

From Boys to Men Project



WORKING WITH YOUNG MEN AT RISK OF BECOMING DOMESTIC ABUSE PERPETRATORS: PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FROM BOYS TO MEN PROJECT

Rose Broad and David Gadd, University of Manchester

The From Boys to Men Project was funded by the ESRC (RES-062-23-2678/) 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: Phase 1 - a survey of 1203 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 abuse as victims, perpetrators or witnesses. It also included a studentship linked to the project which addressed female perpetrators and male victims. The project produced a set of key findings about what motivates young men to commit acts of domestic abuse, together with a set of policy recommendations - available on the website www.boystomenproject.com. The ESRC Impact Acceleration Award (IAA) award which funded the production of this briefing explored what the project's findings mean for practitioners. One of the strands of work undertaken during the IAA award re-examined findings from the From Boys to Men project so as to inform practice guidelines for organisations working with young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Key Findings

The following themes were identified from a review of the three phases of From Boys to Men. This briefing highlights the implications of these themes for individuals, organisations and commissioners who provide services for young men involved in relationships that entail domestic abuse. In the UK, much of this work is still in the early stages of development.

- Young people's attitudes towards domestic abuse are frequently contradictory and derive from a combination of direct experiences, shared perspectives and media coverage. It is therefore important that policymakers are conversant in what can realistically be achieved by educational interventions aimed at changing attitudes so that good work is not forestalled by the achievement of relatively modest results as measured through research evaluations.
- Terminology must be carefully considered by organisations working with young people. It is important to note that while many young people perpetrate abusive acts against partners, the majority do not go on to become perpetrators of violence in later relationships. Referring to those who have undertaken acts of abuse against a partner as 'perpetrators' may inhibit receptivity to professional support and intervention.
- Some of those young men who present the greatest dangers to young women often have multiple problems that leave them beyond the reach of schools and too difficult for offender managers to support in the context of time-limited interventions. Anger management is rarely regarded as helpful by young men who are being abusive to their partners and/or parents.
- The absence of secure and trusting relationships in their pasts can make it difficult for some young men to form positive relationships with partners and/or children and to engage effectively with organisations providing support. For young men in trouble for violence this lack of trust can also extend to teachers, the police and other criminal justice professionals, compounding the reasons why they keep problems in their relationships with women a secret.
- Commissioners and organisations need to develop structures that allow practitioners the time and space to build trust with young men who are resistant to talking openly about domestic abuse. Such workers need to be able to sustain meaningful contact with young men in early adulthood through the periods when cohabiting and/or parenting occur.
- Young people who perpetrate domestic abuse are more likely to have been exposed to abuse in the home during their childhood. Organisations hosting this work and commissioners of services need to be able to provide young people with supportive mentors over the longer term and be sensitive to the likelihood that young men will face renewed challenges as they enter intimate relationships of their own, set up homes with partners, or take on parenting roles.
- Organisations need to consider how they can provide a safe space and specific and relevant material for young men across all strands of diversity. There is a danger of alienating those confronting violence in relationships that are not heterosexual when examples relate primarily to opposite sex couples. Racialized stereotypes of perpetrators are sometimes deployed by young men to minimize the seriousness of abuse they have perpetrated themselves.
- Working with young men who move from safeguarding frameworks designed to protect children into criminal justice frameworks designed to minimize the risk presented by dangerous adults is crucial for this is where those once deemed 'vulnerable victims' are reappraised as 'offenders'. This can be a source of resentment to some young men, particularly those who perceive themselves to be providing care, discipline or physical protection for other family members.

- Partner and victim support services that work alongside perpetrator interventions for young men will need to step outside the model conventionally deployed in work with older men and be more creative in the approaches used to support women at risk of being abused. Organisations that work with young men must be able to go beyond working with ‘couples’ in order to attend, where necessary, to the wider dynamics of family and community life that contribute to the occurrence of violence.

Trust

Constructive and containing responses to violence are rare in the lives of young men known to be in abusive relationships with women. The absence of secure and trusting relationships in their pasts can make it difficult for some young men to form positive relationships with partners and/or children. Breaches of trust in intimate relationships are frequently viewed as justification for controlling behaviours by many young men, not only those who perpetrate assaults. Part of the issue has to do with gendered expectations, but some young people also have very specific reasons that explain their difficulty forming trusting relationships. For example, those who have been let down by adults who should have cared for them, suffered the loss of a parent, have been abused, or lived in homes where violence was used to control others are at a disadvantage when it comes to navigating respectful relationships of their own. For young men in trouble for violence the lack of trust can also extend to teachers, the police and other criminal justice professionals, compounding the reasons why they keep problems in their relationships with women a secret.

