating relationships' section above, some of the young people's answers to this question described using harmful behaviour in response to harmful behaviour that was being used towards them:

"Because of the way they had treated me"

12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"In retaliation to abuse received"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Because my partner was constantly being toxic to me so I did the same back"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"As a response to something they've said/done to me"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

While some of the responses were less clear about what they were using harmful behaviour in response to, there were some which appeared to describe violent resistance and the use of harmful behaviours as self-protection:

"Because the person was hitting me"

13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In addition to these responses, there were those which described the use of harm in order to punish the other person for unwanted behaviour:

"Because he is annoying"

11-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"To teach him not to insult anyone"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Because he did something I didn't want him to"

13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

POWER AND CONTROL

Finally, a grouping of power and control was applied to a number of the responses across each of the six questions mentioned above. When asked what they felt young people gain from using harmful behaviour, many responses described gaining a sense of power and control over the other:

"A feeling of control or power over the other person"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"a sense of dominance over the other person, a feeling of superiority knowing they can manipulate the other"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I think young people will use toxic behaviours to feel like they have power over their partner/friend/other to make them feel superior"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

This thread was then mirrored in responses to questions asking about the young person's own use of harmful behaviour, with many describing the use of harm in order to gain/assert control:

"I need to get what I want"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Wanting control in the relationship"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"To assert control when feeling out of control"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Thinking I have to put others down to have some self-esteem, feel purposeful in the world from controlling the situation"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

A smaller number of responses described the power they had over another as enjoyable:

"Gives me a kick"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"For fun, to get a reaction"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

THE FEELINGS LINKED TO HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR

The young people completing the survey were asked what feelings they thought Frankie, the young person instigating harm in the vignette, experienced during the example. This was an open-text question with no set options, and a hybrid of content and thematic analysis was used to group the 702 responses into eight feeling groups.

As Figure eight shows, anger featured in the largest number of responses, followed by jealousy, insecurity, and sadness. While this question asked the young people to speculate on the feelings experienced by a fictional character, some of these same feelings were expressed in responses to questions asking about the young people's own use of harmful behaviour:

> **"I was frustrated"**
>
> 11-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Have problems controlling my temper"**
>
> 12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Because I was upset"**
>
> 16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"I was an angry teenager"**
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

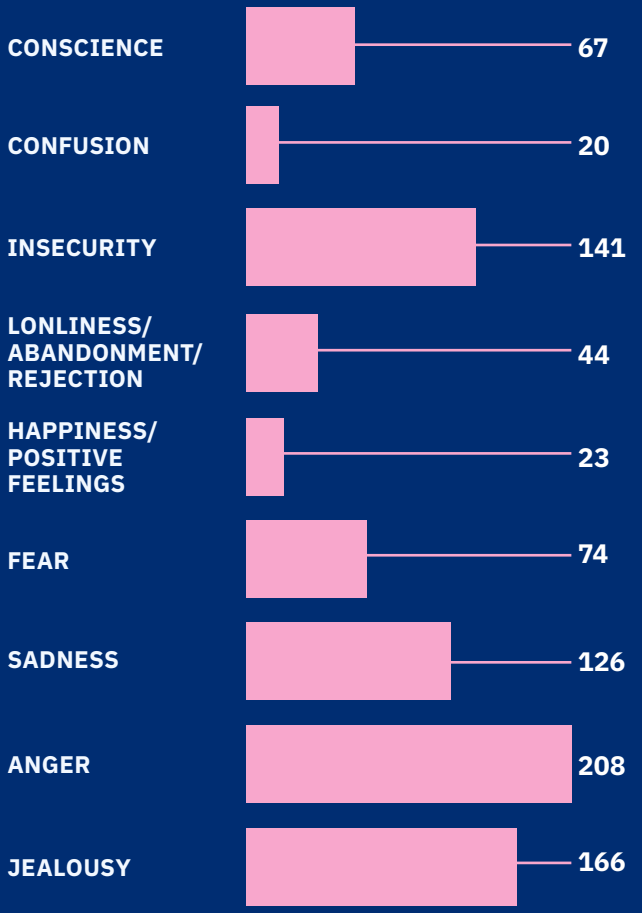
The use of harmful behaviour in response to experiencing jealousy was also discussed by a number of the young people who took part in interviews:

> **"I get incredibly jealous when my boyfriend is out specifically with other girls. I feel like I make him feel guilty just to see even girls he's friends with because I always bring it up and he worries"**
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"I don't think he ever cheated, but he was like messaging other girls and stuff, and yeah, the [young person's harmful] behaviours started again then"**
>
> 23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

The findings outlined in this sub-section, coupled with the earlier discussion of emotional dysregulation, suggest a need to educate young people on how to manage adverse emotions. They also suggest the need to provide young people with alternative and healthy mechanisms for expressing such emotions, so that harmful behaviour does not become the 'outlet' it has been described to be by many young people within this study.

Figure 8 – The feelings survey respondents described as linked to harmful behaviour



AWARENESS

In addition to young people and practitioners describing reasons, justifications and motivations for harmful behaviour, as well as the feelings linked to such behaviour, there was also recurrent discussion around the topic of awareness. When asked about Frankie's use of harmful behaviours in the vignette, the responses given by the young people completing the survey placed Frankie at different points along a spectrum of awareness in relation to their behaviours and their impact:

This spectrum of awareness was also seen in young people's responses to being asked how someone their age would know that they were using harmful behaviour. Some responses described how a good level of awareness of their partner's emotions would help to indicate to the young person that they may be using harmful behaviours, if their partner's emotions changed, as well as leading to a desire to understand what had caused this change, including reflection on their own behaviour:

> **"The partner is never in a good mood and is constantly sad"**
>
> 16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Seeing their partner/ partners in distress due to their actions"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In addition to suggesting that the impact on their partner would cause recognition of their behaviour, some young people talked about the impact on the young person using harm, and how self-awareness around their own emotions may lead them to reflect on certain behaviours as both harmful to themselves and others:

"If they notice feeling particularly out of control or any strong feelings of anger, jealousy or from feeling anxious when your partner is not with you"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"A lot of self-reflection and honesty. Trying to put themselves in their partner's shoes"

23-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Finally, young people described a lack of self-awareness as a barrier to recognition of harmful behaviour:

"I don't know if they could, quite often if they are using toxic behaviours then they struggle to realise"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"For the most part, they actually wouldn't be able to on their own"

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In some cases, their responses framed this lack of self-awareness as a kind of self-protection mechanism for those using harm who may not want to acknowledge their behaviour or its impact:

"I don't think people can tell usually. If they can do they try to ignore it and pretend they aren't being toxic"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

The previous report reflected on the low number of males recruited for this study and possible reasons for this. One reason supported by existing literature and theory is possible gender differences in awareness of harmful behaviour, with boys and young men less likely to appraise their behaviour as harmful[10] and therefore less likely to see this research as relevant to them.

Data collected for this study provides insight into young people's perceptions of relationships and using harm, as well as their own experiences of harming. The key findings relating to these insights are presented within the executive summary (pp.7-8)

What we've learnt about support for young people who harm

This section will outline the findings of the research which relate to research aim three:

3. To explore what support for young people who harm should look like.

This section will continue to explore the experiences and reflections of young people and practitioners, with a focus on prevention for all young people, as well as early intervention for young people displaying harmful behaviours. Following this the importance of informal support for young people will be explored.

Survey questions around support for young people were split into two groups. Firstly, all survey respondents were asked questions focused on the hypothetical situation presented in the vignette (p.19), then those who disclosed feeling like they had used abusive behaviours themselves were asked additional questions about their own support seeking. The findings from the other methodologies (interviews, panel discussions, focus groups, and workshops) are also integrated within this section.

Prevention/ intervention

After reading the vignette of Frankie and Ali, most of the young people who completed the survey said they felt that Frankie should be offered support.

While Figure nine shows that over half (58%) of young people felt that Frankie should be offered support, when participants were grouped by key stage, those aged 11 – 13 years old were the only group more likely to say they were 'not sure'. This could suggest that in early adolescence (11 – 13 years), young people have less understanding or confidence around support for unhealthy relationships and when support should be offered. There was also a small proportion of young people who felt Frankie should be offered support but when asked to expand on this, their responses suggested that they felt Frankie should work through their issues on their own:

> **"Sort themselves out"**
>
> 13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

This view could perhaps suggest some confusion over what support could be offered, or a lack of understanding of the significance of abuse, both in risk and impact, and the need for specialist support.

Survey respondents who shared that they felt they had used toxic/abusive/ harmful behaviours were asked what they would want support around these behaviours to look like. Their responses are presented in Figure ten, which shows they chose support being non-confrontational as the most important element:

Figure 9 – Views on offering support to young people who harm

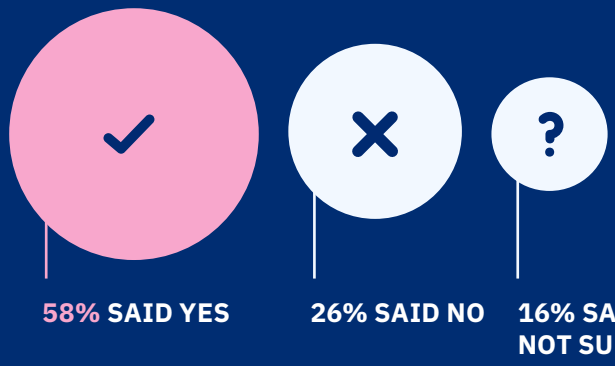
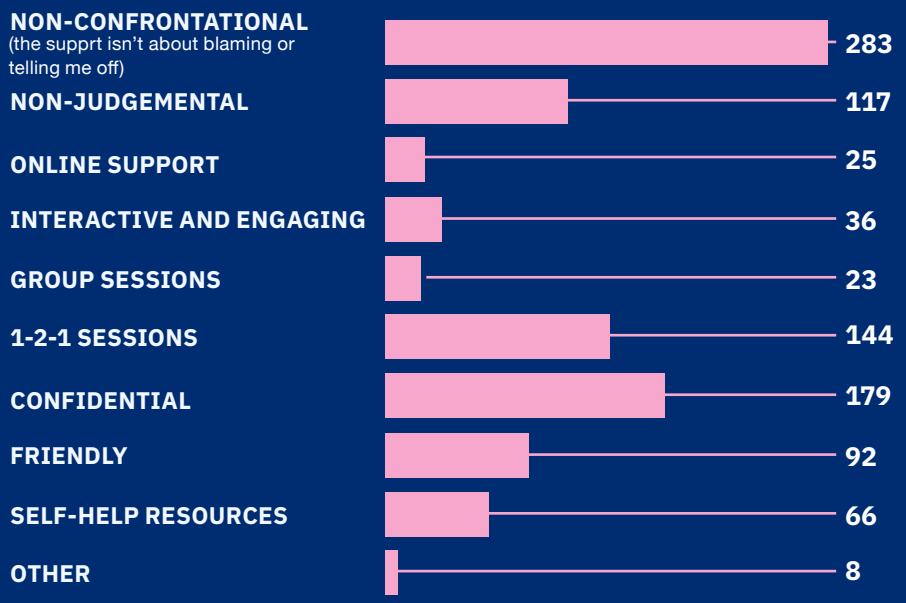


Figure 10 – Important elements of support for young people who harm



This was further reinforced throughout the open-ended questions in the survey and in the interviews, with both young people and practitioners highlighting that, while they did not feel like those who harm should be void of accountability, they believed accountability should be approached in a non-confrontational and supportive way:

"Someone to nonjudgmentally talk through what they feel and why they did what they did, and explain why some of that is not acceptable behaviour"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"They need help, they don't need punishing"

PRACTITIONER

It was clear from the data that a key element in effective support was how safe young people felt in the support environment. In addition to a supportive approach to accountability and a confidential space, young people reflected on how valuable it was that they felt able to explore their feelings and emotions without judgement:

"I think having like people in schools, that you can know that you can talk to, and just say anything – as long as it's not, like, actively hurting people, like putting their lives in danger. I think it should just be a more open conversation"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Data from this study emphasises the importance of support feeling like a non-judgemental space where young people feel safe enough to discuss their behaviour. In addition to this, it also highlighted a number of gaps in current support provision, particularly around preventative education and early intervention. These will be explored in the following section.

