

# From Boys to Men Project



## FROM BOYS TO MEN: PHASE TWO 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 three stages of the project are available on our website

[www.boystomenproject.com](http://www.boystomenproject.com).



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## Executive Summary

This document reports on the findings of the second phase of *The From Boys to Men Project*. This entailed thirteen focus group discussions with 69 young people, aged 13-19. The focus groups explored young men's attitudes to domestic abuse by inviting responses to a government anti-violence publicity campaign and a series of hypothetical vignettes. Groups were selected on the basis that they may have a potentially distinctive relationship to violence and/or intimacy and so included;

- young people who had completed a school-based domestic abuse prevention programme;
- young people who were attending an alternative education programme;
- school students attending an anger management programme;
- two groups of young men undergoing Youth Offending Team supervision, one with a history of violence towards their girlfriends;
- young gay men;
- young Asian men;
- young men attending a substance use programme;
- young men who had witnessed violence at home.

Differences between the groups in terms of their attitudes towards violence, however, were not as overt and consistent as might have been expected. For example, in general terms at least, there was broad consensus in every group that abuse in relationships is wrong. Abuse encompassed controlling behaviour, including the exercise of emotional control, as much as physical and/or sexual violence. Participants' initial reactions to televised scenes of domestic abuse were universally condemnatory.

Despite this broad condemnation, it was quite common for participants to justify the use of controlling behaviour – and in fewer cases, physical violence – where low levels of trust were identified in a relationship. While trust was regarded by the young men we spoke to as a fundamental feature of any good relationship, romantic relationships lacking in trust were described as not worth having, even if providing sexual gratification. Leaving a relationship lacking in trust was regarded as a better option than violence. But some young men thought a breach of trust, for example when a partner has been – or has the potential to be – unfaithful, justified controlling behaviour. Others viewed controlling behaviour as necessary to protect naïve young women from the risks posed by dangerous men, or even to avoid a report to the police if accusations of rape might be made.

Insecurities – either generally felt or linked to current or past relationships – were highlighted as an underlying cause of some young men's controlling behaviours and attitudes. In some instances, it was evident that participants could 'see themselves' in the anti-violence publicity shown, and that this recognition was difficult to admit to, generating defensive victim-blaming responses in some instances.

Insecurities were commonly projected onto women who ‘dressed like slags’, whose behaviour many thought ought to be moderated, even if misguided in motive. They were also disowned and attributed to ‘control freaks’, ‘scumbags’, ‘mad men’ ‘Muslims’, ‘Somalians’ ‘chavs’, ‘gang’ members, drunks and drug addicts, even ‘poofs’. In other words, imagined outgroups of men, deemed lesser in terms of their social standing and respect for women. Retributive violence could be justified against them, not only to protect vulnerable women and girls, but also to distinguish oneself as different and better.

Such dynamics highlight the distinction between what young men know about domestic abuse, i.e. that it involves emotional, verbal and financial components, as well as controlling and threatening behaviours that can take place between partners or ex-partners of any age, and the working assumptions that come into play when the experience is personal. Even those who had recently undergone a programme of relationship education tended to lapse periodically into the assumption that ‘real’ domestic abuse only happens in adult relationships where men repeatedly assaulted women, if not because they are ‘freaks’, then because of the pressures engendered by work and family related stresses.

Participants from all groups struggled to suggest ways of preventing and responding to domestic abuse, whether perpetrated in the families of young men, or by a young man who had pushed a girl in his school and called her a ‘slag’. No one doubted that in the latter scenario the boy would get excluded, though opinions varied on whether or not this was either a sufficient response or an overreaction to something trivial – the latter view most articulated by those who had been in trouble themselves for this kind of behaviour. When prompted, most young men welcomed initiatives to provide preventative domestic abuse education in schools and specialist advice and counselling provision for victims, witnesses and perpetrators alike. Young people were, however, more cautious about social service intervention, and generally sceptical about whether criminal justice responses would achieve intended results.

Confronting perpetrators with physical violence was a reaction that emerged repeatedly and spontaneously in many of the discussions, however, suggesting that policy and practice interventions construed in terms of ‘challenging men’ risk unwittingly accentuating the connections between masculinity and violence in some instances. Some young people with histories of school exclusion pointed out that classroom-based learning consistently fails to reach those whose attendance is minimal. This might include those living in care, many of whom would have lived with abusive parents. While none of the participants commented on the potential of social marketing, our discussions revealed that exposure to material from a recent government anti-violence campaign was sufficient to get most young people talking about the complexity of the issue of domestic abuse. Exposure to this

material evoked a range of reactions: condemnation and outrage; self-reflection and defensiveness; the desire for vengeance as well as empathy and understanding; and a willingness to intervene amidst limited knowledge of what effective intervention might entail. The extent to which exposure to such campaigning creates opportunities for reorienting young men, who are at risk of becoming prone to perpetrating domestic violence, merits further research.

## Method

Between February 2011 and January 2012, 13 focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 69 young people aged between 13 and 19. The aim was to explore the situational contingencies through which violence is defined as either acceptable or unacceptable, as well as the kinds of interventions young men regard as necessary and helpful. The size of individual focus groups ranged from three to eight participants. Three groups were mixed sex and the remaining ten were all-male groups. Seven focus groups were conducted in educational settings: four in schools where young people had received domestic abuse prevention education; two within a project providing alternative education to those excluded from mainstream schooling; one among young men receiving anger management support within school. Six further focus groups were conducted in community-based settings. These attempted to recruit young men with potentially distinctive relationships to violence and intimate relationships, as detailed below in Table 1.