Practitioners have, therefore, to work particularly hard to develop effective relationships with young men who have been violent, or who are at risk of becoming abusive in their relationships with partners and ex-partners. Commissioners and organisations need to develop structures that allow practitioners the time and space to build trust with young men who are resistant to talking openly about domestic abuse. Maintaining a key worker for a young person and allowing the necessary time to address and build trust are crucial in providing what may be the only respectful relationship that a particular young person has. Such workers need to be able to sustain meaningful contact with young people in early adulthood through the periods when cohabiting and/or parenting occur.

Terminology

Allocating labels to young people in terms of their perpetration, victimisation, or because of violence they have witnessed is not straightforward given the considerable overlaps in such experiences. It can also be unhelpfully stigmatizing. Practitioners and the organisations they work for need to consider carefully the consequences of referring to young people as the ‘abuser’ or ‘abused’, ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’. Choosing more neutral labels can avoid the pitfall of suggesting that because someone has done something wrong, or had something wrong done to them, that their future will be determined by that experience. Critically, it is important to note that while many young people perpetrate abusive acts against partners, the majority do not continue to be perpetrators of violence in later relationships.

The complexity of the circumstances in which young men are hit or hit back can make it hard for some practitioners to differentiate those who are victims of domestic violence from those who feel aggrieved, hurt and victimized. It may be more important in some instances to take the opportunity to engage young men who present as victims without necessarily coming to an immediate view on whether or not they were also perpetrators, primary or otherwise. Indeed, identifying the primary aggressor may not always be useful in helping a young person with experiences of both perpetration and victimisation to accept the need for help. Commissioning

structures frequently fail to reflect this. The tendency to use labels to set targets that aspire to overly simplistic outcomes for ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ needs to be transcended.

Attitudes and Education

Educational interventions provided in schools can reduce the social acceptability of domestic violence. Caution, however, is needed in terms of how much attitudinal change is taken as a primary goal. Simple attitudinal change as measured by questionnaires can obscure more complex rationalizations for violence. Young men’s attitudes towards domestic violence tend to be quite contradictory. Condemnation of perpetrators in the abstract, for example, can also conceal acceptance of controlling behaviour in very specific circumstances, such as when a boy has been hit first, been cheated on, or feels insecure. For this reason, attitudinal change does not necessarily secure behavioural changes when young men are confronted with difficult circumstances.

Second, schools based interventions compete in a world in which more complex messages abound. Advertising and television drama which highlight the commodification of sex together with the cases of high profile figures who redefine domestic violence – even murders – as something more acceptable can overshadow the messages conveyed in schools and social marketing. It is therefore important that policymakers are conversant with what can realistically be achieved by educational interventions so that good work is not forestalled by the achievement of relatively modest results as measured by evaluation research. It is also important that anti-violence campaigns speak to young men in ways that do not overly demonize them or underplay the complexity of their motives for violence. Organisations should consider ways to support young men that take account of the importance and role of peer pressure in reinforcing and/or challenging violence. Practitioners may benefit from the use of national anti-violence campaigns with young people either as awareness raising tools or as catalysts for discussion.

Finally, it is important to note that young men who have lived with domestic violence – a population at greater risk of becoming perpetrators – are more likely to be absent from school and to have problems with behaviour, attendance and attention in school. For those with ‘discipline’ problems schools-based interventions may prove particularly unpalatable, especially if delivered by teachers who have marked their behaviour or attitudes out as ‘bad’ or ‘unacceptable’.

Gender, power and development after exposure to domestic violence

The particular effects of exposure to domestic abuse between parents or caregivers on young men are rarely understood in ways that take full stock of the relevance of gender, power and interpersonal development over time and as new relationships are entered. For some, childhood awareness of violence perpetrated against mothers establishes violence as normal behaviour. But many young men express a desire to be different from their fathers and other adult men they have known to be abusive. Many young men aspire to have much better relationships with women and children than their fathers had. Others justify using controlling behaviours that are not as evidently physical or cruel as those they have seen their fathers or stepfathers perpetrate as positive progress. For example, some young men view scaring a partner by hitting the wall or shouting as ‘not as bad’ as the assaults they have seen other older adult men exact on women they know.