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION GAPS

The need for prevention and early intervention is already established within the literature[13], yet young people and practitioners felt there remains a lack of early support for young people when they are first entering romantic/dating relationships, as well as for those young people who are starting to use harmful behaviours:

"I just think there's not enough support out there; there's not enough open-ended support for the young people that are doing the harming"

PRACTITIONER

"I would say that young people need more education on relationships in general, because the only guidance I had was like the internet, and my parents – which wasn't great"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Most of the conversations with practitioners and young people within this study centred around school-based interventions:

"Trying to set up with the school, that there's something more available to them, because when you think you know obviously, they're at school between 9 and 3... so, there's a 6½ hour window there, where they can go and they can talk to somebody"

PRACTITIONER

With a number of responses stating that it is crucial for conversations concerning healthy relationships to start before young people are entering into romantic relationship, and therefore within primary school settings.

"I think getting into primary schools, and teaching it in like obviously, at age-level friendly way, but teaching how to have healthy relationships"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

It is noteworthy that although all non-education practitioners pointed to schools as responsible for prevention, the educators felt it wasn't possible for this responsibility to sit with them. They reflected on the challenges to this approach, and their view that schools are already expected to provide more education than they have time or capacity for:

"We have RSE, and we have these things no, I've got I've got them doing 10 GCSE's – where, where are we supposed to find the time for that?"

PRACTITIONER

Taken together, data from young people and practitioners suggested that prevention and some early intervention measures should occur at school, but not by school. For a large proportion of young people, the school day has a fixed structure that's familiar to them, and ensures they will be in a single place for a set number of hours. However, it is clear that teachers and school staff themselves should not be positioned as responsible for delivering the specialist support young people need. If this additional support occurs within schools, then further funding, staffing, resources, and training needs to be provided to ensure this support is achievable and effective without adding to current school staff duties. If support is positioned within school boundaries, consideration needs to be made to the young people who have either been excluded from school, are not engaging with school, or are home schooled.

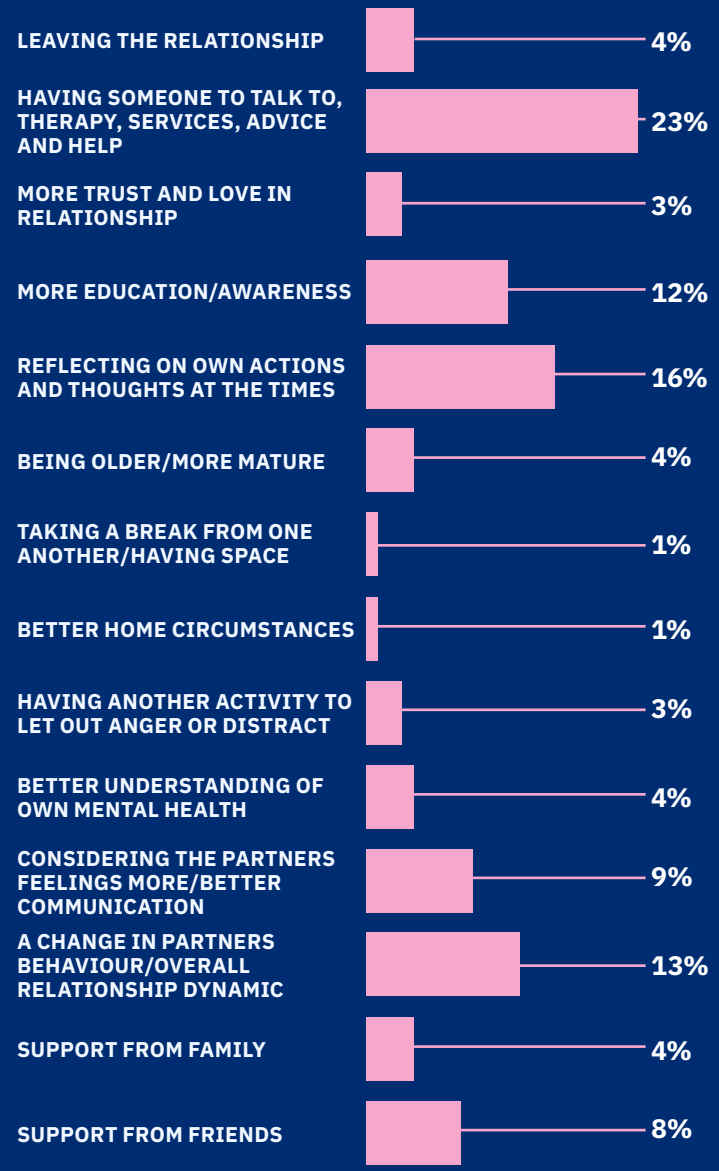
The survey responses, along with the interviews, highlighted young people's desire to access support around relationships to help them navigate these in a more positive way. Those taking part in the survey who felt they had displayed harmful behaviours were asked 'what might have helped you not behave the way you did'. The open-ended responses were grouped by the researchers (using content analysis) and a frequency of each grouping was created. Young people most frequently described having a space to discuss their behaviours and get advice, followed by the ability to reflect on their own thoughts and actions; a change in the relationship dynamic, and increased education/awareness. The percentage of responses within each grouping are detailed in Figure 11.

Despite a clear desire to access support, young people reflected on finding that such support is often hidden or not easily accessible for those using harmful behaviours in their relationships. In addition to this, young people felt that the support which is available is expensive and feels like it is not tailored to young people on the verge of harming.

"The kind of formal support that I imagined there being is like relationship counselling or something, which, I guess, is like you know, quite serious – expensive – that kind of thing... so, I don't know if there's like other stuff available that is similar but not as like yeah, intense, or expensive"

23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Figure 11 – Young people's views on what would have prevented their use of harm



As a result of these gaps, young people reflected on feeling like they were currently navigating relationships without much context for what a healthy relationship looks like, which increases the likelihood of harmful behaviour being used:

"The younger people, maybe like early teens, they have no idea what they're doing...like 11 to 14/15, just like you're not thinking about whether things are healthy, you're just doing stuff"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

When talking about this, interviewees reinforced the view that education around healthy and unhealthy relationships needs to start early on in life:

"By the time they get to about 14 or 15, they can be very ingrained in the way they are going to act and it becomes a lot harder to mould them as a teacher"

PRACTITIONER

While the need for education to start young was widely emphasised, both practitioners and young people also made clear that this education should not be a one-off, and must be ongoing so that individuals are frequently reminded of these messages and do not fall back into previous behaviours:

"Education and reduction. You can fall back into bad habits and behaviour"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

Young people and practitioners felt that currently there are not enough opportunities for young people to access reliable advice around healthy and unhealthy relationships, and that this often leaves young people trying to navigate this new stage on their own. These findings emphasise the need for increased support for young people, both in terms of prevention and intervention, and the importance of such support starting early and being continually reinforced throughout their development.

EDUCATION ACROSS SOCIETY

In addition to emphasising the importance of preventative education for young people, the data also highlighted the need for healthy relationships education across society:

"So many people that are just like terrible in relationships and they just don't know what to do about it"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

"Our understanding of domestic abuse as a society is really simplistic... I feel like there needs to be – I don't know how you do it – but a broader education about what this is"

PRACTITIONER

Theories of adolescent development highlight the importance of behaviours seen by a young person in shaping their own later behaviours through the process of modelling[21,22], thus emphasising the need for young people to have multiple examples of healthy relationships within their lives. This was echoed across the data from both practitioners and young people within this study, who reflected on the need for healthy relationships to be modelled to children and adolescents. Many also discussed the need for models of healthy relationships that went beyond heteronormative dynamics, so that all young people are able to develop frameworks that are relevant to them. In order for such modelling to take place, young people and practitioners felt that wider society needed to have a better awareness of healthy relationships:

"More education around healthy and unhealthy relationships. Including relationships between people of the same gender"

HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

"Modelling different types of relationships is so important, like maybe for queer people, as well, like being like LGBT... I think they can look differently, and there's so many like tropes and stuff like that, like ... and like polyamory – it's not going to be for everyone, or people use it as an excuse, whatever, but like erm just showing, like maybe people's relationships aren't working out because they're trying to make it look a certain way"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

As well as further education around what a healthy relationship looks like, young people and practitioners advocated for further education on what an unhealthy relationship looks like. As previously discussed, data from this study suggests that while there is societal awareness that physical abuse is not acceptable in a relationship, other forms of abuse are less easily recognised:

"Everybody knows you shouldn't hit somebody – people do hit people – but I think it's about a broader, real education around what controlling behaviour is, would be really helpful, if it was just kind of part of our general understanding of what's not right"

PRACTITIONER

"I feel like it should still be spoken about, that actually there can be like abusive behaviours in a relationship that can still affect you – it doesn't just have to be like a physical assault"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Young people reflected on how the lack of awareness around different types of abuse may be a barrier in people recognising their own behaviours:

"There needs to be a lot more education on gaslighting, narcissism, manipulation etc as the biggest problem is the victim and perpetrator not realising they're abusive/ being abused"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

In general, young people were aware of the importance of support and highlighted clear guidelines for an approach to support that would allow young people to feel comfortable attending and engaging.

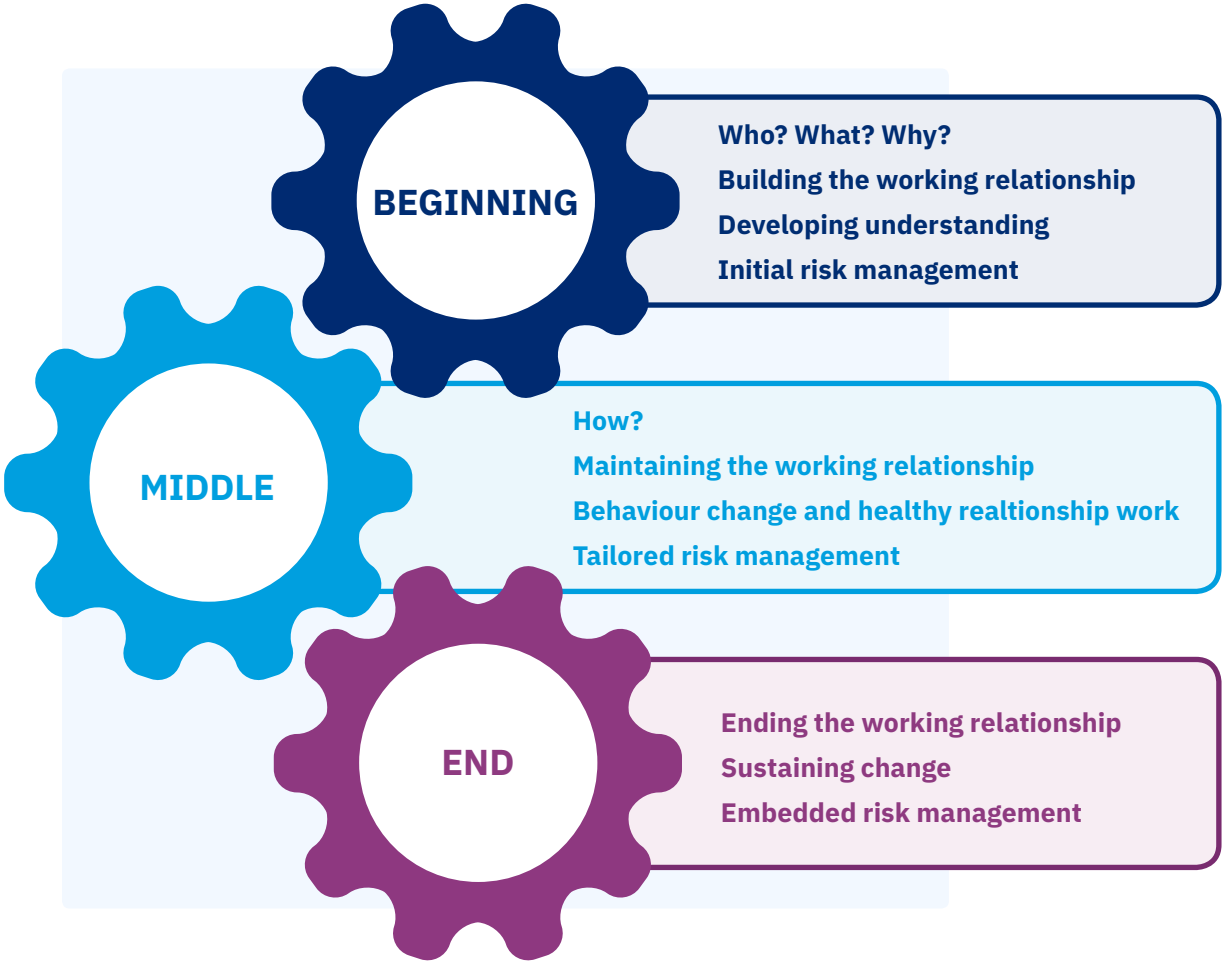
Both young people and practitioners expressed frustration with current prevention and early intervention efforts and reflected on the limitations that need addressing. Finally, both young people and practitioners reflected on the fact that child development does not occur inside a vacuum, and in order to achieve a long-term aim of ending domestic abuse for everyone, young people need to have healthy relationships modelled to them, and in particular a diverse range of healthy relationships. For this to be possible, those that young people model their behaviours on need to also understand the dynamics of a healthy and unhealthy relationship (across all different types of relationship).