**Table 1: Focus Groups**

Group	Description
FG1	Mixed sex; school pupils who received a domestic violence prevention programme.
FG2	All male; school pupils who received a domestic violence prevention programme.
FG3	Asian young men.
FG4	Gay young men.
FG5	Mixed sex; school pupils who received a domestic violence prevention programme.
FG6	All male; school pupils who received a domestic violence prevention programme.
FG7	Young men under YOT supervision with a history of violence towards their girlfriends.
FG8	Young men attending a substance use programme.
FG9	Young men who had witnessed violence at home.
FG10	All male; students attending an alternative education programme.
FG11	Mixed sex; students attending an alternative education programme.
FG12	Young men under Youth Offending Team supervision on a group work programme.
FG13	School students attending an anger management programme.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic area, only young people aged 13 and upwards were recruited. All participants were asked explicitly whether they consented to participating in the research. In addition, parental consent was also sought on an 'opt out' basis for participants in school-based focus groups. Consent was sought in loco parentis from key staff members in organisations where the community-based focus groups took place (e.g. youth justice worker, probation staff, substance use counsellor). All names and identifying information were removed from the transcripts and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Focus groups were actively co-facilitated by two of the team's researchers, Mary-Louise Corr leading the discussions and David Gadd notetaking but also asking follow-up questions and responding to questions posed by participants (the focus group schedule is available as an appendix). In most cases focus group participants engaged positively with the discussion. However, there were some reticent participants who, despite encouragement from the researchers, did not share as openly as others. One group in particular – young men who had witnessed domestic abuse at home – were not very forthcoming, we suspect because a youth worker remained present during the discussion. Typically, the focus group discussions lasted about an hour and produced in excess of twenty A4 pages of transcript (1.5 line-spacing).

Each focus group commenced with participants viewing the 'Bedroom' film that comprised the main element of the UK Government's 2010-12 *This is Abuse* campaign. The film tells the story of two teenagers in a potentially intimate situation that turns aggressive when the young woman declines her boyfriend's invitation for 'a bit of fun' and suggests they just watch television instead. A text message from one of the girl's friends enrages the young man, who then throws the girl's phone across the room, before twisting her arm as she begins to protest. The scene ends with the young man telling his girlfriend she is 'pathetic', unfastening his belt, asserting, 'Well, go on then. Show me something'. The camera swings to an image of the same boy banging on the bedroom window from the outside shouting 'Get off her. Get off her' and the caption 'If you could see yourself, would you stop yourself?' The film thus subtly encourages male viewers to identify with a young man who becomes increasingly abusive, before confronting them with this identification.

Participants were asked for their reflections on the film, before being presented with two further vignettes. One vignette told the story of a young couple where a young man, unhappy that his girlfriend is dressed up to meet her friends for a night out, shouts 'if you do that again you know what will happen' before slamming the door. The second vignette tells the story of a boy in trouble at school for calling a girl 'a slag' and pushing her; the groups learn at a later stage that this young man was

witnessing abuse at home. The use of the video and vignettes provided the groups with concrete examples which participants could comment on without having to resort to disclosing their own experiences. Participants were also asked for their reflections about domestic abuse in different couple groupings – older and younger couples, couples from different ethnic groups, same sex couples – and to advise what they would do for young people ‘if they were in charge’. The data were initially analysed thematically using NVivo. Once the analytic themes were identified, the complete transcripts were examined to identify the ways in which young people positioned themselves in relation to violence.

## Findings

### Naming and Condemning Abuse

Most of the focus group participants had seen the Bedroom film before and therefore had some familiarity with the content. At the outset, the initial reaction across all the groups was one of concern. Both male and female participants condemned the young man in the film for being ‘possessive’, ‘aggressive’, ‘bang out of order’, ‘threatening’ and ‘selfish’ and his behaviour was described as ‘shocking’, ‘disgusting’, ‘wrong’, ‘disgraceful’, ‘nasty’, ‘mean’, ‘senseless’, ‘bad’, ‘violent’, ‘grim’, ‘sad’ and ‘horrible’. On the surface, there was a high level of consensus amongst young people about what abuse is and how wrong it is. Few were in any doubt that it involves emotional, verbal or psychological elements, as well as physical and sexual coercion and damage to property. Perpetrators of domestic violence, those who had witnessed violence at home, recipients of a domestic abuse prevention programme and those who had received no domestic abuse education said remarkably similar things, although those with direct experiences tended to offer more vivid examples, unlike some of those in the school-based groups, whose definitions tended to be academically coherent, if sounding a little rote learnt in their articulation.

Young men across a number of groups – including those who had witnessed abuse, those on alternative education programmes and those under YOT supervision – interpreted the film as ‘all about having sex’ (Doug, FG12). Some suggested the young man in the film was either a virgin or a ‘man slag’, but in any case, ‘just gagging for it’ (Colin, FG11), ‘desperate for sex’ (Brian, FG10). His behaviour was in such instances interpreted as an attempt to overcome sexual frustration, an act of abuse many regarded as completely ‘out of order’, or even tantamount to ‘rape’.

**Derek:** *Just out of order innit? He’s basically raped her hasn’t he?... Forced her into doing something that she doesn’t want to do, raping her. (FG9)*

Thereafter a consensus typically emerged around the importance of tackling abusive men. One participant in an alternative education programme suggested that he would ‘go mental’ (Colin, FG11) if he were the victim of such abuse, while others suggested that had they witnessed or learned of the abuse they would attack the perpetrator – ‘punch him in the face’ (Ben, FG4), or ‘knock him out’ (Guy, FG13). Participants generally did not present themselves in the role of the young man behaving coercively but rather as someone who might challenge him physically. Such a reaction included the group of young men who had a history of being violent to their partners, who imagined how they would feel if they were the young woman’s father, one asserting that he would ‘kill him’ or ‘snap’ his ‘legs’ (Mike, FG7).



The authors are grateful to the Home Office for permitting the reproduction of this image.

