

# Living without fear



Levels of domestic abuse are alarmingly high with children increasingly emerging as victims. But what can schools do to prevent children repeating the violence they have witnessed? **Claire Fox, Rebecca Hale and David Gadd** report on the evaluation of an innovative project.

**T**here is increasing recognition that the problem of domestic abuse – the use of physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse to control a partner or ex-partner – affects young people as much as it does adults. One means of supporting children and adolescents in this situation is to provide educational interventions designed to help young people to deal with domestic abuse as they enter dating or intimate relationships during adolescence and early adulthood.

In North Staffordshire a charity called Arch has been delivering an educational programme which aims to give young people the knowledge and skills to recognise an abusive relationship. The programme, Relationships without Fear, also tackles the underlying attitudes that give rise to abusive tendencies. This intervention seeks to safeguard the welfare of children and adolescents by identifying,

supporting and protecting those who are affected by domestic abuse. In sum, the programme aims to contribute to the long term overall reduction in domestic abuse.

The current government **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy**, has diluted the emphasis on compulsory domestic abuse prevention education with a more specific focus on the issue of sexual consent, and a greater emphasis on a national awareness raising campaign – so effectively the strategy is a re-running of the **'This is Abuse'** campaign. In this article we argue that domestic abuse prevention education in schools is needed, it can be effective, but that getting the message right is the key to effectiveness.

## Relationships without Fear

**Relationships without Fear** is delivered by specially trained facilitators (either domestic abuse practitioners or trained teachers) who visit schools to teach weekly one hour sessions for six weeks (often as part of the Personal Social Health Education programme).

The programme is delivered to young people aged 8 to 16 years, with each year receiving a programme tailored to their particular age-group. The programme is delivered to children aged 8 to 11 years and focusses on friendships and how to manage negative emotions.

In year 6 (ages 10-11 years), the topic of domestic abuse is introduced to pupils, including the types of abuse and sources of support for victims. The secondary school programme addresses a wide range of issues pertaining to domestic abuse including acceptable and unacceptable behaviours within a relationship, the experiences of victims, why victims struggle to leave abusive relationships, the role of power and control within relationships and how to seek help in domestic abuse situations.

## The case for prevention

On the surface, the importance of this type of educational programme appears crucial; however effectiveness of this type of intervention at changing attitudes has always been unclear. Recently, though, Arch agreed to participate in two studies to evaluate the effectiveness of Relationships without Fear. One of the studies – **From Boys to Men** - was funded by the **Economic and Social Research Council**, and aimed to examine why some boys become domestic abuse perpetrators when others do not. Amongst other things, this research involved assessing adolescents' attitudes towards domestic violence, and ascertaining their experiences of domestic abuse as a victim, perpetrator and witness.

The other study – **REaDAPt** (Relationship Education and Domestic Abuse Prevention Tuition) – was funded by the European Union's Daphne III scheme, and examined the effectiveness of Relationships without Fear (and similar programmes in France and Spain) in changing young people's attitudes towards domestic abuse. REaDAPt also explored young people's opinions about the programmes and identified good practice and areas for improvement. These findings were used to inform a new intervention – the **REaDAPt Educational Toolkit** – which was implemented and evaluated in Malta. The findings also highlighted the challenges faced by educators seeking to implement this type of intervention.

## Is preventative education needed?

In the From Boys to Men project, 1143 young people aged 13-14 years were surveyed about their experiences of abuse. Of those who had been on a date, 44 per cent of boys and 46 per cent of girls reported having ever experienced at least one of the types of domestic abuse (see questions on next page).

The questions below are very sensitive and personal (about you). You do not have to answer the questions if you do not want to and you can stop answering the questions at any time. Think about people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends. Have **THEY**:

If you have NEVER been on a date or had a boyfriend/girlfriend please circle 'Never' for each of the 10 questions

	(Please circle one)	If you ticked once or more than once did this happen in the last 12 months?
1) Ever pushed, slapped or grabbed you?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
2) Ever punched, kicked or choked you, or beaten you up?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
3) Ever threatened to physically hurt you?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
4) Ever pressured or forced you to have sex?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
5) Ever pressured or forced you to do anything else sexual, including kissing, hugging and touching?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
6) Ever called you nasty names to put you down?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
7) Ever stopped you from seeing your friends or family?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
8) Ever told you who you can't speak to?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
9) Ever checked up on who you have phoned or sent messages to?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No
10) Ever damaged something of yours on purpose?	Never/Once/More than once	Yes/No

The most prevalent form of abuse reported was emotional abuse and controlling behaviours, with 38 per cent reporting at least one of the experiences outlined in questions 6-9. Physical abuse was the next most commonly experienced by 17 per cent of the sample (questions 1 and 2). Sexual victimisation (questions 4 and 5) was reported by 14 per cent of those who had been on a date.