Early intervention support model

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HARM

Data from the surveys, interviews, workshops and focus groups led to the creation of a model intended to provide a framework for early intervention support with young people who harm. The development of this model was also influenced by the knowledge and experience of SafeLives as an organisation and the individual staff members, including that of Zoey, an expert by experience. A visual representation of the model is shown on this page with the various elements of the model described in further detail on the following pages.

This model has been split into three sections; beginning, middle, and end. In current support provision, the beginning and ending phases are often given comparatively little attention, funding, and planning compared to the middle section which contains the 'support' sessions. However, conversations had with young people and practitioners as part of this research positioned the beginning and end sections as vital elements to enhance the main 'support' sessions. Furthermore, a review of current healthy relationships interventions highlighted a lack of sustained long-term change after support[13], which suggests a need to develop the current approach.



BEGINNING

Within this model, the 'beginning' phase of support reflects the time from when a referral for a young person is received, to the time when 'the intervention' (e.g. sessions focused on behaviour change) begins.

BUILDING THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Both young people and practitioners who took part in the study reflected on the key role of the working relationship between the young people who harm and those delivering support. Relationship-building was described as fundamental for engaging young people in support, and a prerequisite for doing behaviour change work. Young people and practitioners discussed numerous ways to facilitate relationship building, which are explored below, and detailed in further depth in the 'four pillars of support' theme in the previous report.

EXPERTISE

The practitioners' expertise around adolescent domestic abuse, and applicable experience was deemed important for both young people and practitioners. For practitioners, this knowledge was necessary in order to provide expert support to young people, with the practitioners in this study reflecting that understanding the complexity of adolescent domestic abuse required specialism:

> **"There isn't a set early warning time for any child that's harming; I think you have to look at the bigger picture, and it takes time, and it takes people that know what they're looking for"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

> **"I don't think you can get someone who hasn't got much experience and teach them a manual, and then get them to go and deliver it"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

Practitioners also reflected that those who work outside of the domestic abuse field often have a limited understanding of the sector, which can create a barrier with multi-agency work:

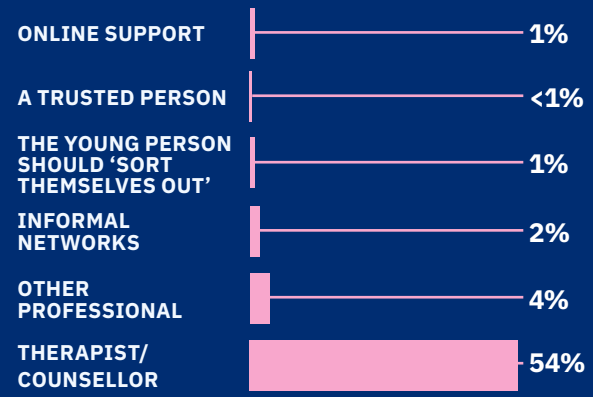
> **"None of that has ever been discussed outside of the domestic abuse sector; like Housing, I don't think understand that – Police definitely don't – I don't think even Mental Health Practitioners normally really kind of understand the dynamics of kind of situational couple violence, or retaliation – that sort of thing"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

Young people also reflected on the benefit of a practitioner being experienced and highlighted the ineffective (and sometimes damaging) support they had experienced when practitioners were not specialists. One interview participant described seeking support from a therapist and trying to discuss their concerns around their own behaviour, only for these to be dismissed:

> **"Oh, you're young – everyone has relationship problems" and I'm like 'I don't want to hurt anyone, though!'"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

When asked about what support for Frankie (the young person using harm in the vignette) should look like, a number of the responses focused on who should offer support. These responses were grouped and the proportion of young people's response in each grouping can be seen in Figure 12.

Figure 12 – Who young people think those who harm should go to for support



Most young people (54%) felt that a therapist or counsellor should provide the support. Young people in the interviews and workshops, as well as the surveys often referred to therapists and counsellors rather than domestic abuse specialists or other young people's practitioners. This emphasises the need to make specialist practitioners visible and seen as a safe space for young people to go as well as to provide specialist training related to domestic abuse in young people for therapists and counsellors. It also highlights the need to ensure referral pathways between therapists/counsellors and specialist domestic abuse services are well established.

"It should be counselling to make him see how Ali felt in this situation and realize what he was doing wrong so he would actually change"

12-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"He needs a therapist to help him not get so aggressive"

11-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"They are more experienced and have the training to help me and to guide me to a better relationship"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Trained therapist"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

"Someone with experience"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

A further 4% of young people responding to this question referred to other kinds of professional involvement, such as seeing a social worker:

"Social worker that kind of thing"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Get a teacher to help sort out her problem"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Maybe speaking to a relationship advisor or mental health specialist would help"

23-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

ROLE AND BOUNDARIES

Practitioners also discussed the importance of flexibility in their role, while ensuring that boundaries were still maintained. The data highlighted that the role of practitioners required more flexibility when working with young people, compared to when supporting adults:

"You have to take more of a kind of I guess like more of a teacher, or kind of almost like parent type of approach with them. And I guess I know with some of the young people I work with, I have to be more kind of nurturing, with them"

PRACTITIONER

Although this flexibility was seen as a significant element in building a strong relationship with the young person, practitioners also discussed ensuring there are clear boundaries in place and reflected on the damage caused when this wasn't successful:

"Blurring of the boundaries, where they blur between 'work professional' and 'friend'... and then when, invariably, the professional has got to do something that the Service User doesn't like...the young person will often see that as a betrayal...and that can damage the relationship irrevocably"

PRACTITIONER

CONSISTENCY

Practitioners also reflected on the role of consistency in relationship building. This was deemed an essential element in cultivating the working relationship, especially in the early stages in order to reiterate to the young person that this was a relationship they could rely on, which may be of particular significance to young people who have had fewer (or no) consistent relationships in their life:

"Just continuously make contact, continuously show that we're not going anywhere; the support is remaining"

PRACTITIONER

However, as consistency of support worker isn't always possible in practice, when young people do have to have a change of support worker, it is important to ensure that the practitioners work closely together to ensure a consistent level of understanding and approach between them. One practitioner reflected on how beneficial this is when done well:

"I would be there, as the counsellor; there'd be somebody there from the school; there'd be the foster parents, the social worker, the child support worker, and that I found really healthy, and really helpful... because you get everybody together"

PRACTITIONER

WHOLE FAMILY

The conversations also centred around the need to build relationships with parents/carers as well as the young person. When asked what support should look like for Frankie, one participant suggested this support should be offered to both Frankie and their family members:

"One to one help with Frankie and family. Education and support through school"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

There are numerous benefits to including the whole family in relationship building, for example parents/guardians are often the gatekeepers to the young person, and they may be responsible for ensuring the young person is consistently accessing support. Interviews with practitioners highlighted the impact of parents' lack of engagement, or parental disengagement for the young person who is accessing early intervention support:

"The parents shut all of the conversation with adults, and between the children, down. So, what that meant ... that we actually couldn't do anything about it"

PRACTITIONER

"I went to a school the other day, and the amount of young people that were brought into this meeting – the multi-agency meeting – that had concerns and problems, parents had disengaged a long, long time ago"

PRACTITIONER

Furthermore, practitioners also discussed navigating parents own emotions when their child is accessing support for harmful behaviour:

"I have a lot of crying Mums; 'Have I not done enough – have I not showed her how to behave – should I not...?'"

PRACTITIONER

Although this can be an additional challenge for support workers to navigate, some parents may also want support alongside their child. Ensuring the relationship building includes the family will help practitioners to recognise when this is the case, provide support to the parent when appropriate, and subsequently will foster better support within the young person's support network.

WHOLE COMMUNITY

In addition to ensuring support takes a 'whole family' approach, the value of a 'whole community' approach was also reflected in the data. In particular, practitioners reflected on building relationships with other professionals who work with the family to promote a multi-agency approach to support:

> **"It's got to be everybody involved, you know, school pastoral team... it's family support workers, it's counsellors... if they go to a boxing club, it's a guy down at the boxing gym... I think, we need to be much, much, much more joined up in trying to work and help these young people"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

By including a variety of adults that are around the young person, the support content is not only reinforced but long-term risk management and behaviour change can also be facilitated.

DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING

Young people and practitioners reflected on the importance of developing a tailored support plan for young people who harm. Before this is possible, support workers need to gather all the necessary information to give them adequate understanding of the young person, their behaviour, and their context. This information gathering can be guided by the questions who, what, and why?

WHO?

Before creating a tailored support plan, or undertaking any behaviour change work, practitioners need to understand who the young person is. To do this effectively a 'whole person' approach is needed, which explores the intersecting elements of the young person's identity and how this shapes their view and use of harm. The following sub-sections summarise elements of identity and areas of need discussed by the young people and practitioners within this study.

ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

Young people discussed how their culture or upbringing may have shaped their view on relationships, highlighting this as a component to consider when providing support for young people:

> **"I'd say the Middle East has like a really weird culture around relationships, and like how to treat women, and how to treat men. So, I think that kind of like warped my view, slightly, of what a relationship should look like"**
>
> 17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

This young person's reflection highlights the need for culturally aligned services which truly understand the intersection of a young person's cultural upbringing and their experience of harm/harming. Where such services are not available, it is incumbent on the services which do exist to increase their cultural competence, so that regardless of location a young person can access a service that will be able to understand and support them.

Although this particular reflection comes from the perspective of a young person who grew up in a 'non-white' culture, whiteness and white culture also reinforce the subjugation of women and shape acceptance of misogyny and abuse. It is fundamental that when considering the way different cultures shape acceptance of misogyny and abuse, we include whiteness and white culture in this discussion, and when working with young people who harm, we don't only assume that culture has shaped an individual's views and behaviours when they are a person of colour.

