

# From Boys to Men Project



## FROM BOYS TO MEN: PHASE ONE KEY FINDINGS

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The *From Boys to Men* Project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to explore why some boys become domestic abuse perpetrators when others do not. In so doing, it sought to establish what more could be done to reduce the number of young men who become perpetrators. The study involved three phases of data collection including: Phase 1 - a survey of school children aged 13-14, Phase 2 - focus groups with 69 young people aged 13-19, and Phase 3 - life history interviews with 30 young men, aged 16-21, who had experienced domestic violence as victims, perpetrators or witnesses.

Reports on all stages of the project are available on our website  
[www.boystomenproject.com](http://www.boystomenproject.com).



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## Executive Summary

The *From Boys to Men* Project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to explore why some boys become domestic abuse perpetrators when others do not. In so doing, it sought to establish what more could be done to reduce the number of young men who become perpetrators. The study involved three phases of data collection including a survey of school children aged 13-14, focus groups with 69 young people aged 13-19, and life history interviews with 30 young men, aged 16-21, who had experienced domestic violence as victims, perpetrators or witnesses. Reports on all three stages of the project are available on our website [www.boystomenproject.com](http://www.boystomenproject.com)

This report documents the findings of the first phase of *The From Boys to Men* Project. The findings reported here are drawn from a survey of 1,203 school children, aged 13-14. The survey measured:

- Attitudes towards domestic abuse
- The incidence and prevalence of domestic abuse victimisation
- The incidence and prevalence of witnessing domestic abuse between adult carers
- Self-reported domestic abuse perpetration
- Willingness to seek help from adults
- The impact of a relationship education programme on acceptance of domestic abuse

We found that:

- Over half of 13-14 year olds had some direct experiences of domestic abuse, whether as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators.
- 44% of boys and 46% of girls who had been on a date had experienced at least one of the types of domestic abuse measured.
- A quarter of girls and boys who had ever been on a date reported having carried out at least one of the abusive behaviours listed.
- Girls were more likely than boys to have noticed violence between parents and other adult carers.
- 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.
- The social acceptability of violence was reduced through exposure to preventative education.

## Method

With regard to attitudes, participants completed the *Attitudes towards Domestic Violence* questionnaire (ADV). This measures children's beliefs about how wrong it is for a man to hit a woman, and also a woman to hit a man, in six different situations, relating to whether the offender is drunk, apologises, has been 'cheated on', was 'hit' first, was 'embarrassed' by their partner, or thinks their partner 'deserves it'. Participants were then asked to think about 'people' they 'have dated, and past or current boyfriends/girlfriends' and to answer questions on victimisation and perpetration in their dating relationships – questions asked about physical, emotional and sexual abuse. They were also asked about witnessing abuse at home between 'e.g. your parents, stepparents, guardians or foster carers', answering questions about physical and emotional abuse. Participants were asked to indicate whether any of this abuse had happened once or more than once, and whether or not it had happened in the last 12 months. Finally, participants were asked two questions about help-seeking behaviours: how likely they would be to seek help from an adult if they had been hit by a boy/girlfriend and, secondly, how likely they would be to seek help from an adult outside of their friends/family if they witnessed an adult at home being hit by their partner (please contact the authors directly for a copy of the questionnaire that was used).

Before taking part, participants were advised that some of the questions were quite 'personal and sensitive' and that the questionnaire was anonymous and confidential. However, they were also told that if they revealed something to the researchers face-to-face that suggested that they or someone else was at significant risk of harm, then that information would be shared with one of their teachers. Prospective participants were also told that they did not have to take part in the research if they did not want to, and could stop taking part at any time. 28 school children chose not to participate (17 male and 11 female). A further 19 children were opted out of the research by their parents/guardians (16 male, 3 female) from whom consent was sought on an 'opt out' basis. In sum, twice as many boys were opted out of the research than girls.

## Participants

In total, 1,203 Year 9 pupils (aged 13-14) in 13 schools in Staffordshire took part in the study. Young people 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%).

## Results

### Victimisation

Of the 1,065 young people who answered the question, 83% reported that they had previously been in a dating relationship: of these, the vast majority reported different sex partners and therefore the data on victimisation and perpetration predominantly relate to heterosexual relationships.<sup>1</sup> In line with other UK based studies (Barter et al., 2009), we found that experiences of domestic abuse were commonplace, with 52.5% of participants saying that they had at least one experience of victimisation, perpetration or witnessing one of the behaviours listed in the questionnaire.