A quarter of girls and boys reported having carried out at least one of the abusive behaviours listed. The most prevalent form of abuse perpetrated by the young people was emotional abuse and controlling behaviours (20 per cent). Physical abuse (excluding threats and damage to property) was perpetrated by 7 per cent of the students and 4 per cent had perpetrated sexual abuse. A third of all students reported witnessing at least one type of abuse at home. Emotional abuse/controlling behaviours were witnessed by 27 per cent of the sample and physical abuse was witnessed by 19 per cent of them.

With the data on victimisation, perpetration and witnessing abuse combined, 52.5 per cent of the whole sample of 13-14 year olds had experienced some form of domestic abuse, whether as a victim, perpetrator or having witnessed abuse. It means that those working with young people need to be alive to the possibility that in almost every class there will be a sizeable minority of young people who have experienced domestic abuse in a relationship.

Attitudes  
towards  
Domestic  
Violence  
Questionnaire

<b>Do you think it is OK for a man to hit his partner/wife if HE is drunk?</b>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's perfectly OK	It's sort of OK	It's sort of wrong	It's really wrong
<b>Suppose a woman hits her partner/husband, do you think it is wrong for HIM to hit HER?</b>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's really wrong	It's sort of wrong	It's sort of OK	It's perfectly OK

“Most young people regard violence from women to men as more socially acceptable than violence perpetrated by men against women.”

Finally, the nature of young people’s attitudes towards domestic violence indicated that a disconcerting number of them believe that domestic violence is acceptable in certain circumstances. Students’ attitudes in six different situations were assessed (for example, is it OK for a man to hit his partner/wife if she has cheated on him) using the Attitudes towards Domestic Violence Questionnaire developed for the project. Each situation was presented in pairs, so that it referred to a man hitting his partner/wife, and also a woman hitting her partner/husband. The findings showed that 49 per cent of boys compared to 33 per cent of girls thought hitting would be ok in at least one of the situations. Specifically:

- 17.5 per cent of boys thought it was okay for a man to hit his partner/wife if she has hit him, compared to 11.5 per cent of girls.
- 10.2 per cent of boys thought it was okay for a man to hit his partner/wife if she has cheated on him, compared to 6.9 per cent of girls.
- 30.4 per cent of boys thought it was okay for a woman to hit her partner/husband if he has hit her, compared to 18.4 per cent of girls.
- 18.2 per cent of boys thought it was okay for a woman to hit her partner/husband if he had cheated on her, compared to 9.6 per cent of girls.

So fewer boys than girls regard hitting your partner as wrong. Most young people regard violence from women to men as more socially acceptable than violence perpetrated by men against women: 40 per cent of young people reported that it was ‘OK’ for a woman to hit her partner in at least one of the circumstances listed compared to 25 per cent of young people who thought it was OK for a man to hit his partner.

The data also revealed that those who had already experienced domestic abuse – whether as victims, witnesses or perpetrators – were more likely to think that hitting a partner was okay than those who had not: 44 per cent compared to 37 per cent. In sum, the social acceptability of violence is shaped by both gender and prior experiences of it among young teenagers.

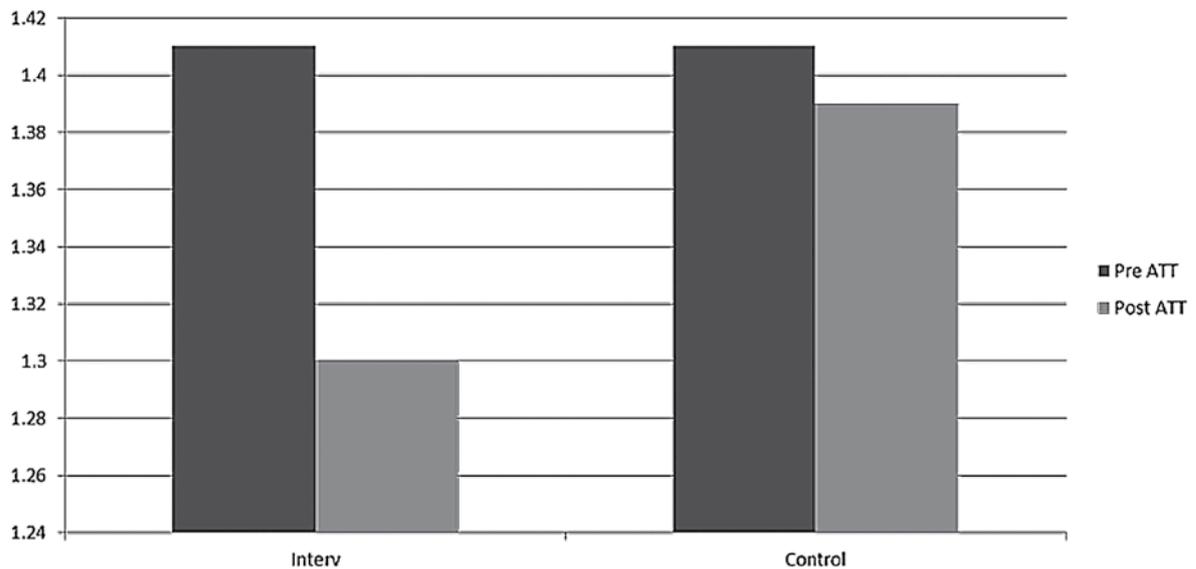
To conclude, the From Boys to Men project highlighted the high prevalence of domestic abuse in young people’s dating relationships, and that many adolescents think that hitting a partner is acceptable in certain circumstances. These findings tell us that if the aim is to reach children before domestic abuse begins to impact upon many of their lives, then, in the UK at least, interventions are going to need to target children before they reach the age of 13.