Young people also reflected on the way that culture, and particularly experiences of marginalisation and racialisation, could influence barriers to young people's support seeking:

> **"Culture - bringing shame to the family, we don't talk to the police"**
>
> WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

> **"If you're used to never being heard the likelihood you reach out is slim to none"**
>
> WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

"In certain communities DA is still very much a taboo topic and language barriers may stop people from accessing support or even knowing that there is support available"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

This reflection highlights the responsibility of the practitioner to learn about the young person. It isn't enough to simply develop an understanding of who the young person is, practitioners have a duty of care to put in the work to learn about different aspects of the young person's identity, and how these might need to shape support, but also how these factors may influence the young person's behaviour or engagement with support.

SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY

Within this study, there were very few practitioners who discussed abuse between non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered couples. The one practitioner who did discuss relationships beyond heteronormative dynamics described the gaps in support for queer or LGBTQ+ young people who are harming, and the need to address this so that they feel support is more inclusive:

"I think, even in the manuals, it's kind of, it's very much like, yeah, there's, and I know it's an abuse of 'he/she', but I just you know maybe if there was some more inclusive language?"

PRACTITIONER

MENTAL ILL-HEALTH AND NEURODIVERSITY

Many of the young people in this study discussed their harmful behaviour in light of their mental ill-health or neurodiversity. As is previously discussed (p.33), data from this study highlights how an individual's mental health or neurodiversity can shape their behaviours and support needs, especially in a society with a superficial understanding around these differences in cognition.

A number of young people in this study discussed their mental health journey, which they were navigating alongside their use of abusive behaviour:

"Erm I think where I so, I'd like I think I started going to counselling when I was like 12, for anxiety and self-harm and stuff"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

The reflections from the young people included in this sub-section focused on mental ill-health and neurodiversity, this is likely due to these being the long-term health conditions that young people who were interviewed disclosed. However, these findings are also relevant for young people with other disabilities and long-term health conditions. Practitioners working with young people who harm need to ensure that support is accessible for an individual from the start and tailored to their specific needs. For example, a service which solely relies on helplines may be inaccessible for many individuals, including d/Deaf individuals or those for whom English isn't their first language. More research is needed to expand this knowledge and gather the views and experiences of those with physical disabilities and/or learning difficulties, to ensure that support for young people who harm is accessible for all.

Another 'who' that is important to reflect on when creating a tailored support plan, is who the abuse is aimed towards, and how this may influence the pattern of behaviour that is being displayed. Differences in patterns of abusive behaviour are explored further in the following section.

As well as the importance of relationship building with the whole family, as discussed earlier, practitioners should also seek to develop understanding and knowledge of the family dynamics which surround the young person. Although the link between experiences of abuse in the home and using harm in later relationships is not a deterministic one, the context of the family home can be a risk factor for future abuse. Practitioners in this study described working with a number of young people who had experienced trauma and/or abuse prior to using harm themselves. If a young person has abusive behaviour modelled to them by their parents/carers (for example), providing them with behaviour change work is likely to only lead to short-term change unless support involves the wider family.

WHAT?

Another part of the 'beginning' stage of support is the 'what' around the young person's harmful behaviours. This includes thinking about what the behaviour looks like and what impact it has. Conversations with practitioners highlighted a need to understand the shape of a young person's harmful behaviours, including any patterns. Practitioners reflected that patterns of abuse do not appear to be as clear with young people as with adults:

"An adult perpetrator sort of goes above and beyond to get that honeymoon period, and make sure they don't leave, whereas... I suppose that's what it's about, is that cycle of abuse – it's making sure the partner doesn't leave, because they remember the good times. But for the young person, they know their parent's not going to leave"

PRACTITIONER

"There isn't a set early warning time for any child that's harming; I think you have to look at the bigger picture"

PRACTITIONER

This was reflected in the interviews with young people who described a range of different behaviours they displayed, as discussed earlier in the report. This could suggest that young people are still trialling a variety of different behaviours within their relationships, some of which are healthy and some of which are unhealthy. As these behaviours are not established behaviours, intervention at this early stage is likely to have a bigger impact if support is tailored well to the young person.

As well as understanding what young people's harmful behaviours look like, practitioners also need to understand what the impact of these behaviours are in order to help mitigate this impact. When thinking about this, it is important to consider the impact on both the person/people the young person is using harmful behaviour towards, as well as the young person themselves. Although the impact of using abusive behaviour on the instigator was not explored in detail, many of the young people who were interviewed about their own use of harmful behaviours described experiencing victimisation in earlier relationships, and some discussed how their harmful behaviours mirrored those used against them. This suggests that in some cases, an experience of victimisation could be a risk factor for displaying these behaviours in later relationships.

"Eventually, I learnt to kind of 'match' him, like, 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!', but now, I've noticed that those behaviours I'm bringing into our relationship where I don't actually need to. I'm not responding to anything anymore, I'm instigating"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

If this is the case, victim support for young people should continue to focus on trauma recovery, but it should also include healthy relationships education. Providing young victim-survivors with a framework for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relationships would not only enable them to identify abusive behaviours used towards them, but ensure that they have an understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like, so that they do not go on to use harmful behaviours in the future.

Further work is needed to explore the extent to which harmful behaviours in early relationships could impact the young person using them, and those around them. There were fewer conversations within this study which explored the 'what' and therefore this aspect of the model requires further development.

WHY?

When young people were asked what support should look like, they discussed their own experiences of accessing support and stressed the value of the practitioner understanding the complexities underlying their use of harmful behaviour.

"And I think if you understand... the child, and you understand the circumstances, you're much better informed"

PRACTITIONER

"So, it's not as simple as putting a young person through a domestic abuse course; it's actually trying to work out what's going on for them, and giving them sort of a space to be able to talk about that, in a sort of contained way. "

PRACTITIONER

"I hated it. I just don't feel like they saw me, and they had like this book, and they'd be like; 'Ok, that's what you're experiencing – kind of sounds like this – I'll just give you this advice, and see... like hope for the best"

22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

In addition to this, when working with young people who harm, practitioners need to be asking 'why are they here?' – what is their motivation to engage in support, and how can this be built on? A common motivator for adults engaging in perpetrator programmes is contact with children, however it is much less likely for this to be a motivating factor for young people to engage in support, due to the reduced likelihood of there being children involved. In order to develop a complete picture of the young person's situation and enable an effective and tailored programme of support, understanding what the young person hopes to gain from accessing the support is an essential aspect of framing the support provided.

To fully develop this insight, a whole community approach to support is paramount. In order to get a comprehensive picture of the young person and their harming, we need to involve the parents/carers, other professionals, and importantly the young person themselves. Too often young people's perceptions and voices are left out of the information-gathering process.

INITIAL RISK MANAGEMENT

In the beginning stages of support with young people who harm, risk management and safety planning may look quite generic until enough information is known to tailor this. Risk management is still crucial, however, and should be dynamic and evolve each time more information is gained. Some elements to consider in the initial risk management are the stage relationship is at, as well as the severity and frequency of abuse.

While initial risk management is a vital part of support for anyone using or experiencing abuse, it was only discussed in a small number of survey responses and not commonly by practitioners in interviews:

"They should be encouraged to leave Ali alone for the foreseeable future until they are better equipped for a relationship"

23-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"Frankie needs to be single to go through therapy"

21-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"A risk-led response is key"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

The lack of discussion of risk-management by the practitioners in this study may be reflective of the project's focus on those on the verge of harming, but may also reflect lasting perceptions that abuse in young people's relationships is not as serious, and does not have as significant an impact on those involved. As a risk-led organisation, SafeLives recognise that any work around domestic abuse must effectively identify and manage risk, include work with young people experiencing/using harm.

MIDDLE

Within this model, the 'middle' phase of support reflects the time period when a young person is regularly engaging in support sessions, whether in a group or 1-2-1 setting.

MAINTAINING THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

This model for support emphasises that the relationship between the young person and the support worker is significant and should be a focus throughout the support that they receive. As detailed in the previous 'beginning' section, practitioners and young people stressed the significance of relationship building early on in support. However, building a relationship should not be seen as a means-to-an-end or a way to get the young person to engage, and then forgotten about after this point. The approach should remain consistent, and any evolution in role requires consideration of boundaries and clear communication of these to the young person.

Those providing support should also ensure that they are not only maintaining the relationship with the young person, but also with their parents/carers and any other professionals involved.

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WORK

Behaviour change is a key component in adult perpetrator programmes, and young people and practitioners reflected on the relevance of this component for young people who harm, suggesting the following elements as key to effective behaviour change work:

- Applying understanding of the young person and their context
- Facilitating reflection
- Building empathy and understanding the impact of harmful behaviour
- Providing a framework for healthy relationships and behaviour
- Behaviour modelling and guidance
- Domestic Abuse Awareness

APPLYING UNDERSTANDING OF THE YOUNG PERSON AND THEIR CONTEXT

The 'beginning' section of the model highlighted the importance of developing an understanding of the young person. During the 'middle' stage the practitioner should ensure that they apply this knowledge to behaviour change work. Young people taking part in this research felt that this tailored approach would strengthen the behaviour change work carried out during this 'middle' stage.

Young people reflected on the importance of understanding their past experiences as this could be a key motivation for their use of harmful behaviour:

"It's something that should be worked on to better benefit the person to get over past traumas"

25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"Often they are afraid to be left alone, abandoned. The behaviour is their way of trying to make sure the other person doesn't leave them"

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

They also emphasised the value of understanding their underling beliefs, and how these may contribute to the use of harmful behaviours:

"I think part of it is in the narratives we're told growing up i.e., someone is mean to you because they like you"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"Frankie should be questioned about their views on their actions. Then should be made to re-evaluate their beliefs and how they look at relationships"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Another consideration to include is how situational factors influence the young person's experience of using abusive behaviours and engagement in support. This could include, but is not limited to, a young person's housing and living situation, their family, and their educational status. To ensure support addresses and takes situational factors into account, a multi-agency approach which includes the whole of the young person's community is needed.

Finally, young people also reflected on how they felt that emotional dysregulation was a key issue in relation to their own, and other people's use of harmful behaviours, and therefore was a vital element to understand to strengthen support they receive.

"Help them find healthier ways to deal with these emotions and more effective ways of expressing them"

21-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Alternative ways they can act when feeling upset & angry"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

FACILITATING REFLECTION AND BUILDING EMPATHY

Young people who took part in the survey highlighted how support should facilitate reflection. They felt that the early stages of behaviour change should include young people reflecting on their behaviours and cultivating empathy.

"An examination of their behaviour and some form of support in making a long term change to it"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Helping him understand why his behaviour isn't okay, and how it could make Ali feel"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Some young people felt that those displaying harmful behaviours may be unaware of the impact of their behaviours and unaware of other ways to act, further reiterating the importance of support workers helping to facilitate this reflection:

"I'm not sure toxic people can tell when they're being toxic"

19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Personally, I think it depends on people surroundings. If their raised around toxic behaviours, they'll fail to realise they are using them and see them as normal"

22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"I think a lot of people would not know. When I was in school there was no education about abusive or healthy relationships"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

DE-NORMALISING HARM AND UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR

Young people also discussed the normalisation of harmful behaviour, both at a societal level, and across their relationships. These conversations highlighted the role of support in 'de-normalising' harm and helping young people to understand the impact of their behaviours on themselves and others:

"I also think a lot of behaviours that are normalised have to be like explained, as to why they're not normal... because I didn't know that like calling someone names is like 'verbal abuse' ... And it sounds obvious, but like [laughs awkwardly] I had no clue! "

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

"Education on the behaviours and what the consequences are from the behaviours. When talking to young people they sometimes do not know how their behaviours affect others"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

"Education is key for this, especially for young people. School would be the perfect time to educate young people on what a healthy relationship looks like and prepare young people for adult life relationships."

