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High levels of domestic abuse revealed among teenagers

A groundbreaking study of 13 and 14-year-olds in 13 Staffordshire schools has revealed worrying levels of domestic abuse among the young.

The research found that over half of the 1,203 Year 9 pupils had some direct experiences of domestic abuse, whether as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators.

It was led by Professor David Gadd from The University of Manchester and Dr Claire Fox from The University of Keele.

Follow up focus groups revealed a range complicated attitudes towards domestic abuse by children, which went some way to explain the figures.

The problems, argues the Economics and Social Research Council funded study, can be addressed, by preventative education before the age of 13.

While on a date, just less than half of both girls and boys had been abused; a quarter reported carrying out abusive behaviour.

Boys were more likely than girls to perceive hitting a partner as justifiable in various circumstances, but much less likely to say they would seek help if it happened to them.

Girls were more likely than boys to have noticed violence between parents and other adult carers.

Included in the definition of abuse used by the team were different levels of physical and sexual violence, threats, and controlling behaviours.

As part of the research, the team assessed the effectiveness of a school-based programme called 'Relationships without Fear'.

Dr Claire Fox, who led this phase said, "We found that domestic abuse prevention education can be effective in changing girls' and boys' attitudes towards domestic abuse and encouraging more of them to seek help."

The results which form phase one of the study, are published alongside phases two and three at www.boystomenproject.com today.

Professor Gadd, who is based at the University of Manchester's School of Law, said: "The findings of phase one this study reveal worrying levels of abuse among 13 and 14-year-olds, whether as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators and this needs to be addressed by policy makers.

"Many 13 and 14 year olds are already influenced by direct experiences of domestic abuse, with many of those who have witnessed it at home or experienced victimisation, having perpetrated it too.

“So we argue that preventative education probably needs to commence before children reach the age of 13 and be responsive to the different lived realities of boys and girls.

“It must be alive to the fact that many young people already have knowledge of domestic abuse, even if they do not necessarily regard it as such.”

He added: “While united in their condemnation of men who perpetrate domestic abuse, many of these young people defined controlling behaviours as something apart from it.

“Trust and its absence in a relationship – because of past or potential infidelity most typically – was fundamental to explaining and justifying abuse.

“Perhaps the key to understanding domestic abuse in adults may lie in understanding the subtle differences in the ways in which young teenagers appraise and evaluate their own experiences and those of their peers.”

For phase two of the project, the team conducted focus group discussions with 69 young people aged between 13 and 19.

Only a few of the boys felt that physical violence against women was ever acceptable, but many empathised implicitly with other men’s insecurities and the desire to control women when trust is lacking.

Phase three of the study elicited detailed accounts from 30 young men, aged 16-21, who had been affected by domestic violence, having experienced it as either a victim, witness or perpetrator.

The interviews threw light on how violent behaviours develop, and highlighted the absence of any intervention from public authorities. Few had talked to anyone in any depth about what they had done or why they did it.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Economics and Social Research Council funded study was carried out by criminologists at The Universities of Manchester, Keele and Bath

For more details about the study, From Boys to Men, is available here: www.boystomenproject.com.

The project was carried out in three phases, and each phase has a corresponding report. All three are available.

For phase one of the study, the 1,203 Year 9 pupils, based in 13 schools in Staffordshire, were recruited from both schools that had received Relationships without Fear (RwF) (‘intervention schools’) and those which had not (‘control schools’). 619 pupils from seven intervention schools (27 classes) and 584 pupils from six control schools (27 classes) took part; 572 were male and 596 were female

(gender was not recorded for 35 participants). The majority of young people who took part self described as 'White' (89.5%) and as 'British' (96.8%).

Professor David Gadd and Claire Fox are available for interview.

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