### Can education change attitudes?

In view of the high prevalence of adolescents’ experiences of domestic violence, and their high acceptability of it in certain circumstances, the importance of educational interventions designed to tackle domestic violence appears indisputable. However, if interventions are going to be delivered in schools, they must be effective.

In the From Boys to Men project young people’s attitudes towards domestic violence were assessed before and after they received Relationships without Fear, to determine if the programme was influencing their attitudes. Additionally, the attitudes of these pupils (forming the intervention group) were compared with pupils in other schools who were not receiving the programme (the control group). The attitudes of the intervention group were also assessed for a third time (the follow-up), three months after completing the programme.

The results showed that there was a statistically significant change in young people’s attitudes in the intervention group from before to after the Relationships without Fear programme (i.e. their scores decreased, showing they had become less accepting of domestic violence). This is indicated in the pair of columns on the left side of Figure 1, and the significant finding is denoted by the star. In contrast, there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores for the control group.



**Figure 1: A comparison of the attitude scores from before to after the intervention**

The study also found that young people who had received the programme maintained their lowered acceptance of domestic violence three months after the post-test showing that Relationships without Fear is effective at changing young people's attitudes, and these changes are maintained after three months. The findings of the study support the call for young people to be exposed to domestic abuse prevention education in schools. While it can be difficult to find time within the PSHE curriculum to cover all of the important issues, we would argue that schools should make time and space for it, introducing this to young people before they start to form intimate relationships (e.g. ages 12–13 years), and on a yearly basis.



### Relationship Education and Domestic Abuse Prevention Education – REaDAPt project

Pupils receiving the interventions in England, France and Spain, completed the Attitudes towards Domestic Violence Questionnaire (ADV) developed by researchers for this study.

Pupils completed this questionnaire before they received the interventions (pre-test) and after the interventions (post-test) to determine how their attitudes changed between the two time points. Some of the young people at each site also took part in focus groups to discuss the programmes. The findings from the evaluation informed the content of the REaDAPt! Research Toolkit and the REaDAPt! Educational Toolkit. The Educational Toolkit was then implemented in schools in Malta, and evaluated using the ADV questionnaire.

### The challenges of delivering preventative education

Although educational interventions may be effective in changing attitudes there are a number of challenges that educators may encounter when delivering preventative education. These issues were identified during focus groups conducted with pupils in years 6 and 9, conducted as part of the REaDAPt project. The focus groups examined what young people liked and disliked about Relationships without Fear, and if they had any opinions about how the programme could be improved. The key challenges that emerged were: the need for educators to deliver varied activities; the difficulty in managing pupils' opinions; how to manage student discomfort; and students' assertions that the programme is 'sexist'. The children were generally very positive about the programme but did indicate areas for improvement which are summarised on the next page.



### 1. The need for varied activities, active participation and flexibility

The programme consisted of a predetermined, fixed curriculum that facilitators delivered in much the same way to all classes within a particular year group. However, this approach was problematic because of young people's differing ability levels, interests and experiences. Additionally, young people preferred lessons that were student-led where they were actively engaging with the material. Overall, this shows the importance of ensuring interventions are responsive to the needs and learning preferences of students.

Vary [lessons], like sometimes you do role-plays, sometimes you do story-telling, sometimes you're on netbooks (Secondary School Boy).

You have to find the information, not like people telling you (Secondary School Girl).

### 2. The difficulty in managing what pupils say

Sometimes teachers will know (or suspect) that certain students in their class have witnessed and/or experienced domestic violence and seek to ensure these individuals are not exposed to insensitive comments. Therefore, a potential challenge faced by educators is how to manage pupil participation and 'protect' vulnerable students, without contributing towards the disengagement of pupils who are frustrated at the restriction of their opinions. This was demonstrated in one focus group where students explained that the facilitator had posed a question about the victim's culpability in a particular scenario, and the students had responded with viewpoints that their teacher disagreed with. However, despite the teacher's intentions to manage what he deemed as insensitive comments, his actions were interpreted negatively by students and consequently discouraged their participation in further discussion.