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

PROVIDING A FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND BEHAVIOUR

The data suggested that young people felt support for young people who harm needed to provide them with a framework for healthy relationships and behaviour. Young people reflected on some aspects of these frameworks which were key to focus on. There was an emphasis on the need for behaviour change work to involve learning about healthy communication:

"He should speak to a relationship psychologist to get help on communication"

18-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

"They also need help to develop healthier communication skills and ways of expressing themself"

20-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In addition to healthy communication, young people felt that education around healthy boundaries was another gap which support should address. Specifically, when asked what support for the vignette character 'Frankie' should look like, young people suggested being taught about healthy boundaries:

"Encouraging them to communicate with Ali more to build trust and establish boundaries"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Teaching boundaries to Frankie"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

During one of the workshops held with pupils in secondary schools, the young people highlighted numerous gaps in their relationship education, namely limited knowledge of a range of different relationships and stages in a relationship, and how to navigate these healthy:

"Online relationships"

HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

"How to deal with rejection"

HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

"That relationships aren't just male and female"

HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

BEHAVIOUR MODELLING AND GUIDANCE

Practitioners in this study reflected on how many of the young people they have supported in the past did not have healthy relationships or boundaries modelled to them in their home. They therefore felt that this should be part of support for young people who harm. This was also reflected in the young people's survey responses:

> **"I didn't really have an example of a healthy relationship from anyone"**
>
> 23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Young people and practitioners reflected on how abuse was often modelled in young people's early (family, peer, and romantic) relationships leading to a normalisation of abuse. This is discussed in depth in the 'interconnectedness of relationships' theme in the previous report*. In addition to this, practitioners reflected on how the time they spent with a young person during the support journey, could be an opportunity to model healthy behaviours in a relationship, for example how to set healthy boundaries and be respectful:

> **"We often talk about when clients use abusive tactics with... erm... with practitioners, because that's maybe like... often, it's about reflecting the behaviour that they know has gotten people places in the past. And it's about how do we navigate and work with that; but I'm always quite grateful for those moments, because I think it's a really important learning opportunity for them – and for us, that we can model boundaries"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

DOMESTIC ABUSE AWARENESS

As well as providing a framework for healthy behaviour and relationships, the data from participants reflected the need to increase awareness around abusive behaviours and relationships. When asked what support should look like, young people responded with education around abusive behaviours:

> **"Abuse awareness course"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

When asked about this in more detail, young people suggested that this should be specific and practical, highlighting what abusive behaviours look like, as well as the impact of these behaviours, to improve young peoples' understanding of what/which behaviours are not acceptable in a relationship:

> **"Coercive control"**
>
> HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

> **"Understanding behaviours"**
>
> HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

> **"Education on why these behaviours exist and how they could have formed, as well as how they impact others"**
>
> WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

TAILORED RISK MANAGEMENT

As previously mentioned, support should be tailored to the individual, as there are a myriad of elements which shape a young person's harmful behaviours and their engagement in support. However, it is not just the support that a young person receives that needs to be tailored. Just as a young person's context, culture, and other intersecting identities and needs should be considered when developing a support plan, these same factors must be considered in relation to risk-management. Taking the time to develop a thorough understanding of the young person, their behaviour, and their context, provides support workers with the knowledge to create a tailored safety plan.

END

Within this model, the end phase of support reflects the time between regular support sessions coming to an end and a young person being closed to support.

Similarly to the 'beginnings' part of support, little attention and funding is often allocated to the 'ending' of support, compared to the 'middle' section. Data from this study demonstrated the significance of endings for young people, highlighting that this part of the support journey needs more attention. A recent review of 22 programmes aiming to support young people displaying harmful behaviours in their romantic relationships suggested that many interventions provide short-term and medium-term outcomes, however there is a lack of long-term sustained behaviour change[13]. The data collected in the Verge of Harming project suggests that this could be, at least in part, due to a lack of focus on how support ends.

ENDING THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Data from the study highlighted how the end (or perceived end) of a romantic relationship was a difficult time for young people to manage. Many of the abusive behaviours young people described using within interviews occurred around this time, and were associated with the perceived or real threat of rejection, as previously discussed. Indeed, young people in the workshops highlighted their fear of rejection and the end of relationships, and that they didn't know how to end a relationship well, and described this as something they need support with:

> **"How to deal with rejection"**
>
> HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

> **"It's okay to move on"**
>
> HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

> **"When you see people who've had that damage in upbringing, and they're into an intimate relationship where you've got – possibly for the first time in their life – someone who genuinely seems to love them and care for them, and there's nothing more scary than that being removed"**
>
> PRACTITIONER

> **"That one relationship where I wasn't so invested, I felt like I could walk away, and I would be ok; whereas the other felt like ... I'd be destroyed if like, you know, it ended"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Some young people described seeing parents remain in unhappy relationships, and how this creates a model of relationships that doesn't measure success based on impact, but on maintenance of the relationship:

> **"I mean, it's possible that [the normalisation of toxic behaviours in relationships]...it comes from parents, maybe, just because that's what people have seen; we've seen that people are unhappy, but they've stuck with it"**
>
> 18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

It is important to prepare young people for, and normalise, the ending of romantic/dating relationships. However, these are not the only relationships which will end. If support workers are taking the time to build a relationship with a young person at the start of the support journey, they also need to take the time to prepare that young person for the relationship to end after support has finished. The support worker may become a prominent person in the young person's life, so ending that relationship abruptly and withdrawing support without any preparation or step-down plan can be incredibly traumatic.

In addition to preparing the young person for the support to end, this time is also an opportunity to model how a relationship can end healthily, making this a positive or neutral process, modelling that this isn't always negative. This idea was reflected by a young person who felt this was a fundamental lesson to learn:

"Being on your own is fine and normal"

HER CENTRE WORKSHOP PPT.

This model recognises that the end of a relationship can be an incredibly scary prospect and young people need to be taught how to shift their measures of successful relationships so that endings aren't as scary or as likely to be catalysts for harmful behaviour.

Ending the relationship well may be equally as important for practitioners as it is for young people. Practitioners will work closely with young people for an extended period of time, and their emotional investment in helping the young person to navigate future relationships more healthily should also be recognised. One practitioner reflected on this as they discussed a particularly memorable case and how they revisited the family they had worked with, after support had finished:

"And we went for sort of a final catch-up, because we'd spent so long with the family, and it was such a... sort of 'deep' case. Myself and [my co-worker] went back, and they were just... they were just more natural with each other, if that makes sense, and... they'd laugh at something the other one said, and that didn't happen 3 months previous – that was really, a really positive outcome"

PRACTITIONER

While data from this study emphasises the significance of the end of relationships, further research is needed focusing on support for young people who harm and exploring exactly what ending the working relationship well should look like in practice.

SUSTAINING CHANGE

Although there were only limited discussions within the data around sustaining change, the findings relating to ending relationships led to the team considering the ending phase of other elements of support for young people who harm, and how any change might be sustained when support has finished.

Data from this study suggested three key aspects to focus on in order to sustain change, which have been included within the 'end' stage of the model:

- Providing young people with tools, education, and resources
- A step-down approach to ending support
- Ensuring support networks are in place following the end of specialist support

First, young people should be provided with tools, education, and resources throughout support to help them move forward without using harm in their future relationships. Practitioners should then ensure young people have the knowledge and understanding to confidently apply this learning once support has ended.

Another aspect of sustaining change is incorporating a 'step down' approach to ending support. This ensures that the young person is eased into independence, as opposed to support ending abruptly. Practitioners needs to ensure that the young person is in a place where they no longer require this guidance and feel able to apply the learning themselves. Following this, practitioners should consider what support networks will remain after formal support has ended. Even though this specialist support may no longer be in place, young people should still feel there are people or places where they can go to ask questions about their behaviour and receive informed guidance:

"I try to... leave them in a position where they've got somebody they can go and talk to. It might be bringing a parent in, and try and improve that relationship, because very often that relationship's flawed"

PRACTITIONER

As young people stressed the ease of returning to using harmful behaviour, having this ongoing support outside of the specialist service is an essential part of sustaining long term behaviour change.

"You can fall back into bad habits and behaviour"

WASSUP PANEL MEMBER

EMBEDDED RISK MANAGEMENT

In addition to considering how to sustain behaviour change, attention should be paid to the ongoing management of risk once specialist support is no longer in place. Practitioners should work to identify adults in the young person's life who will be aware of warning signs and are able to continue to evaluate risk levels. This could include family members, schools, and/or other professionals who work with the young person. In addition to this, data from this study suggests the need for wider society to have increased knowledge around healthy relationships, so that sustaining change does not rely solely on the adults and professionals directly involved in the young person's life.

The model detailed above highlights a number of gaps in current support provision, which may appear to be unrealistic to address considering current funding restrictions in the sector. In order for a comprehensive model like the one above to be possible, prevention work is needed to reduce the number of people requiring specialist support and intervention. Both practitioners and young people reflected on how the current widespread lack of understanding around healthy relationships leads to high demand for specialist support and therefore long waiting lists and increased pressures on specialist organisations and their staff:

" And my work that I was doing was 6 weeks of half-an-hour, and it barely even scratched the surface"

PRACTITIONER

"If you think about it, domestic abuse like doesn't start in the relationship, necessarily, it starts with her upbringing and how her parents spoke to her, and her self-esteem – and that doesn't reverse in 6 weeks of case work"

PRACTITIONER

Education around both healthy and unhealthy relationships is needed earlier, so that young people are equipped with the necessary tools before they enter into romantic/dating relationships. This way, fewer people will require specialist domestic abuse interventions, and therefore support can afford to be more tailored and extensive.

Informal support

Although formal sources of support were commonly discussed, young people also emphasised the need for informal support networks, and often showed a preference for the latter over the former. When asked what they felt support for Frankie (the instigator of harm in the vignette) should look like, many of the responses described informal support from family and friends:

> **"Professional therapy, friends and family to support them and make them aware of the situation that they were in and how they acted, but also to be there for them"**
>
> 13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

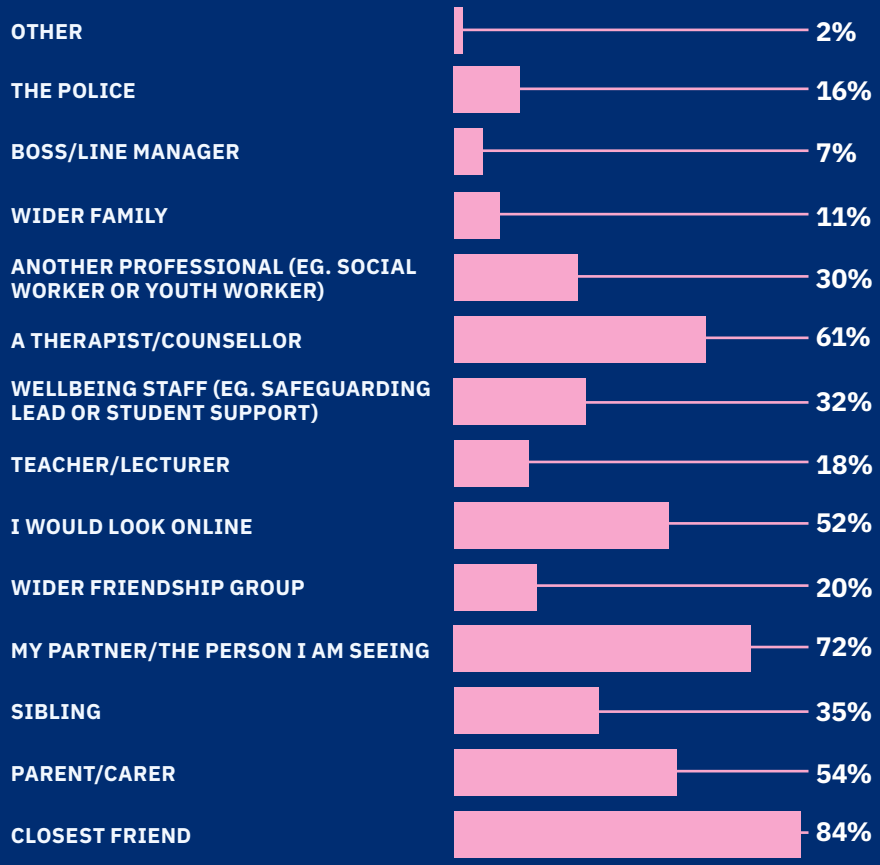
> **"Speaking to someone, speaking to family and friends"**
>
> 13-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Young people completing the survey were given the following list of people and asked who they would speak to if they were worried about their own behaviour:

- Closest friend
- Parent/carer
- Sibling
- My partner/the person I am seeing
- Wider friendship group
- I would look online
- Teacher/lecturer
- Wellbeing staff
- Therapist/Counsellor
- Another professional
- Wider family
- Boss/line manager
- The police
- Other (please describe)

They could choose to answer 'yes', 'no' or 'N/A'. The proportion of young people who said 'yes' to each option can be seen in Figure 13.