Participants in both mainstream and alternative schooling anticipated that the young man looking in on himself through the window would feel ‘ashamed’ of having ‘taken advantage’ of the girl and ‘embarrassed’ by his actions. This, some thought, might lead to a period of self-reflection along the lines of ‘What was I thinking? What was I doing? Why was I doing that?’ (Emmet, FG11). Conversely, it became clear among some of those with experience of being in trouble that more defensive reactions had been evoked. A young man who had witnessed domestic abuse asked, what ‘if the parents walk into that?’ (Carl, FG9), while some of those on alternative education and/or under youth offending team supervision noted the risk of criminalization the perpetrator faced: ‘Cos then you can get done for rape can’t you, if you take advantage of her’ remarked Dylan (FG11). This risk was explored in some depth by the group of domestic violence perpetrators we interviewed, before they concluded the

potential rape they had earlier noted, ‘could have been worse’ (Mike FG7) and was probably no more than ‘a shag’ (Danny, FG7).

### Qualifying What Counts as Abuse

As the conversation in each of the focus groups progressed, and we introduced hypothetical vignettes, the certainty about what behaviour constitutes abuse, and what forms it typically takes, tended to dissipate to varying degrees. Opinion became divided on whether or not the scenario the Bedroom film depicts is realistic. Some boys and girls said it was ‘something that is happening’ every day (Sophie, FG11) and ‘a good reflection of what really happens’ (Blake, FG8). Others argued that the content of the film was ‘shocking’, extraordinary, and unexpected among young people of a similar age to them (James/Will, FG2). One schoolboy on an anger management programme, suggested that such violence might be becoming more common among younger teenagers because ‘there’s all kids wanting sex now’ (Ger, FG13). These comments reflected a view that domestic abuse is a problem that affects adults predominantly. Some young men, like the perpetrators we interviewed, for example, went on to conceptualise domestic abuse as almost exclusively about the use of ‘extreme’ (Robert, FG7) and persistent physical violence by adults. Even young people who had been subjected to a relationship education programme and were otherwise knowledgeable about the nature of domestic abuse became ultimately inclined to this view, though they expressed it less forcefully. Some suggested that domestic violence happens mostly in adulthood because of physical development – ‘you’re probably stronger’ (Matt, FG1); familiarity, those with more knowledge of their partner better able to control them; or because of life stressors, including redundancy, miscarriage (Ben FG4), and the burden on men of having to support non-working women and children (Duane, FG1). Other school children exposed to relationship education attempted to apply what they had learnt about controlling techniques, hypothesizing that ‘knowing’ a partner through marriage would allow an individual to ‘use those kinds of things against them’ (Tony, FG1), deprive a partner of money by ‘not giving them anything’ (Joe, FG2) or to enforce isolation.

**Will:** ... when you live together and you’re adults they can try and cut you off from your family and friends easier and threaten you without anyone else knowing either cos you’re like in a safe environment so it’s easier. (FG2)

By contrast, young people who were violent or controlling towards partners, as discussed further below, were thought more likely to be motivated by feelings of betrayal and insecurity, especially when trust had been violated, typically by actual or perceived infidelities.

## Trust, Betrayal and Control

Following on from discussions about the Bedroom film, we presented a vignette to participants about a young man, 'Mark', who threatens his girlfriend because he does not like the way she is dressed to go out with her friends. Young women who had received domestic abuse prevention education were immediately sensitive to the issues of power and control in this hypothetical relationship.

**Natalie:** *It's like the man controls her, power over her.*

...

**Emily:** *I think he tries to make her feel weak so if she left him she'd feel like she couldn't get back with anyone else. (FG1)*

Control did emerge explicitly in young men's accounts, too. Reflecting on the Bedroom film shown at the outset of the focus group, Barry, an attendee at a substance misuse programme, interpreted the young man's behaviour as more to do with 'control' than 'sexual desire'.

**Barry:** *I think it's just how the person thinks about themselves... even if it was about sex... I don't think sex is the main thing in the situation. I think it's just control more than sexual desire. I think it's about controlling more than anything. (FG8)*

More typically, however, recognition of control was embedded in young men's discussions of what they viewed as the most fundamental challenge in intimacy – trust and its absence: 'It's always something to do with trust' (Guy, FG13); 'If you never trust someone, you'll never like go any further in the relationship I think. You've got to be able to give a bit of trust or there's no point' (Barry, FG8); You 'should trust your bird', 'leave her to go out'. (Danny, FG7). It was when there was a lack of trust in a relationship – typically related to past or potential infidelity – that a need for exerting control within a relationship was usually identified.

Predictably, many young men identified solutions to breaches of trust that merely reinforced the centrality of one-upmanship, retribution and regaining control as masculinity-affirming. For example, for Danny, one of the young men known to have been violent to a female partner, this meant threatening violence against men perceived to be flirting with his partner – 'snap the lad's neck for him' – and a 'love them and leave them' approach to women – 'tell her to go and fuck off... and go on to the next one' (Danny, FG7). Craig (FG12), also on YOT supervision, would either 'batter the guy' or 'pull a blade on him'. For other young men, such as the group of young Asian men we spoke to, control could

be a collective endeavour, facilitated via social media, to ‘insult’ those men deemed unable to keep their girlfriends ‘on lockdown’.

**Kamil:** *The guys, they have a thing ...*

**Malik:** *... it's a Facebook group yeah... It's massive.*

...

**Kamil:** *... do you know when a guy says to you, 'your girlfriend's going on lockdown'.*

...

**Nadir:** *... basically 'we've got your girlfriend on locks', 'like a bitch', 'she'll come up to me and sit on my lap like that'... 'You haven't got her on locks, she's got you on locks'... 'she's going out doing stuff' and like that, 'out in the bikini'... 'You're a pussy you are, you can't get your girl on locks'. They expect that your girlfriend would be faithful to you and everything and do what you say basically... you have to be the dominant guy. (FG3)*

Most of the young men we spoke to, however, were disparaging about relationships in which such control was needed. They explained that if there was no trust, it was better to leave, or ‘go your separate ways’ (Barry, FG8). Some put the matter more brashly – ‘move onto the next’ – and responded with misogynistic solutions to failed relationships with women who had violated their trust.