Rates of victimisation among those who had been on a date were in excess of what is ordinarily reported for adult populations living in European countries. 44% of boys and 46% of girls reported having ever experienced at least one of the types of domestic abuse as listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Responses to the question: ‘Think about people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends’ (Victimisation)**

Have they ...	Once (%)	More than Once (%)	% in the last year
1. Ever pushed, slapped or grabbed you?	12.0	4.6	58.5
2. Ever punched, kicked or choked you, or beaten you up?	3.5	1.0	72.2
3. Ever threatened to physically hurt you?	3.9	3.0	49.2
4. Ever pressured or forced you to have sex?	3.5	0.9	73.8
5. Ever pressured or forced you to do anything else sexual, including kissing, hugging and touching?	9.0	4.4	78.2
6. Ever called you nasty names to put you down?	14.2	10.9	63.1
7. Ever stopped you from seeing your friends or family?	2.8	2.7	67.4
8. Ever told you who you can’t speak to?	13.3	5.4	68.5
9. Ever checked up on who you have phoned or sent messages to?	10.7	6.6	73.2
10. Ever damaged something of yours on purpose?	3.8	2.0	55.1

As the far right column indicates, most of these experiences of abuse had occurred in the last year. The most commonly reported experiences of abuse related to emotional abuse and controlling behaviours,

<sup>1</sup> Data on victimisation and perpetration relate to only those young people who reported previously being in a dating relationship; data on witnessing abuse relate to the sample as a whole.

with 38% reporting at least one of these experiences (as measured by questions 6-9). Physical abuse was the next most commonly experienced, by 17% of the sample (questions 1 and 2), or 21% if threatening behaviour and damage to property (questions 3 and 10) are deemed 'physical'. Sexual victimisation (questions 4 and 5) was reported by 14% of those who had been on a date. In contrast to what is known about adult rates of victimisation, we found no statistically significant difference between girls' and boys' rates of victimisation, including repeat victimisation, except with regard to sexual victimisation, where girls' experiences were significantly higher.

### Perpetration

As other studies of teenagers have reported (Archer, 2000; Barter et al., 2009; Moffitt et al., 2001), teenage girls tended to admit to perpetrating as many abusive acts as boys. We found:

- A quarter of girls and boys reported having carried out at least one of the abusive behaviours listed.
- A fifth (20%) of respondents reported perpetrating emotional abuse and controlling behaviours;
- 7% had perpetrated physical abuse (excluding threats and damage to property);
- 4% had perpetrated sexual abuse.

### Witnessing or Noticing?

When we looked at witnessing abuse between parents and adult carers at home, we found significant differences between boys' and girls' overall reports: 30% of boys and 39% of girls reported witnessing at least one of the types of abuse involving an adult who looks after them. Given that there is no real reason to expect the prevalence of domestic abuse to be higher in the homes of daughters than in the homes of sons, it seems likely that gendered differences in the perceptions of boys and girls were at stake among this age group of participants. Girls aged 13-14 may already be more sensitive to what counts as abuse – especially in its less injurious and/or more emotional forms – than boys. Of course, this needs to be considered in relation to self-reported perpetration and victimisation. A more detailed breakdown of responses to each of the measures addressed to the witnessing of violence between adults in the home did reveal that the greatest disparities in what girls and boys said they had witnessed pertained to emotional and controlling behaviours, though there were also gender differences with regard to the witnessing of actual assaults too. In sum:

- 26.8% of girls reported witnessing physical abuse between adults who care for them compared to 20.3% of boys;
- 33.7% of girls and 21.6% of boys reported witnessing emotional abuse and controlling behaviour between adults who care for them.

### The Acceptability of Hitting

Responses to the *Attitudes towards Domestic Violence* questionnaire provided further evidence of gendered differences in perceptions about what counts as acceptable use of force. 49% of boys compared to 33% of girls thought hitting would be okay in at least one of the 12 scenarios measured by the ADV questionnaire. Specifically:

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

Three features of this data were worthy of note. Firstly, fewer boys than girls regard hitting your partner as wrong, or as synonymous with ‘real’ violence. Second, most young people regard violence from women to men as more socially acceptable than violence perpetrated by men against women: 40% of young people reported that it was ‘okay’ for a woman to hit her partner in at least one of the circumstances listed compared to 25% of young people who thought it was okay for a man to hit his partner. The implications of this finding merit reflection given the number of boys who think it okay to hit a girl who has hit them first. Third, gender differences are rarely absolute, i.e. in every class there will be boys who are less accepting of violence than some of the girls. Interestingly, our dataset 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% compared to 37%. In sum, the social acceptability of violence is shaped by both gender and prior experiences of it among young teenagers.