*'Our form tutor though, he was like every time you said something he'd put the point against it even though it was your opinion, he'd put a point against it, and it'd just do my head in.'* (Secondary School Girl)

### 3. Managing student discomfort

Through the lesson content and delivery, teachers/facilitators can inadvertently tap into the anxieties and experiences of pupils. For example, role-plays may tap into a young person's lived experience, and this raises questions about the potential risks of re-enactment, and the discomfort this could cause. Additionally, some students (regardless

of personal experiences) may find the topic of domestic violence upsetting. This was highlighted in one focus group, where the use of real-life case studies was deemed inappropriate for year 9 pupils especially when encouraged to empathise with the victim by imagining it is a friend.

*'You hear about [domestic abuse] in stories and like it is based on like a true story, but like it just felt awkward to be like talking about it as if it was your friend.'*

(Secondary School Girl)

#### 4. The programme is 'sexist'

Like many such programmes, Relationships without Fear addresses domestic abuse as a gendered phenomenon, in which men tend to perpetrate more violence that is repeated and life-threatening than women. Some children struggle, however to grasp the difference between a gendered perspective and discrimination against men. Some children who participated in Relationships without Fear, for example, thought that the programme was 'sexist', and were unhappy with the programme's greater emphasis on male perpetrators compared to female perpetrators. Likewise, one girl suggested that girls might not like how females are presented as victims.

*'That's not fair when it's always men beating women - it's sexist against men.'*

(Primary School Boy)

*'Girl 1: Most of the time it seemed like the male gender was getting the blame for abuse, and I don't think the lads felt that happy with that*

*Boy 3: it was sexist*

*'Girl 3: so it seemed a bit like sexist. But the women, but like the girls as well, I think some of them got offended when they turned round and said that we weren't as strong as men in domestically abusive situations.'*

(Secondary School Group)

Whilst women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse incidents compared to men, for the primary school children in particular, the greater emphasis on female victims came across as simply being unfair.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, high rates of abuse have been found in the dating relationships of young adolescents. Subsequently, preventative education is crucial to support young people in early adolescence, to prevent abuse occurring in their own relationships. The From Boys to Men project found that domestic abuse prevention education programmes can change young people's attitudes, and thus we would argue that it is a worthwhile endeavour. But, if we wish to reduce the social acceptability of violence, we need to ensure that young people's concerns are fully anticipated in domestic abuse prevention education programmes.

Our research highlights the importance of listening to the views of young people to ensure that this type of education is tailored to their needs. Domestic abuse is a complex problem and thus, there a number of challenges for educators and schools to surmount. In particular, the lessons need to be delivered in a way that utilises student-led methods where young people actively engage with the material. Educators also need to recognise that young people can perceive such programmes as 'sexist' and that this could lead to students, particularly boys, disengaging from the programme. Additionally, the sensitive nature of this topic means that some young people may become upset by the programme's content, and that pupils who have experienced domestic abuse may be especially vulnerable. This situation could be further exacerbated if students express insensitive comments. Here, educators need to navigate the tricky balance between allowing students to freely express their concerns and opinions, while also trying to

protect vulnerable students. Taken together, these issues highlight the importance of educators developing expertise and confidence in delivering this type of programme.

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### Further information

The READAPT project has produced an Educational Toolkit that can assist educators in doing this, and is free to download from the READAPT website: <http://www.readapt.eu/content/educational-toolkit>

The Educational Toolkit comprises six modules and can be used by educators to deliver a preventative programme to students aged 12-18 years. The modules contain a number of lesson plans, resources and teaching guidance, and the resources can be amended to suit the students' age, learning preferences and ability levels.

Once such resource is a short film, 'Through a Child's Eyes'.



In this film, a young boy talks about his experience of witnessing his father being violent towards his mother. He tells his story through pictures he has drawn. The film highlights a child's perspective in domestic violence situations. Viewers are encouraged to share the film with their teachers.

There is also a Research Toolkit, free to download from the website:

<http://www.readapt.eu/content/research-toolkit>

The Research Toolkit enables educators to evaluate preventative programmes, providing them with insight into the effectiveness of their programme and the extent that it is responsive to the needs of students.

For further information on the From Boys to Men ESRC-funded research project see [www.boystomenproject.com](http://www.boystomenproject.com)

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### Knowledge Trails

**Coping with child violence**

– What can be done about children and adolescents who are repeatedly violent against their parents and peers? Oliver Standing explains.

**A Review Of Preventative Work In Schools And Other Educational Settings In Wales To Address Domestic Abuse**

- This review by the National Foundation for Educational Research looks at preventative work in schools and other educational settings to address domestic abuse, identifies examples of good practice and makes recommendations on the key components of a successful programme. Available with Leadership Briefings.