Figure 13 – Who young people would speak to if they were worried about their own behaviour



The five options young people answered 'yes' to the most were their closest friend, their partner/the person they are seeing, a parent/carer, a therapist/counsellor, and looking online. These five options, were then broken down by age group:

Figure 14 shows that across all ages, a large proportion of young people felt they would speak to their closest friend. This report has already discussed some of the complications of young people disclosing their use of harmful behaviour to peers, and the resulting normalisation that often occurs, highlighting the need for education and support that will enable young people to respond well and safely when a friend raises these issues.

A higher proportion of those aged 11-13 felt they would speak to a parent/carer than those in other age group, possibly reflecting changes in child-parent relationships across adolescent development. While this age group had the highest proportion who said yes, the fact that a proportion of young people in each age group said they felt they would speak to a parent/carer emphasises the importance of improving healthy relationships education across society, so that parents/carers feel equipped to respond well and offer healthy guidance.

As is shown in Figure 14, there was a trend of increasing reliance on online support with young people as they got older, with the youngest group being the least likely to say they would look online.

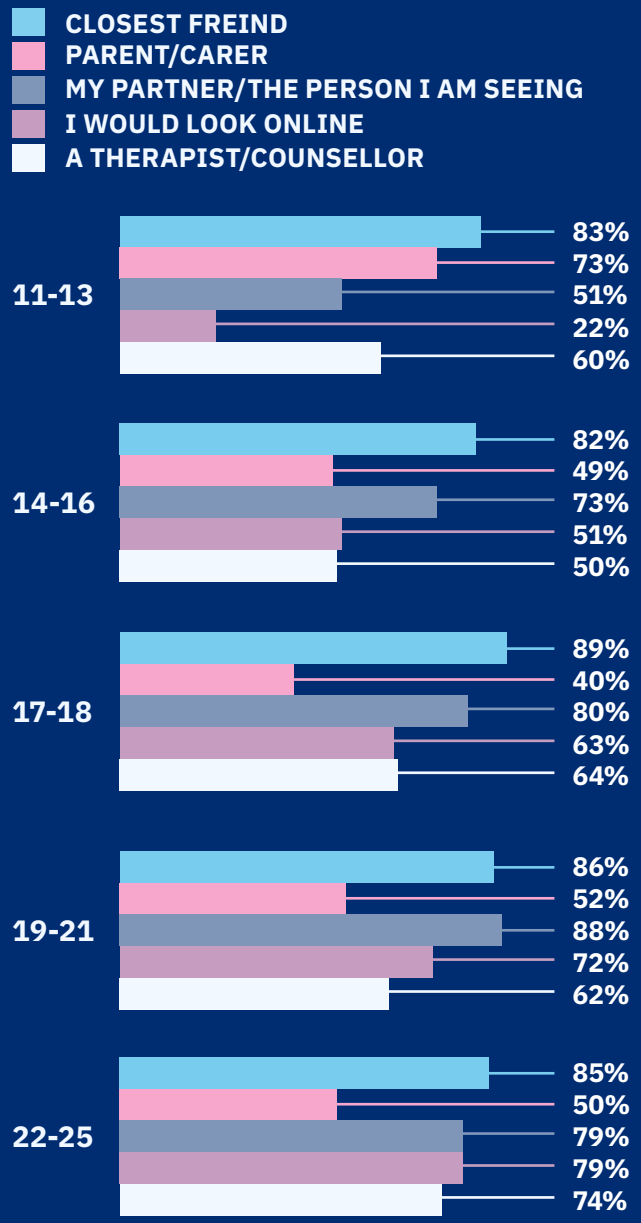
Finally, the proportion of young people who reported that they would speak to a therapist or counsellor remained fairly stable throughout the age groups. While it is reassuring that young people feel comfortable approaching formal avenues for support, it is important to ensure that therapists and counsellors have training in relation to domestic abuse within young people's relationships, and that pathways between these professionals and specialist domestic abuse services are well established. This would not only ensure that young people receive appropriate support, but also decrease the likelihood of a young person's first experience of formal support acting as a barrier to accessing formal support in the future, as was the case for one of the interview participants in this study:

> **"I did go to therapy briefly, but it was just... she was not very... good at her job. And it just kind of wasn't... it just felt very impersonal, so I just stopped going there. And I think it just kind of turned me off... I just kind of gave up with that situation.**

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Following this, young people were then asked who they would be **most likely** to speak to if they were worried about their own behaviour. As detailed in the quote above, this initial avenue for support is significant and can shape whether young people will continue to access support and feel confident doing so again in the future. As was the case with the question of who they would speak to, the top five options young people chose for who they would be most likely to speak to were their closest friend, their partner/the person they are seeing, a parent/carer, a therapist/counsellor, and looking online.

Figure 14 – Impact of age on who young people would speak to about their own behaviour



The responses to this question were then broken down by gender identity, as is shown in Figure 15.

As Figure 15 shows, all genders chose 'my partner/the person I am seeing' as one of the top three options of who they would be most likely to speak to. When asked why they would be most likely to speak to their partner, young people who chose this option described feeling their partner was the most appropriate individual, as they were involved in the situation and thus would have knowledge around how to improve things:

"Because it's the only other person who genuinely knows the situation like you do and therefore how it will be solved quickest"

24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

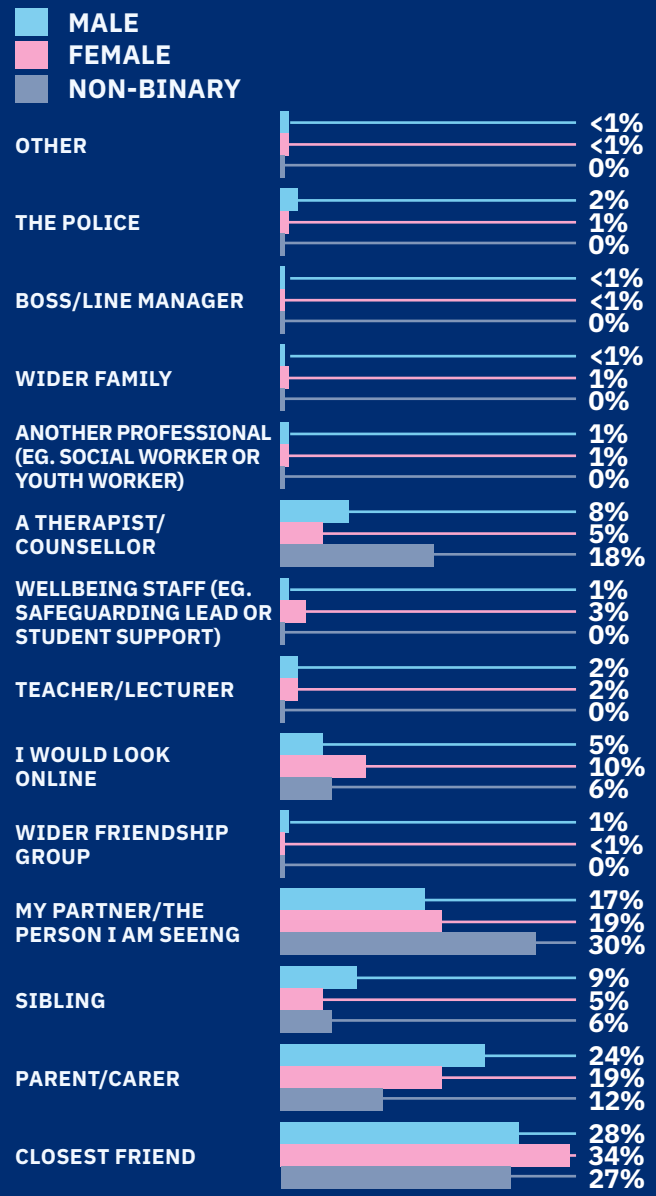
" I would choose to talk to my partner because it is the two of us who are in the relationship and if there was anything I would be doing that made them feel uncomfortable in any way I would hope that our relationship would be safe enough to discuss"

21-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT

There are a number of possible implications of young people speaking to their partner if they are concerned about their behaviour. If these conversations are taking place in the context of a relationship where there is healthy and open communication, they may provide a space for the other partner to share if/how the behaviour is impacting them, and for the partner concerned about their own behaviour to reflect and make changes. If, however, the young people do not have a framework for healthy relationships, as is true for many taking part in this study, solely speaking to their partner about their behaviour is unlikely to lead to a positive outcome. If the young person is using harmful behaviour, and particularly if these are more established behaviours, their partner may well minimise or deny this behaviour when asked as a means of self-protection. If the partner experiencing harm does feel able to be honest, this may lead to consequences and further harm. Existing research[23] also suggests that there will be some young people, most likely young women, who are being victimised and led to believe that they are the abusive partner as part of a pattern of victimisation. In these instances, if it is in fact the young person experiencing harm who is sharing concerns about their own behaviour with their partner, who is the person causing harm, these concerns are likely to be reinforced. These more negative implications highlight the importance of ensuring young people have places to go where they can discuss these concerns and receive appropriate support and guidance.

Although there was only a small sample of young people in the survey who identified as non-binary, the findings suggest that the places non-binary young people will turn to for support may be different to those identifying as male or female. The only professional non-binary young people stated they would be most likely to speak to was a therapist or counsellor, which may reflect that such professionals are the only ones seen as a safe space for non-binary young people.

Figure 15 - Impact of gender on who young people would be most likely to speak to about their own behaviour



Although young people selected a variety of different people to speak to, there were a number of similarities in why they chose the specific person. Young people described feeling comfortable confiding in their chosen person. In some cases, this was because they found them easy to talk to:

> "We talk about everything"
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "It's easier to talk to them because they are closer to me"
>
> 14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Additionally, some young people reflected that they felt that the conversations would be confidential and anonymous if they went to their chosen place for support:

> "You should be able to, say, go to someone and to trust them not to, say, spread the word, or something that you don't want them to, and stuff like that"
>
> PRU FOCUS GROUP PPT.

> "Because I could trust them and they could keep my secret to themselves"
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "People you can speak to anonymously"
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "I definitely think it should be anonymous ... because it carries a massive stigma, like, if you were trying to ask for help in those behaviours, you definitely want it to be anonymous"
>
> 23-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

> "It's confidential and anonymous"
>
> 16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Feeling accepted, and being able to trust the individual were two other aspects which helped young people feel comfortable confiding in their chosen person:

> "I wouldn't feel judged and it wouldn't change their opinion of me"
>
> 14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "I trust my closest friend not to tell anyone my concerns"
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "Trust them and I trust their judgement"
>
> 25-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "You have to point out when a behaviour is wrong, but it's about being... yeah, it's about not disliking them as a person, and actually making sure that they feel... kind of accepted, and comfortable, and that it isn't a space where you're just going to get judged"
>
> PRACTITIONER

In this vein, having received previous advice or guidance from the individual before was often highlighted as a basis of their trust:

> "The internet has provided me with help in the past"
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> "I trust my mum more than anyone she has good beliefs and morals, she's good at giving advice"
>
> 24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In line with this, young people who completed the survey felt that trust and a good relationship was the most crucial aspect about support, with half of respondents picking this option, as can be seen in Figure 16 on the following page.