**Doug:** *If she cheated on me I'd tell her to fuck off, sell her to a prostitute man... She has to go. There's no point having girlfriends. I mean there's slags about. That's what I do. (FG12)*

‘You might as well just be single’ (Mike, FG7), some argued, so that you could sleep with ‘everyone’ (Robert, FG7). And for some, ‘dumping’ a cheating girlfriend had the advantage of allowing one to pursue sex elsewhere without compunction with any number of ‘slags’.

Others, however, including those known to be violent to partners, explained that relationships that were just about sex were also not worth having.

**Mike:** *... he's not getting his nuts is he? (laughing)*

**Danny:** *Yeah, but that's not all you're with a bird for is it? I'm not just with my bird just so I can bang her... I wouldn't be arsed if my bird said 'nah' couldn't shag her. (FG7)*

Infidelity was regarded by everyone who commented on it as evidence that a relationship was both ‘rubbish’ (Ger, FG13) and at risk of becoming abusive. Yet most recognised that leaving the relationship was a better option than violence.

**Joe:** *Well if they're doing that they might as well just leave them cos they're not really faithful so it's a better option than beating them.* (FG2)

**Alan:** *No, I wouldn't bother hitting them. I'd say 'fuck you see you later, get a life, jog on'.* (FG8)

Indeed, even some of those who extolled the use of social media to police young women's behaviour, ultimately conceded that a relationship without trust was ‘not much of a relationship’ and destined to ‘crumble’ (Nadir, FG3).

### **‘Mad Men’, ‘Paranoia’ and Insecurity**

Taken out of this context, of trust and betrayal, domestic abuse was hard to explain, making it easier to demonise those regarded as perpetrators. Josh (FG2), a young man who had received domestic abuse preventative education, depicted as ‘sick’ those who get sadistic enjoyment out of ‘using’ their girlfriends. In fact, a number of participants branded such men ‘control freaks’ or ‘paranoid freaks’. When such characterisations took place, male focus group participants often proceeded to depict perpetrators as men unlike themselves: as ‘scumbags’ (FG7), ‘bullies’ (FG7 and FG11), ‘pricks’ (FG11 and FG12), and (without much hint of contradiction) ‘poofs’ (FG13). Perpetrators were imagined by some to predominate among ‘the people in the YMCA’ (Ahmed, FG3). A group of young men who had recently completed a domestic violence prevention programme at school were adamant that only ‘chavs’, gang members, and those who delude themselves that ‘acting hard’ convinces others of their superiority would behave this way (FG6). Muslim men and men from other countries – ‘like in Afghanistan and Israel and places like that/Yeah and Bangladesh’ (Adam/Justin, FG6) – who ‘terrorised’ women and tolerated violence, were also routinely stereotyped by white young men as the real aggressors.

**Danny:** *Them Somalians and all.*

**Mike:** *Them type of religions that just terrorise women don't they?*

**Danny:** *Yeaab they look down on them and all don't they?...*

**Mike:** *It's like their religion though innit?*

**Robert:** *Isn't it in their religion that they can tell their wives what to do and that or something. And if they cheat they're allowed to batter them in their religion.*

**Mike:** *East is East, that type of thing. (FG7)*

Others attempted deeper, typically psychological, explanations. Some young men thought perpetrators had psychological issues or 'mental problems' (Eric, FG10) like 'one of those psychotic guys in Scream' (Nadir, FG3). News stories about 'proper mad men' (Robert/Danny, FG7) who have killed themselves after killing their families, tended also to contribute to such perceptions. Others assumed that perpetrators were often under the temporary influence of illicit substances when being abusive, like 'crackheads' who had gone 'out of their mind' (Brian/Christian, FG10).

The shift to a more explanatory discourse did, however, yield some revelatory, confessional and soul-searching responses. The attendees at a substance misuse programme, for example, were divided on whether intoxication causes violence, as opposed to amplifying existing feelings and intentions.

**Blake:** *I've been in so much trouble... drinking and then being violent because it changes you. It does transform you into a different person.*

**Barry:** *... I think you've already got the anger or aggression there. Cos I just think drugs and drink amplify things... I think there's always got to be something there first, in your subconscious... Something that triggers it... (FG8)*

Likewise, several boys thought it possible (for them, at least) when 'drunk' to rape 'someone cos you don't know what you're doing' (Brian FG10).

**Justin:** *Yeaab, if the girl or like doesn't want to do it then he could...*

**Adam:** *And then it just leads to rape. (FG6)*

Others talked about the challenges of managing adolescent sexual desire:

**Blake:** *It's probably emotions playing up... I think once you get to a certain sexual desire you can't really stop it. I mean if you like really want to have sex with someone like it takes over your mind... You can't really control it. It makes you do things that you really wouldn't normally do. (FG8)*

A more commonly acknowledged problem, however, was containing the insecurities many young men encountered in intimate relationships. Whether or not a particular partner was being unfaithful, weak ego-strength and personal insecurities were often close to the surface. In one group, the young men suggested a controlling boyfriend might be 'scared' of losing his girlfriend because she is 'too good for him' (FG6). Another young man suggested that abusive young men often think that the 'other person is better than them... so they take it out' on them (Paul, FG1). And one young man, attending a substance misuse programme, noted how the experience of knowing that a girlfriend loved him made him conscious of what he had to lose.

**Blake:** *I've experienced it myself... when you've got a girlfriend and... she's really in love with you, you feel good about yourself cos you feel like you've got control. And then you might be insecure and feel like someone is going to take it away. If she's out texting someone else, you're going to think that she's going to stop spending time with you and spend time with them. Cos she's made you feel secure and confident in yourself, you don't want nothing to stop that in your life. (FG8)*

A group of young gay men noted that previous experiences of unfaithful partners (referring to a vignette based on a gay relationship) often affected men's subsequent relationships.