### Help-Seeking

Perhaps the most striking evidence of gender difference, however, was with regard to the questions pertaining to seeking help from adults when a young person has themselves been hit by a girlfriend or



boyfriend. Boys (33.3%) were much less likely than girls (67.5%) to say they would seek help from an adult. Conversely, when asked if they would seek help from an adult if a parent or carer was experiencing abuse in their home, similar proportions of boys (69.4%) and girls (72.4%) agreed. On this measure, however, statistically significant differences could be found between those who had actually experienced abuse already and those who were answering the question hypothetically. In terms of seeking help had they been hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend themselves, those who had experienced abuse in some form (43.9%) were less likely to say they would seek help from an adult than those who had not (57.7%). Those who had been victims of domestic abuse (39.6%) were less likely to seek help in comparison to those who said it had never happened to them (55.7%), as were those who had witnessed it (44.2%) relative to those who had not witnessed it (54.1%) within the family. Additionally, young women who self-reported perpetrating abusive acts (50%) were less likely to say they would seek help from adults than those young women who disclosed no perpetration (72%) should they themselves be hit by a partner. In terms of seeking help when having witnessed abuse, those who had experienced abuse in some form (66.8%) were less likely to seek help from those who had not (74.0%); girls who had witnessed abuse themselves were less likely to seek help than girls who had not witnessed abuse (66% compared to 78%). In sum, many of those living with recent experiences of violence had come to the view that they would deal with it without the help of adults. Willingness to seek help is thus moderated by both gender and actual experiences of abuse in a variety of ways.

### Culpable Victims?

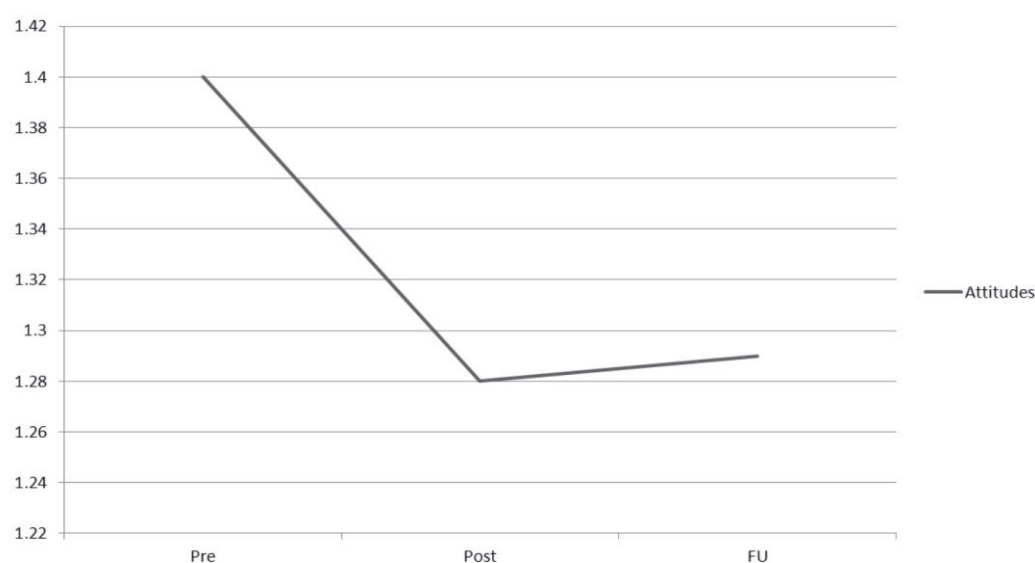
The importance of this finding becomes paramount when one recognises that among the 13-14 age group it is much harder to differentiate victims and offenders than it is among adult cohorts. Within our sample, over half (51.2%) of those who had experienced one of the listed forms of abuse also admitted to having been abusive. While the vast majority (92.3%) of those who self-reported at least one form of perpetration also indicated that they had experienced at least one form of victimisation from a boyfriend or girlfriend. There were also significant overlaps in experiences of victimisation and witnessing abuse between adult carers/parents. 67% of those 13-14 year olds who had witnessed abuse at home had also experienced it in their own dating relationships, compared to 32% who had not witnessed it. Those 13-14 year olds who had witnessed abuse at home were also more likely to report having perpetrated it (42% compared to 15%).

## Changing Attitudes

In seven schools where we sampled participants, school children took part in the *Relationships Without Fear* programme (RwF)<sup>2</sup>. These participants were matched with a control group, in schools that were not yet receiving the programme, taking into account the size of the school, demographic variables and geographical proximity.<sup>3</sup> In order to assess change in young people's attitudes towards domestic violence and in their help-seeking behaviour, children in the intervention schools completed the questionnaire in the first and final session of the intervention and in a three month follow-up; children in the control group schools completed the questionnaires at the same time as those in the matched intervention schools, at least within one week of each other (but they did not participate at the three-month follow-up).<sup>4</sup> Our analysis focussed on the change in young people's attitudes towards domestic abuse from before to after the programme as well as the changes in young people's help-seeking behaviour.

As Figure 1 indicates, for those in the intervention schools, attitudes to domestic violence became less accepting from pre- to post-test and this change was maintained at three month follow up. In the same way, as Figure 2 shows, more young people were likely to seek help after having received the programme, but this change was not maintained at three month follow-up.