Figure 16 – Further important elements of support for young people who harm

Data from this study emphasises that young people are likely to seek support from people with whom they feel comfortable and there were a number of different elements they reflected on which led to a sense of comfort.

In addition to feeling comfortable, young people in this study discussed some other aspects which determined who they would choose to talk to if they were worried about their behaviours. Some young people highlighted knowledge as important. As discussed in the 'expertise' section above, some reflected on this in relation to training and experience. However, in some cases it was personal experience that was seen as relevant:

> **"Because my mum always has answers and she's experienced relationships before so has a good understanding"**
>
> 14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Other young people focused on the importance of feeling that the person they were going to for support knew them, or their relationship, well:

> **"Because chances are my closest friend would know the person I was in a relationship with better than my family for example"**
>
> 14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Because they understand me well"**
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

In addition to this, some young people reflected on how they felt their chosen source of support would provide them with actionable outcomes. In some cases this was widening their perspective, or gaining more insight which could help them to change their behaviour:

> **"Sometimes gaining a different perspective is good"**
>
> 24-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"They could help me understand why I was using the behaviours so we could address the issue and work on it so I no longer use them"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Finally, some young people cited ease and convenience as the driving force behind the source of support they would turn to:

> **"Online would be the easiest way to find impartial advice, and read other people's experiences"**
>
> 14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

Often, this was mentioned when the chosen source was the internet, and in these cases, individuals also reflected on the ease of accessing a wide variety of resources:

> **"I prefer to look online due to a wide variety of resources and forums"**
>
> 19-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

> **"Online would give a lot of information and you can then decide how to proceed"**
>
> 22-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

When young people referred to accessing support online, this was often discussed either alongside therapy/ counselling, or due to a lack of access to formal avenues of support:

"Counselling? Online support maybe?"

16-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"My Mum said we'd get help for it, but every time I've really tried to get help for things, it never really works out... So, most of the help that I've gotten has been online"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Although there were numerous different motivations for turning to their chosen place for support, for young people the key element was how support made them feel. Young people reflected on turning to informal support as they felt that this was a safe, knowledgeable, and non-judgemental space.

Young people also discussed how interactions with informal sources of support could help an individual to recognise their use of harmful behaviours:

"It may be things like their peers telling them what they're doing is wrong"

17-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

"Your friends recognise it and tell you"

14-YEAR-OLD SURVEY PPT.

However, as previously discussed, some young people also reflected on times when their behaviours had been normalised by those they chose to speak to:

"You're talking about all these things you're doing, but it's not seen as a bad thing, it is just seen as the norm, because I think when it's so common, that you don't realise what you're doing is actually doing more harm than good"

18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

For many of the young people, the response they received was the normalisation of toxicity through peers sharing that they were behaving in the same way. When asked how her best friend had responded when she disclosed the use of harmful behaviours, one young person said:

"Erm, unfortunately, she uses the exact same ones"

17-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW PPT.

Findings from this study make clear that young people need to be better supported and equipped to respond well and safely when a friend discloses that they are concerned or unsure about their own behaviour in a relationship.

While young people completing the survey and those taking part in interviews gave many reasons for why they would turn to certain people and places for support, there were also young people participating in this study who shared their reluctance to access any form of support. When young people attending the Her Centre workshop were asked whether they would seek support if they were worried about their own behaviours, over half of them (56%) said they would not. When asked what the barrier would be, the most frequent responses were around fear and embarrassment, reiterating the importance of support which feels non-judgemental and the need for young people to feel comfortable.

This section provides an insight into the perceptions of young people and practitioners around domestic abuse prevention and healthy relationships education. It also explores experiences of formal and informal support and the views of young people and practitioners on what support for young people who harm should look like. An overview of the key findings from this section can be found within the executive summary (pp. 9-11).

Reflections and recommendations

REFLECTIONS

This project sought to further understandings of abuse in young people's relationships, as well as to explore the views of young people and practitioners around prevention, early intervention and specialist support. The learning from this research led to the creation of a model of support for young people who harm and a set of recommendations. Before outlining these recommendations, it is important to reflect on the model of support and its limitations.

The model presented in this report is the first iteration of a model developed with the aim of guiding practitioners and funders in creating effective and accessible support for young people who are using harmful behaviours in their relationships. This evidence-based model has been developed from a project which aimed to explore support for young people on the verge of harming and has therefore been created with this stage of harmful behaviour as the focus. In light of this, further research is needed focusing on young people with more established patterns of abuse to explore the applicability of the model to support for this group. While some of the practitioners interviewed for this study reflected on their experiences of working with young people with more established patterns of harmful behaviour, further conversations with young people, practitioners, and those who have been through behaviour change and perpetrator programmes, would allow the application of the model to be explored at various stages of harm, as well as furthering understandings of the practical implications of the model.

In light of domestic abuse being widely recognised as a gendered issue, it seems important to reflect on the gender split of the young people who took part in this study. This research originally intended to focus on gathering the voices of boys and young men who harm, as these voices are often absent in conversations around abuse. Of the 40 young people recruited for the interview aspect of the current study through social media campaigns asking if they were worried they had ever used toxic behaviour, only four were male, and only one went on to take part in the study. Furthermore, of the 749 young people who took part in the survey, 25% identified as male, compared to 64% female. There are many possible explanations for this lack of male response, including possible gender differences in the appraisal of behaviour, with existing research suggesting that boys define abuse based on intent while girls define abuse based on impact[10]. This explanation would suggest that fewer males saw the advert as relevant to them, due to fewer appraising their behaviour as 'toxic', compared to the females who saw the advert. Further possible explanations for this disparity can be found in the **previous report**. As a result, the learning from this research has predominantly come from the stories of girls and young women, however boys' voices were gathered through the focus groups in a PRU, indirectly through narratives from practitioners who had supported boys and young men who harm, as well as through the survey.

NEXT STEPS

The Verge of Harming project has begun to address the evidence gap around young people's use of harm in their romantic/dating relationships, and has provided insight into their views and experiences, as well as recommendations for support. Further research is needed, however, building on this work and addressing the areas of reflection outlined above. Firstly, it is the aim of the research team to use the learning from this current project to inform future recruitment strategies in order to broaden conversations with boys and young men to ensure their often-unheard voices are included in future research. Secondly, the research team aim to strengthen the early intervention model of support presented in this report through further research focused on workshopping the model with a wide audience of practitioners and young people.

Recommendations

Learning from this project led to the creation of seven recommendations focused on healthy relationships education and resources, domestic abuse awareness, and the need for additional levels of support and specialist training, as well as four additional recommendations focused on support for young people who harm:

1. Healthy relationships education and prevention work needs to:

    A. *Work towards expanding current understandings of abuse to include behaviours that aren't solely physical*

    B. *Equip young people to respond well and safely when their friends share concerns about their own behaviour*

    C. *Develop young people's emotional literacy so that they feel able to identify, understand and express adverse emotions in a healthy way*

2. Resources and education relating to healthy relationships and domestic abuse need to expand beyond heteronormative depictions to ensure visibility of LGBTQ+ relationships

3. Domestic abuse awareness campaigns that want to reach young people need to ensure terminology (such as domestic abuse) is explained in a way that feels relevant for young people, using examples with characters/actors in this age range and behaviours that take place in young people's relationships

4. This research identified a need for support that exists between the levels of prevention (before harm is used) and specialist domestic abuse support. In order to better understand this level of support and what it should look like, mapping is needed of what currently exists, the gaps, and young people's views and experiences of this provision

5. Partnership working between specialist domestic abuse services and organisations working with young people (e.g. schools) needs to be strengthened in order to increase the visibility of such services and improve referral pathways

6. Research focused on the new relationship and sex education (RSHE) curriculum should be carried out with a domestic abuse lens in order to explore the impact of this new curriculum on young people's views around, and experiences of, romantic/dating relationship

    A. *SafeLives are currently undertaking research exploring how the new curriculum is being received in secondary schools, however further work is needed focusing on primary schools*

7. Specialist training focused on domestic abuse and young people should be made available to professionals working with this age group. As therapists/counsellors were the practitioner group young people said they would be most likely to share concerns about their own behaviour with, training should be made available to them as a priority

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HARM

These recommendations reflect the early intervention model of support outlined in the findings section of this report (pp. 47-61), which has been created based on data from this study.

8. Support for young people who harm should be holistic, working with the whole person (intersecting identities and overlapping needs), whole family, and whole community (other professionals working with the young person and their family)

9. The response to young people who harm should be supportive rather than solely punitive, ensuring that when consequences/punishment are a necessary response to such behaviour, this does not happen without support and behaviour change work also being provided

10. Those providing support should seek to build and maintain strong working relationships with the young people they are supporting, as well as family and other professionals, and take time to end these relationships well

11. Those working with young people who harm should seek to tailor the support environment so that each young person feels that they are in a judgement-free, non-confrontational, and safe space

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 – SURVEY QUESTIONS

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and to have your say about what matters to people aged 11-25 on the topic of relationships.

The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and you will be given the option at the end to be entered into a prize-draw for a £50 Amazon Voucher.

You will be asked your thoughts about behaviours in relationships, and also about your own behaviours. Your responses are anonymous. No one will be able to tell who you are at any point unless you specifically leave your name or contact details within a comments box.

Use the 'Next' button at the bottom of each page to move through the survey. If you want to go back to a previous page click 'Back'. Once you have finished the survey a 'Submit' button will appear on the bottom of the page. Please ensure you click this button in order to send us your answers.

If you have technical problems completing the survey please email surveys@safelives.org.uk

I have read the above information and consent to taking part in this survey

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

How old are you?

[ ] Under 11 [ ] 11 [ ] 12

[ ] 13 [ ] 14 [ ] 15

[ ] 16 [ ] 17 [ ] 18

[ ] 19 [ ] 21 [ ] 22

[ ] 23 [ ] 24 [ ] 25

[ ] Over 25

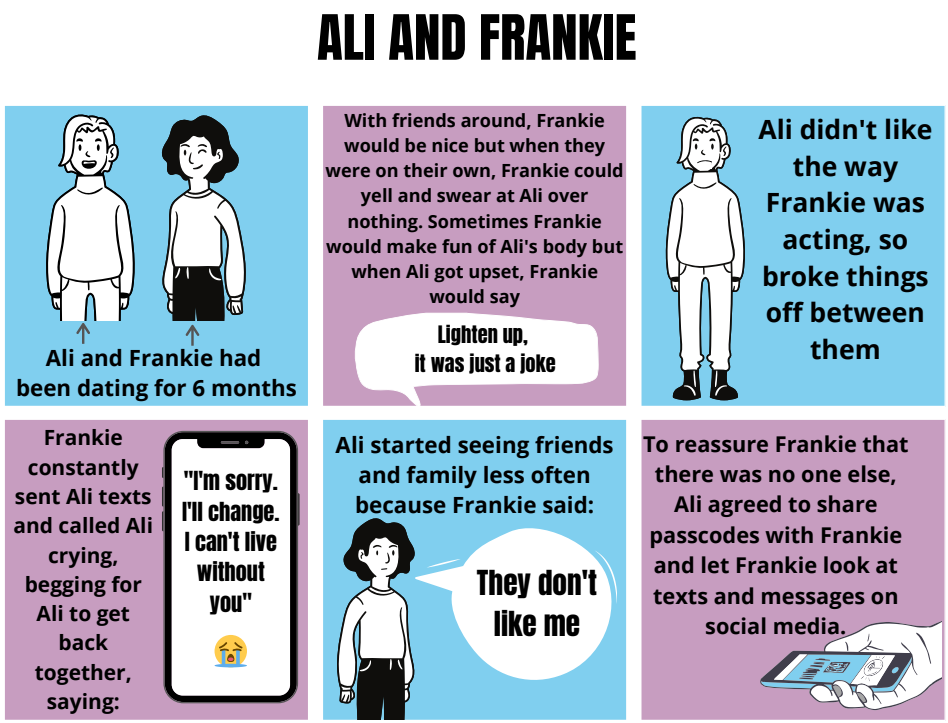
What word would you be most likely to use to describe young people's relationships that seem unhealthy?