**Ben:** *Mark might be insecure himself. He might be worried that Sam's gonna go off with some other guy... Mark just might be letting his bad side take over just because he's insecure or worried.*

**MLC:** *... Why would he think this about Sam?*

**Ben:** *His own relationships... say Sam has cheated on somebody else in the past so Mark's not very trustworthy of him. They've only been together six months, Mark doesn't trust him fully enough... he's overreacting but he's got a point.*

**Ryan:** *He's overreacting because something's happened in the past. (FG4)*

Likewise, Blake argued that controlling a partner who had been unfaithful was ‘almost a right’ and, though not justification for abuse, still a compelling explanation for why some men are violent towards women.

**Blake:** *If someone's been cheating on you and you decide to stay with them then I think you've got a right to be more controlling over them cos they, it's their fault they put themselves in the situation... I think that you should never hit a woman but I know I've experienced it in the past when I've been cheated on and at the time you're that upset, you don't really think... you just want to go round and smash someone's face in. Even though you know it's wrong... you feel like you need to get them back. You can't let them get away with it... but when you're put in that situation you can't control it. (FG8)*

Beneath some of the bravado and chauvinism articulated by some boys, we also encountered strong feelings of betrayal and hurt, as illustrated by these schoolboys attending an anger management programme.

**Doug:** *If my girl looked like a tart I'd say 'you're not fucking wearing that'... If she cheated on me I'd tell her to fuck off...*

**MLC:** *... So you're suggesting that she might be cheating on him or she might cheat on him in the future.*

**Craig:** *It's not even that, it could be the fact that she was going out for a drink with her mates ...*

**Doug:** *Or she could have cheated on him before... Or maybe she had sex with his brother like my fucking ex-girlfriend did. (FG12)*

Just as certain kinds of ‘scumbags’ were demonized in ways that prevented young men from recognising themselves as potential perpetrators, so certain kinds of women were demonized as the real source of some men’s insecurities.

**Mike:** *I half see why that one is. If you're dressed like a slag... Little skirt, boobs out and all that... She's obviously going to be talking to lads and that, they come on to you. (FG7)*

Even in the mixed sex groups, a woman's dress style was construed by some young men as indicative of her trustworthiness, despite objections from female participants.

**Vicky:** *You don't know what clothes she's wearing though.*

**Tyler:** *But yeah if she's like wearing a really short skirt... and she's in a relationship it's like she wants attention.*

...

**MLC:** *If she wasn't in a relationship would it be okay to wear a short skirt and whatever?*

**Zoe:** *Yeab*

**Tyler:** *Not really...*

...

**Sarah:** *... He should trust her anyway whatever she's wearing*

...

**Luke:** *... if she was in a relationship and she wasn't with her boyfriend at the time, you know, she's like walking around with stuff on, these boys are obviously going to look at her then she's going out... (FG5)*

The young women we spoke to – both in school and alternative education – felt that young men simply did not understand that the way a female dresses ‘might be how she gets her confidence’ (Sarah, FG5) or a way to ‘express herself’ (Olivia, FG1) and not necessarily a means of attracting the attention of multiple admirers (Julie, FG11). Many young women, we were told, merely want ‘one’ young man who ‘stands by’ them. It was thus unfortunate that so many young men were unable to trust a girlfriend ‘to say ‘no I’ve got a fella’’ (Sarah, FG5) and tended to get ‘jealous’ for reasons that were often exclusively in their ‘heads’.

**Sophie:** *Lads get a little thing in their head that they think is happening and then that's what they believe then. Whether it's true or not that's what they believe. They start accusing them and arguing. (FG11)*

Some young men confirmed as much, justifying control in terms of the naivety of young women with regard to the risks posed by ‘other teenager boys’ who would ‘try it on’, as well as by ‘smackheads’ and ‘drunken idiots’ from whom they needed protection.

**Eddie:** *Well I think the man's right cos he's there for her, he's worried about her... she's probably got... see through... tights and... dead short skirts on and high heels and that. Probably dressed as one of them prostitute things (laughter) ...*

**Guy:** *She might end up being mugged.*

**Eddie** *... so I think he's right.*

...

**Guy:** *Cos being dressed up like that it, say you take your mate home and then... maybe that guy will take advantage of her and all of that.*

**Ger:** *And the fact that you're all dressed up and everything... There are going to be drunken idiots on the street.*

**Guy:** *And she might be drunk as well.*

**Ger:** *Yeab.*

*I reckon the man's trying to protect her. (FG13)*

More tellingly, however, some young men suggested that the most controlling men were often those who were being unfaithful themselves, insecurity and anxiety tending to haunt 'the one who's got something to be guilty for' (Barry, FG8). The young perpetrators suggested 'That's the way it normally goes' (Mike, FG7), the man who keeps his 'bird' on 'lockdown' is usually the one to be 'fucking her about' (Robert/Danny, FG7). Others also noted that abusive men have good reason to be 'paranoid'.

**Adam:** *He's paranoid in case she's texting anyone else.*

...

**Justin:** *Because he thinks she's telling someone about the abuse and stuff like that. (FG6)*

While a minority suggested the risk of criminalization might justify a perpetrator's use of further control, others appeared to have learnt from their mistakes, identifying controlling behaviours in the vignettes as warning signs that one should take the 'easy route out' (Adrian, FG6) and leave the relationship before it becomes even more abusive. As Tom (FG6) succinctly put it, 'I won't do it again if I'm not with her'.

### Exceptions to the Rule

Among those who had received domestic abuse education, knowledge of these warning signs was commonplace. In most of the school-based groups we were told that abuse tends to develop from

'little things' into controlling behaviour that is more systematic. The recurring problem for many, however, was that verbal abuse was, in their experience, a typical, normal or 'standard' (George, FG12) feature of many relationships and hard therefore to distinguish from the arguments that any couple might have.