*Figure 1: Change in attitudes from pre- to post-test among young people receiving RwF.*

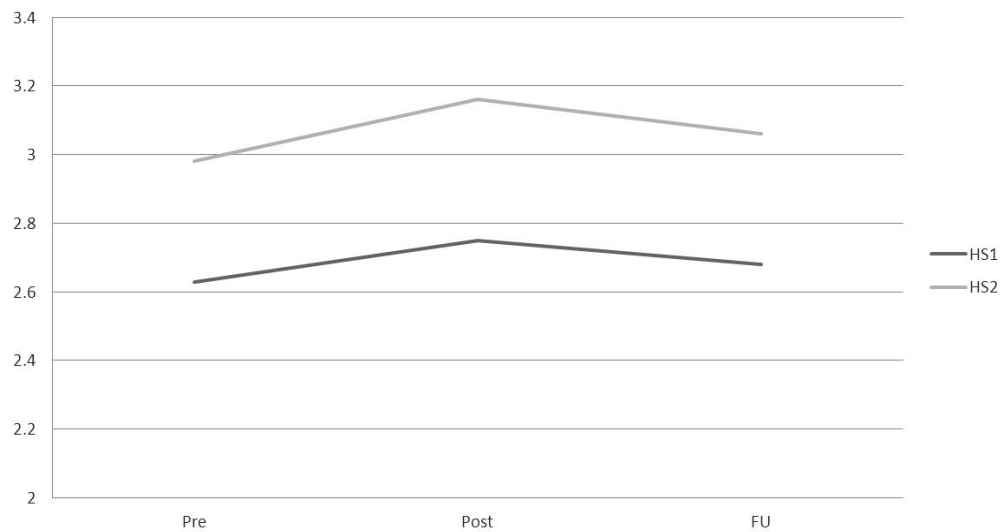


<sup>2</sup> See [www.archnorthstaffs.org.uk](http://www.archnorthstaffs.org.uk) for further details of this intervention.

<sup>3</sup> One school acted as a control for two intervention schools, given the small number of classes taking part in two of the intervention schools, and so there were six control group schools.

<sup>4</sup> At post test and three month follow up pupils were only asked to answer questions on attitudes and help-seeking and not experiences.

*Figure 2: Change in help-seeking from pre- to post-test among young people receiving RnF.*



The improvement from pre- to post-test in young people's attitudes and help-seeking behaviour was found to be significant in comparison to young people who did not receive the programme.

Furthermore, the outcomes in relation to young people's attitudes to domestic violence did not vary by gender or experiences of abuse. This is not to ignore the fact that there were overall differences at both pre- and post-test by gender and experiences of abuse. Boys were more accepting of abuse, compared to girls at pre- and post-test. Indeed, their attitudes only improved to the same level at which girls started the programme. In addition, those who had experienced abuse as victims, perpetrators and witnesses were more accepting of abuse in relationships. But, the intervention was effective for boys and girls and irrespective of prior experiences. Against our predictions, the intervention was just as effective for boys as it was for girls. Outcomes, as measured by attitudes to violence, did not vary by experiences of abuse.

## Conclusion

In sum, over half (52.5%) of our participants had some direct experiences of domestic abuse, whether as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators. Thus, the attitudes of a sizeable minority of 13 and 14 year olds are already coloured to a certain extent by direct experiences of domestic abuse, with many of those who have witnessed it at home or experienced victimisation, having perpetrated it too. Involvement in this perpetration may actually make it harder to condemn the violence of others. Such dynamics appear to play out slightly differently for 13-14 year old boys than for girls in the same age range, even though, at this age, experiences of victimisation tend to be roughly similar. Boys are more likely than girls to perceive hitting as justified, and much less likely to tell another adult about abuse they have experienced from a girlfriend or partner. Girls are more likely to notice violence between parents or other adult carers and are more willing to consider seeking support from an adult when they are hit by a boyfriend or partner. The key to how and why domestic abuse becomes a gendered phenomenon among adult cohorts may therefore lie in understanding these subtle differences in the ways in which young teenagers appraise and evaluate their own experiences and those of their peers.

Given this, 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 also 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. Preventative interventions in schools must therefore be responsive to those teenagers who have already experienced abuse within their own relationships – in whatever role – as much as those who have no such experiences and who need appraising of the dangers. Such interventions need also to be sensitive to the possibility that many young people's attitudes are often informed both by experiences of dealing with abuse – sometimes without the help of adults – and by wider levels of peer acceptance. Such attitudes are often subtly gendered, but they are also coloured in part by self-perceptions of culpability, 'hitting back' the circumstance in which young men and women are most likely to condone violence. This is an important finding if one takes into account the possibility for this kind of 'reciprocated' aggression to degenerate into more enduring forms of violence and control as teenage boys move into adulthood (Shortt et al., 2012).

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