[ ] Toxic

[ ] Harmful

[ ] Abusive

The next few questions are focused on fictional characters 'Ali and Frankie', and a snapshot of their relationship. Would you prefer to see this in a comic strip style with images, or just the words? (You can switch between these styles at any time by changing your answer to this question)



Q3: What feelings do you think Frankie experienced in this example?

Q4: Do you think Frankie used any toxic/harmful/abusive behaviours in this example? (if so, please say what these are)

Q5: What do you think of this statement: 'Frankie should be offered support for the way they acted' [route all responses of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' to Q6]

[ ] Strongly agree [ ] Agree [ ] Not sure
[ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree

Q4: Do you think Frankie used any toxic/harmful/abusive behaviours in this example? (if so, please say what these are)

Q7: What do you think young people gain from using toxic/harmful/abusive behaviours?

Q8: Young people have told us that they feel the following things influence/lead to young people using toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours in their relationships? Choose the three you are the most linked and drag them into the box on the right, putting them in order with the most linked at the top.

[ ] Experiencing abuse within their family
[ ] Experiencing abuse in a relationship
[ ] Having friends who use these behaviours
[ ] Media (films, TV, songs)
[ ] Wanting to gain power and control
[ ] Their own feelings
[ ] Lack of education/understanding around healthy relationships
[ ] Social media
[ ] Experiencing bullying
[ ] Peer pressure
[ ] Other (please specify)

Q9: If someone your age was in a relationship, how do you think they would be able to tell if they were using harmful behaviours?

Q10: If you were worried about your behaviour in a relationship, would you talk to the following people about it?

Closest friend	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Parent/caregiver	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Brother or sister	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
My partner/the person I am seeing	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Wider friendship group	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
I would look online	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Teacher/lecturer	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Wellbeing staff (e.g. safeguarding lead/student support)	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
A therapist/counsellor	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
A professional e.g. social worker/ youth worker)	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Wider family	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Boss/line manager	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
The police	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**
Other (please specify)	**[ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] N/A**

Q11: Who would you be most likely to talk to?

Response options: Multiple choice list of the people they said ‘yes’ to in the previous question

Q12: Why would this be the person you would choose to talk to?

Q13: Do you feel you have ever used toxic/harmful/abusive behaviours? [route responses of 'yes, in a romantic relationship' and 'yes, with a family member' to Q13. Route responses of 'no' to Q18. Route responses of 'not sure' to Q13 then Q14, without showing Q15-Q17']

[ ] Yes, in a romantic relationship

[ ] Yes, with a family member

[if they select this option, route to 'please say which family member?' with text box]

[ ] No

[ ] Not sure

Q13: In what ways have you acted that you think may be toxic/abusive/harmful?

Q14: Why do you feel you might have used those behaviours?

Q15: Is there anything you feel might have helped you not behave this way?

Q16: Young people and young adults have told us that the following things are important in support. If you were getting support for using toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours, what would you want it to be like?

[ ] Non-confrontational (the support isn't about blame or telling me off)

[ ] Non-judgemental

[ ] Online support

[ ] Interactive and engaging support

[ ] Group sessions

[ ] 1-2-1 sessions

[ ] Confidential

[ ] Friendly

[ ] Self-help resources

[ ] Other (please specify)

Q17: What would be most important to you about who delivers the support?

[ ] Where it takes place

Open text box below: Please where you would/wouldn't want support to take place

[ ] The people running the support are relatable (they are the same age/race/have the same gender identity etc. as me)

[ ] Consistency (same staff running each session)

[ ] Trust and good relationships with the people running the support

[ ] The people running support have experience of being in toxic/ abusive/harmful relationships

[ ] Other (please specify)

ABOUT YOU

The following questions are about you. We are asking these questions because we want to understand more about different people's experiences, including whether there are differences based on intersecting identities. This information will help to identify the needs of young people. The information you provide will be kept entirely confidential and will never be traced back to you as an individual.

Q19: Where do you currently live? [route answers of 'England' to Q20 and answers of 'outside of the UK' to Q21]

[ ] England

[ ] Northern Ireland

[ ] Scotland

[ ] Wales

[ ] Outside the UK

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q20: Which region?

[ ] East Midlands

[ ] Eastern

[ ] London

[ ] North East

[ ] North West

[ ] South East

[ ] South West

[ ] West Midlands

[ ] Yorkshire And The Humber **[ ] Prefer not to say**

Q21: Which country?

Q22: What was your sex assigned at birth?

[ ] Male

[ ] Female

[ ] Intersex

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q23: How would you describe your gender identity?

[ ] Male

[ ] Female

[ ] Non-binary

[ ] Prefer to self describe [box to add comment]

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q24: How would you identify?

[ ] Heterosexual

[ ] Bisexual

[ ] Lesbian

[ ] Gay

[ ] Pansexual

[ ] Asexual

[ ] Not sure

Prefer to self describe

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q25: Do you consider yourself to have a disability, a long-term illness or health concern (physical and/or mental health)?

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Not sure

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q26: What is your ethnic group? You will be asked to provide more detail in the next question.

White: Includes British, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy, Irish Traveller, Roma or any other White background

Mixed or Multiple ethnic: Includes White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian or any other Mixed or Multiple background

Asian or Asian British: Includes Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese or any other Asian background

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African: Includes Black British, Caribbean, African or any other Black background)

Other Ethnic group: Includes Arab or any other ethnic group)

[ ] White

[ ] Mixed or multiple ethnic

[ ] Asian or Asian British

[ ] Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

[ ] Other Ethnic group

[ ] Prefer not to say

Q27: Please tick yes below if you are happy for SafeLives to use anonymous quotes from your answers on our website or on our social media. If not, tick no.

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and to have your say about what matters to people aged 11-25 on the topic of relationships.

Our goal is to hear the voices of as many young people and young adults as possible.
Help us reach that goal by sharing this survey with others using the hashtag #IsItOk?

Our research team would like to talk more with those of you who shared that you have used toxic/abusive/harmful behaviours in a relationship. If you would be willing to take part in some non-judgemental conversations please click here to share your contact details.
(We do this on a separate site so that we can make sure your details aren't connected with your answers in this survey).

If you would like to be entered into the prize-draw to have the chance of winning a £50 Amazon Voucher, please click here to share your contact details. This will open a new window, but remember to click submit at the bottom of this survey to send us your answers.
(We do this on a separate site so that we can make sure your details aren't connected with your answers in this survey).

If you feel you need any support after completing this survey, please contact:

Childline on 0800 1111 or chat 1-2-1 to a counsellor online

The Mix for essential support for under 25s on 0808 808 4994 or online chat and forums

Galop for support for LGBTQ+ people experiencing domestic abuse. 0800 999 5428 or help@galop.org.uk

Muslim Youth Helpline for free and confidential faith and culturally sensitive support services on 0808 808 2008

Refuge for the national 24-hour domestic abuse helpline on 0808 2000 247
Click the submit button below to send us your answer

APPENDIX 2 – DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

A breakdown of the demographic data for each methodology is detailed below, however no demographic data was collected for the 70 young people who took part in the Her Centre workshops.

Participants were asked to describe their gender identity. Five members from the WASSUP panel identified as female, one as gender non-conforming and two did not disclose their gender. 18 of the participants from the focus groups in a PRU described themselves as male and one as female. Of those who took part in the interviews, nine identified as female, one identified as male, and one identified as non-binary/gender-queer. Finally, 480 of the young people who took part in the survey identified as female, 188 identified as male, 33 identified as non-binary/gender-queer, 15 preferred to self-describe, and 33 did not disclose their gender identity.

Young people were asked whether they felt that they had a long term health condition. One of the WASSUP panel members described themselves as having a disability or long-term health condition five members answered no to this question and two did not answer. Fifteen of the focus group participants described themselves as having a disability or long-term health condition, two answered no to this question and one chose not to answer. Of those who took part in the interviews five of the participants described themselves as having a long term health condition or disability, five answered no to this question, and one young person did not answer this question. Of the survey participants, 182 described themselves as having a long term health condition or disability, 420 answered no to this question, 102 young people felt unsure of whether they had a long term health condition or disability, and 45 of the young people did not answer this question.

All participants were asked about their sexuality. Four of the WASSUP panellists described themselves as heterosexual, one as bisexual, one as asexual, and two chose not to disclose. 18 of the participants in the focus group described themselves as heterosexual, and one chose not to say. While this may reflect orientation, it may also reflect the difficulties with identifying outside of heteronormativity as a 13–15-year-old in a PRU attended by all males aside from two females. Four of the young people who took part in the interviews identified as heterosexual, four as bisexual, one identified as pansexual, and two young people chose not to answer. Finally, of the young people who took part in the survey, 430 of the young people identified as heterosexual, 119 as bisexual, 20 identified as pansexual, 23 identified as gay, 18 identified as lesbian, ten identified as asexual, 27 preferred to self-describe, and 102 young people chose not to answer.

The age of participant was collected, with the overall sample aged between 11 – 25 years old. The ages of young people from all data collection methods are detailed in the table (right):

Age	Interview ppts.	Focus group ppts.	WASSUP panel members	Survey ppts.
11	-	-	-	37
12	-	-	-	51
13	-	9	-	105
14	-	7	-	79
15	-	3	-	56
16	-	-	-	75
17	2	-	3	66
18	2	-	1	49
19	1	-	-	36
20	1	-	2	31
21	1	-	-	33
22	1	-	-	38
23	2	-	-	27
24	-	-	-	35
25	-	-	-	31
Missing	1	-	2	-

Finally, young people were asked to detail their ethnicity. Two of the young people who took part in the WASSUP panel identified as White and Black Caribbean, one identified as Ghanaian, three identified as Black African, and two did not disclose their ethnicity. Of the young people who took part in the focus groups at the PRU, 18 identified as White British and one identified as a Mixed ethnic group. Seven of the young people who took part in the interviews identified as White British, two identified as White other, one identified as African/ Arabic, and one did not disclose their ethnicity. Finally, 601 of the survey respondents identified as white, 43 identifying as Mixed/ Multiple ethnicity, 38 identified Asian/ Asian British, 22 identified as Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British, seven identified as other ethnic group, and 38 did not disclose their ethnicity. A more detailed breakdown of the survey respondents ethnicity can be seen in the table below:

	Interview ppts.	Count	%
White		601	80%
	English/ Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	545	73%
	Irish	20	3%
	Gypsy or Irish Traveller	2	<1%
	Any other White background	26	3%
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups		43	6%
	White and Black Caribbean	16	2%
	White and Black African	6	1%
	White and Asian	16	2%
	Any other Mixed/ Multiple ethnic background	5	1%
Asian / Asian British		38	5%
	Indian	14	2%
	Pakistani	12	2%
	Bangladeshi	1	<1%
	Chinese	5	1%
	Any other Asian background	5	1%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British		22	3%
	African	15	2%
	Caribbean	5	1%
	Any other Black / African / Caribbean background	2	<1%
Other ethnic group		7	1%
	Arab	2	<1%
	Any other ethnic group	4	1%
Did not disclose		7	1%
	Prefer not to say	29	4%
	Missing	9	1%

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