**Craig:** *Verbal abuse is just normal anyway. It doesn't matter whether it's in a relationship or just a general conversation. It all depends, beat of the moment.* (FG12)

**Mike:** *I don't reckon like screaming at each other is that bad because that is what happens in a relationship isn't it?* (FG7)

Violence that was reciprocal was also difficult for some to conceive of as abuse. Ryan (FG4), a young gay man, argued that being 'violent towards each other... might just work' for some couples. Two young men known to have been violent towards a female partner referred to violence as 'kinky' and 'exciting', while at the same time proclaiming it 'wrong' to 'hit a bird'. Similarly, schoolboys attending anger management classes explained that there are 'some weird girls' who 'love getting beat up' (Craig/Doug, FG13), while another young man suggested that there are women who provoke their partners to violence by either saying things that 'really gets under his skin' (Nadir, FG3) or, as others suggested, by simply being 'moody'.

**Adam:** *Like if they're on their menstruation period (laughing) ...That makes some women moody whereas men don't have that.*

**Tom:** *It may provoke a man's abuse sort of thing... Because she might be moody with the man and it might cause him to be angry at her. Have a go at her or something.* (FG6)

Though it was rarely acknowledged, such assertions about provocatively moody women contrasted starkly with the claims made by many of the same young men that tolerating violence perpetrated by women was simply what one had to do. Guy (FG13) explained that 'there's certain unwritten rules for a man that you never hit a girl ...Women can hit men. Men can't hit women'. Will and James (FG2) argued that 'a man should be able to like take a bit more' and keep his 'nerve' because 'if she hits you... you don't hit them back. You just take it': 'Men are like meant to be stronger'. 'Gripping' her or just pushing her off (Evan/Craig, FG12) were the upper limits of what most young men deemed an acceptable response to a woman who was being physically abusive. Indeed, the perpetrators we interviewed suggested being 'slapped' by women was only to be 'expected', especially if one had been unfaithful, but that one could keep the upper hand by 'laughing' it off, appearing unbothered, or by intoxicating her.

**Robert:** *Birds can't do that much damage to you. I'd just laugh at them.*

...

**Mike:** *Laugh at her really and just say 'what an idiot'... 'calm down'.*

**Danny:** *Feed her weed or something.*

**Robert:** *Yeab yeab.*

**Danny:** *... When she wakes up in the morning and she will have forgotten about it (laughing) (FG7)*

Only exceptionally muscular and/or large women were to be feared. A 'woman body builder' who was 'drunk' (Fergus, FG13) for example, or a 'fat woman', a 'big Mrs' (Eric, FG10) with 'massive bones' (Kamil, FG3) might be exceptional cases. Following this same logic, lesbian women, some thought, might be at risk if one of the 'women ends up... becoming the man in the relationship' (Paul, FG1). Attitudes towards domestic violence in gay men's relationships tended to invite more ambivalent reactions, some insisting that they would not know, or more generally that 'poofs' were not worth fighting, while others suggested that violence between two gay male partners was not as abhorrent – 'half all right' (Mike, FG7) – because a 'man on man' fight was liable to involve combatants of the 'same strength'. (Duane, FG1). A few spotted the potential of violence between male partners to escalate more rapidly.

**Adam:** *Until one of them gets killed.*

**Justin:** *If one gave the other a proper beating then you'd expect him to fight back. (FG6)*

The group of young gay men we spoke to offered what felt like a more straightforward explanation, by contrast.

**Jack:** *It depends on the man's personality...*

...

**Ben:** *A lot of men it could be like butch macho men and then some guys, some gay guys can just be like as feminine as girls, it just could literally be like a guy and a girl. (FG4)*

### Intervening in Abusive Relationships

As part of the focus group sessions, participants were presented with a vignette of a boy who pushes a girl in his class and calls her a 'slag'. Participants were asked to reflect on what a headteacher would or should do about it, before being asked again, this time having been told that the boy was also living

with abusive parents. Participants were also asked what they would do to help victims, witnesses and perpetrators of domestic violence if they were 'in charge'.

The vignette turned out to be a scenario that was familiar to many, and one which a few had experienced themselves. 'I got in trouble for doing that' remarked Ahmed, (FG3). Some implied it happens all the time and was not therefore a 'big deal' (Robert, FG7). Some interpreted the story to suggest that victim precipitation was a probable cause. Some of the gay young men we interviewed hypothesised that the young man in the vignette was standing up for himself or his friends.

- Ryan:** *It also depends why he's called her a slag and pushed her over. Because if she's been saying a lot of things that aren't very nice about other people and he's just stood up for his mates then why should he have to get in trouble for it?*
- Ben:** *Or if he's receiving abuse off her then he stood up for himself.*
- Ryan:** *Yeab and he got caught cos that's happened to me a few times. Someone said something to me and I said it back and I got in trouble. (FG4)*

Similarly, one participant in a group of young men who had received domestic abuse education successfully argued for the boy to be punished less severely by invoking his own experiences of getting into trouble for retaliating against a girl who had bullied him.

- Josh:** *... this girl had been bullying me for 18 months and one day I just literally just flipped and I punched her in the face and I got internal exclusion for a day. I know it wasn't right but also what she did wasn't right. So we should both get some punishment but maybe the abuser more severe than her...*
- Joe:** *So basically it could have just been like retaliation.*
- ...
- Will:** *... if she has done anything and if she has she should get into trouble as well. (FG2)*

Others identified the victim's needs as greater because: 'most women getting abused like they've no self-confidence' (Sarah, FG5); the girl might be at 'breaking point'; and because if left unsupported she might become 'resigned into thinking that, you know, you can't do any better than be someone who is being controlled by someone else' (Barry, FG8).

When attention did focus either on young perpetrators or on how a headteacher should deal with John, knowing he had pushed a girl and called her a 'slag', participants in all groups struggled to recommend

any type of intervention with ideas often only generated through probing from the researchers. Some spontaneously suggested John would or should be suspended or excluded, especially if he was known to have behaved this way before.