Identifying with a father figure who has been violent can sometimes underpin abusive behaviour, even when hatred is expressed towards that person. One reason for this has to do with the desire to avoid feeling the fear and powerlessness witnessing domestic violence as a child often instils. Young men who have experienced the fear of witnessing domestic violence sometimes grow up wanting to be able to ‘look after’ themselves physically. Others aspire to be the disciplinarians in their homes, as well as the providers and protectors, once father figures have left. Claiming

such male authority comes with risks for young men exposed to violence. These include the risks entailed in exerting force to manage situations that appear out of control. This can be where similarities with abusive father figures become apparent and where feelings of self-loathing emerge for young men. Sometimes such self-loathing is projected back out towards female partners who are attacked for appearing weak or critical.

Learning to recognise that they identify with a father figure who has been abusive is a traumatic process for some young men. This is why it is important that those working with young people develop trusting and containing relationships with them. Organisations hosting this work and commissioners providing funding should develop services that can provide young people with supportive mentors and positive role models over the longer term. In addition, it is necessary to be sensitive to the likelihood that client groups will face renewed challenges as they enter intimate relationships of their own, set up homes with partners, or take on parenting roles.

Exploring perceptions of mothers who have lived with domestic violence can also be difficult for young men. This is often because abused mothers are perceived by boys as weaker than their abusers and/or defenceless. It may also be because abused mothers are judged – by individual men, family members, welfare professionals and in the media - as abandoning or failing to provide protection to vulnerable young people. For some young men this fuels misogynistic feelings and attitudes and can drive an investment in apparent self-sufficiency expressed as a desire to ‘look after’ oneself. Learning to understand the strength of a mother who has survived an abusive relationship can be hard for young men who have yet to broach long term relationships of their own and who have limited understanding of emotional and financial dependency. Such dependency can also appear very threatening to young men who aspire to be self-sufficient.

Diversity

The From Boys to Men research discovered that some young women are also abusive although this abuse is unlikely to be sexual or repeated in nature. The social acceptability of girls’ violence towards boys is likely to be different in nature than that pertaining to boys’ violence towards girls. The difficulty is that for many heterosexual young men being hit by a girl is reason enough to hit back. And for some, once hitting becomes reciprocal, a fight has ensued. For many young men it is difficult to walk away from a fight without attempting to win it. This is where verbal and physical conflicts can give rise to severe assaults and battery. Many young men feel hurt when they discover or suspect a girlfriend of infidelity. Infidelity is also a reason that many young men and women think justifies the use of controlling or violent behaviour.

Organisations should also consider how they can provide a safe space and specific and relevant material for other groups, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer young people (LGBTQ). There is a danger of alienating those confronting violence in relationships that are not heterosexual when examples relate primarily to opposite sex couples. Programmes that rely on single-sex group work with young men need to anticipate this.

Working with young men from different ethnic groups also presents challenges. Many young white men hold stereotypes of perpetrators, imagining them to hail primarily from migrant populations that hold sexist attitudes towards women, to be driven by religious zealotry, or to be involved in gang or drug related crime. Working to challenge racialized stereotypes of perpetrators and/or of women likely to suffer violence is therefore crucial. Class based prejudices and popular psychological myths about the mental well-being of those who commit acts of violence against women also need to be confronted.

Help-seeking and targeted work

Teenage boys are generally much less likely than girls to say that they would seek help from an adult if they had been hit by an intimate partner. In addition, young people who have been victims, witnesses or perpetrators of abuse are less likely to say they would seek help than those who had not experienced abuse. This is particularly the case for young women who report perpetrating abuse, self-blame probably deterring those enduring abusive relationships from getting support. Given what we know about hitting back, it is critical that support is provided to both parties in cases where relationships in which violence has been perpetrated are continuing.

Meanwhile, some of those young men who present the greatest dangers to young women often have multiple problems that leave them beyond the reach of schools and too difficult for offender managers to support in the context of time-limited interventions. Insecure housing, involvement in the care system, experiences of living with a parent with substance abuse problems and interrupted patterns of schooling were commonplace among those who participated in Phase Three of the From Boys to Men project, as were learning difficulties and attention deficits. Sadly, for many young men involved in perpetrating violence, domestic abuse is perceived as the least of their problems. The complex and frequently chaotic lives of those people accessed in the From Boys to Men research suggests that interventions addressed to violence must link to exclusion units, educational facilities offering special needs provision, organisations supporting LGBTQ young people, drug, alcohol and mental health services, as well as organisations supporting disabled young people, those in care and young people with low levels of literacy and cognitive ability.

Service provision

Engaging with teenagers through life transitions is a major challenge, given the organisational divisions between services for young people and services for adults. Organisations working with young people often reported very little contact with young men known to have experiences of domestic abuse. Engaging those young men who are cajoled from a safeguarding framework designed to protect vulnerable children towards a criminal justice framework designed to minimize the risk presented by dangerous adults is very important, for it is in this context that those once deemed vulnerable victims are reappraised as offenders. Building and maintaining effective and trusting relationships with workers regarded as part of this 'system' is particularly challenging.

As organisations involved in this type of work are aware, the type of domestic abuse services or interventions offered to, or accessed by, young people can be more varied than those offered to adults. Specific programmes addressing abusive behaviour and related partner support services are usually only available to adults. Findings from the From Boys to Men Project indicated that young people are frequently offered anger management and counselling services. For the majority of those people using abusive and controlling behaviour, anger management based interventions are often greeted with hostility because they do not explore the sources of their discontent and instead manage its appearance in order to keep out of trouble. The appropriateness of requiring young men who are being abusive, as well as those who have suffered significant childhood trauma, to undertake these programmes therefore needs to be carefully considered. Organisations assisting young people affected by domestic abuse can play a crucial role in raising awareness of the suitability of such interventions and the dangers they present. Counselling type services are often viewed more positively by young men as providing an opportunity to talk and be listened to, but few of these probably also work alongside those providing support to partners. Conversely, the small number of young men who took part in the From Boys to Men project who had attended groupwork via an Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme regarded it as unhelpful, in part because

such programmes tend to be geared towards older men, many of whom will have been violent in the context of their marriages.

Links also need to be made with GPs who are likely to encounter young people with violence problems among those referred because of attention problems, anxiety, depression and/or substance misuse. Many of the young men who took part in Phase Three of the From Boys to Men project were contending with substance misuse issues. Dealing with their substance misuse was frequently viewed by practitioners as of higher priority to young men than the abusive behaviour. Organisations working with young people and commissioners considering funding options for these services should be aware of their multi-faceted needs. It is critical that those working with young men do not postpone discussion of violent behaviour until after drug, alcohol or mental health problems are resolved.

Partner and victim support

In the adult sector working with associated partner support services has been a means of providing a safer context for undertaking interventions with perpetrators, though implementation has been far from universal. Delivering similar practice with younger age groups presents unique challenges and is rarely broached. One reason for this has to do with the nature of young people's relationships, which tend to be shorter, are less likely to involve cohabiting, and may not always be readily categorised as 'exclusive' or 'dating'. Knowing which partners of young men at risk of perpetrating violence need supporting is therefore difficult, especially when violence is perpetrated against ex-girlfriends and/or their new boyfriends. In the From Boys to Men project it also became apparent that some domestic or dating violence occurred within contexts that were not reducible to a couple relationship in which one partner was a victim and the other a perpetrator. Some young men were caught up in relationships in which they assaulted partners who had abused them, sometimes on previous occasions. Some described violence that happened within the context of family relations in which multiple family members were abusive, and/or with parents who could also be victims, aggressors or both. And some happened amidst communities in which gang rivalries were at stake. In this context violence was sometimes mounted against women who held incriminating information as well as the partners of men against whom grievances were held.

Partner or victim support services that work alongside perpetrator interventions for young men do need, therefore, to be able to step outside the model conventionally deployed in work with older men. Organisations must be creative in the ways in which they provide support to victims regardless of whether or not the abuse took place within a 'serious', 'short-term' or 'casual' relationship. It may be necessary to offer support through partnership organisations who are already involved with the victim of the violence rather than attempting to engage them with a new service. In some cases it may also be more effective to signpost to the range of online services available. Either way, attention to risk and the impact of the abuse should have the same high prominence as within adult interventions. The way in which organisations work with young people should reflect this by a) avoiding approaches that work with the 'couple' together to reconcile differences and b) by attending to the wider dynamics of family and community life that contribute to the occurrence of violence.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-2678)
and University of Manchester IAA RMS 99417

Published by University of Manchester School of Law, M13 9PL
June 2014

ISBN: 978-0-9927008-0-5

For further information regarding this research contact:

Professor David Gadd
Director of the Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice
School of Law
University of Manchester
M13 9PL

Tel: 0161 275 5621

Email: david.gadd@manchester.ac.uk

www.boystomenproject.com