**Joe:** *If... he has already been doing it for quite a while then the punishment would be a bit more severe. (FG2)*

Some young people across seven of the groups – both school-based and community groups – thought the police should be called to the school, particularly ‘if he’s threatening all the time’ (Sophie, FG11), in order to ‘scare’ (Justin, FG6) him into addressing his behaviour. However, in general, criminal justice responses were rarely considered an adequate or merited response to perpetrators of domestic abuse. While a couple of participants would ‘Put them in jail and throw away the key’ (Bradley, FG9), others thought prison was too soft an option for perpetrators – ‘like a holiday camp’ (Alan, FG8). Those with direct experience of criminal justice, by contrast, doubted that prison or probation would change an offender’s behaviour, and argued against intervening in relationships they regarded as ‘private’.

**Danny:** *... by making him do that doesn't mean he's going to stop...*

**DG:** *What do you think would help him to stop?*

**Robert:** *Nothing. They're like that aren't they? That's just their way of living. (FG7)*

When the possibility was raised that the young man in trouble was also living with abuse at home, participants generally considered a wider range of options. Several of the groups explored the implications of social services being notified by the headteacher. Most assumed that going into care would follow, almost automatically. This could be a positive outcome – ‘it would be better without the parents if they are abusive’ (Ger, FG12), ‘Care homes are all right you know’ (Robbie, FG7) – that might, as suggested by two young men who had witnessed abuse at home, relocate the boy in an environment free of the root cause of his aggression (Carl/Derek, FG9). But it might also have other undesirable implications, the young person left ‘thinking “it’s my fault”... when it weren’t’ (Sophie, FG11), ultimately getting ‘worse’ and becoming ‘more violent’. Eric (FG10), who had ‘been in care too many times’ thought that the possibility of violence increased every time a person was ‘dumped’ – as his co-participant Brian put it (FG10). Some took the view that living with violent parents was nevertheless preferable to living with strangers.

**Sophie:** *Where would the kid rather be? With his parents or with two people he's never met in his life, doesn't know where he is, moves dead far away. What's he going to prefer? What would you prefer? I'd prefer to be at home.* (FG11)

Conversely, Danny (FG7), who knew what it was like to live with parents who were 'smackheads', suggested 'it doesn't matter if he's gonna miss his parents' as long as the boy remains 'safe'. Whether 'scumbag' social workers could be trusted to do right by the young person had to be questioned though, Robert and Danny (FG7) ultimately concluding that a young man living with domestic violence at home was far better off getting a 'bird' and fending for himself: 'you smashed it then like'.

Opportunities for young people to talk openly about relationships and domestic violence were considered limited, though a few mentioned informal supports, such as 'close mates' who 'give advice' (Alan, FG8) without making it 'obvious that you have got a problem' (Olivia, FG1); grandparents (Julie, FG11 and Guy, FG12); and other family members who make you 'feel... safe because you know someone else knew what was going on' (Justin, FG12). When prompted, most could see advantages – for a victim, witness or perpetrator – to seek 'specialist' advice (Duane, FG1). Such advice, for example, was likely to be most helpful in order to resolve issues 'so they can work it out' and be 'happy' (Duane, FG1). Perpetrators would benefit from a 'confidential support group' (Luke, FG5) to 'talk about their problems' and 'work out a plan how to get away from it' (Luke, FG5). The opportunity to 'talk' for 'as long as you want to talk' was considered to have 'worked' by some of those who had attended counselling and/or anger management (Dylan/Guy, FG13), but not others: 'They don't work. Trust me' (Ger, FG13). Those who had received such interventions in the context of Youth Offending Team supervision tended to be the most critical of 'groupwork', deeming it 'a waste of (their) time' with the potential to 'wind (them) up' (Doug, FG12). What annoyed these young men about the group programmes was their focus on empathizing with victims more than 'criminals': 'They never think about people who do the crimes do they?' (Craig, FG12).

These interventions might be most successful, young people suggested, when professionals delivering them had similar experiences to share with those who seek their help. Past victims were viewed most able to 'talk' a current victim 'through' their abusive experiences (Guy, FG1). Perpetrators too, Barry argued, would only respond to an individual with a similar past.

**Barry:** *If someone hasn't experienced what you have and [they are] trying to tell you how to go about it, half the time you won't listen... how can you tell me what to do when you've not been through it?* (FG8)

Some thought that ex-offenders might also have the advantage of being able to ‘scare’ perpetrators into compliance or by highlighting potential repercussions, such as the risk of imprisonment (Blake/Barry, FG8). Recounting to perpetrators the effects of abuse on those ‘people who have been abused’ and or ended ‘up dead’ was another ‘shock’ technique some proposed (Ryan, FG4). ‘Day trips’ (Olivia, FG1) to meet witnesses of abuse, were similarly championed by some young people as a means of learning from shared experience.

**Paul:** *... a problem shared is a problem solved... He probably thinks that he is the only one going through this domestic abuse in the family. But if... they find out other people going there that both of them put ideas together about how they can help each other and how they can try and help their parents stop abusing. (FG1)*

Rarely did young people spontaneously offer prevention as a long term solution for the headteacher to consider when reflecting on the vignette about John. However, when prompted, those who had received domestic abuse education in schools mostly thought that it could increase awareness and reduce such violence in the future.

**Matt:** *... part of the programme I thought was good was where... it told you all the other types of abuse that could happen, like some people didn't know the definition of what domestic abuse was. (FG1)*

Those who attended such programmes were generally pleased to have been given the chance to explore a topic that was both relevant to them and signified that they possessed the maturity to handle a set of ‘deep’ but ‘frightening’ issues (Duane, FG1). Some also felt that education could reduce future domestic abuse as young people would be less likely to engage in abusive behaviour in adulthood, ‘there’s less chance of them doing it to anyone else when they’re older’ (Derek, FG9).

**Paul:** *They could listen to what we have been taught in class and stuff and it might stop them from doing it, it ends it there and then it stops domestic abuse in their family and their generation. (FG1)*

Receiving domestic abuse education could also encourage young people to seek help.

**Zoe:** *Cos like if I got abused normally I would just keep it quiet but now I'd become more open and I'd tell someone (FG5).*

But others felt that what they had been offered was insufficient and pitched at too basic a level.

**Max:** *We only had like three, two or three lessons. We missed some of them* (FG6).

...

**Adam:** *Stuff we already knew.* (FG6)

More active learning – such as workshops and role play – were preferred to ‘writing’ (Christian, FG10), as was the opportunity to watch films, regarded as ‘more fun’ and memorable (Justin/Justine, FG6). That said, the openly gay men interviewed queried the value of programmes that did not address gay partners directly. They also decried the lack of support service to refer young gay men to:

**Ben:** *I think if it's... a school-aged gay couple... if one of them is being abused, they might not want to go and tell people because they don't want people to know they're gay but with a straight couple it's easier because it's normal.* (FG4)

Other young people with histories of school exclusion pointed out that classroom-based learning consistently fails to reach those whose ‘attendance is two per cent’ (Robert, FG7). This might include those living in care, many of whom would have lived with abusive parents. Paradoxically, no one commented on the potential of social marketing, though as discussion revealed, exposure to material from a recent government anti-violence campaign was sufficient to get most young people talking about the issues. It evoked a range of reactions: condemnation and outrage, self-reflection and defensiveness, the desire for vengeance as well as empathy and understanding, a willingness to intervene amidst limited knowledge of what effective intervention might entail. The extent to which exposure to such campaigning creates opportunities for reorienting young men, at risk of becoming prone to perpetrating domestic violence, merits further research.

## Conclusion

In sum, our focus groups revealed complex attitudes towards domestic abuse among many young men. While united in their condemnation of men who perpetrate domestic abuse, many young people define controlling behaviours as something apart from it. For some, domestic abuse is most easily imagined as a feature of adult – not teenage – relationships, involving perpetrators who are ‘chavs’, ‘scumbags’, drug users or from ethnic minorities (that is to say ‘out-groups’ that do not represent or include them). Whether or not abusive behaviours are deemed acceptable within particular teenage relationships seemed to be highly contingent, not so much on the particular circumstances, but more upon who is perpetrating it, and whether or not they had reason enough to feel insecure, aggrieved or ‘paranoid’.

Trust and its absence in a relationship – because of past or potential infidelity most typically – was fundamental to explaining and justifying abuse. Within this realm of possibilities many young men’s attitudes towards domestic abuse are highly malleable. On the one hand, only a few think that physical violence against women is ever acceptable in any circumstance. On the other, many empathise implicitly with other men’s insecurities and the desire to control women when trust is lacking. Some young men, often drawing on personal experiences, are more able to recognise these tendencies in themselves than others; and some are more able to perceive that leaving a relationship where trust is lacking is better than trying to maintain it through dominance. Some groups of men evidently do actively encourage this kind of dominance by intimidating those who fail to keep their girlfriends on ‘lockdown’. Most, however, are willing to challenge forthright justifications for violence. Such challenges rarely generate spaces for reflection, however. This is because consensus is more readily built around the necessity of exacting retribution against those perpetrators deemed ‘dangerous’, ‘mad’, and ‘out of order’, as well as around the need to monitor and control women who dress like ‘slags’, whether or not they genuinely are seeking the attention of various men. Such complexity helps explain why some young men engage in acts of violence despite their condemnation of those construed popularly as perpetrators of violence against women.

## Appendix: Focus Group Schedule

**The research:** The aim of the research is to explore why some people engage in domestic abuse against their partners, boyfriends/girlfriends or other family members and what could be done to prevent this.

**Topics for discussion:** Some example topics will be: Causes and nature, Differences between boys and girls, education and help. We will start with a short video.

**Anonymity and ground rules:** In the transcript we make of the discussion we will change all names and anything else that might make you identifiable to anyone else. The recording will not be made available to other people and will be destroyed once we have a fully typed up version of the conversations. We will only ask you what you think, not what has happened to you. We want you to treat each other respectfully and not talk about what other people have said outside of the group. Do you agree that this is a good rule? We would also ask that you: speak up, let everyone speak, and to try to keep to one person speaking at a time.

**Confidentiality and harm:** You should not talk about things that are personal to you if you do not wish to. We will not repeat what has been said in these discussions. However, if you tell us that you (or someone else) are at immediate risk of serious harm we may have to pass that information on. Before we do that, we would talk to you about what we may have to do and we would encourage you to talk directly to someone who can help. This might be the person who has organised the group or another local professional, such as an independent domestic violence advisor, youth worker, or a social worker. We will not do anything without letting you know and trying to agree with you the best way to help.

**Recording:** For accuracy.

**Role of the facilitators:** Mary-Louise: introduce topics; make sure everyone feels comfortable and has a chance to speak. Dave: take some notes to help in transcribing the tape and assist Mary-Louise. We will ask some questions to get the discussion started but we would like you to discuss the issues/questions among yourselves.

**Clarifications:** Any questions?

**Introductions:** Names (doesn't have to be your real name) and age only.

## 1) Causes

### Dave

A recent government campaign defined domestic abuse as: the use of controlling or threatening behaviour, including violence, between people who have been dating, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. It can be psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional in nature. It can be between current partners or ex-partners.

The government made a video to try and tackle domestic abuse.

### **SHOW VIDEO**

### Mary-Louise

What do you think of the video?

Do you think this is how domestic abuse usually happens?

- Why do you think domestic abuse happens?
  - Prompts: jealousy; drink; disrespect?
- Can you think of circumstances where some form of violent, controlling or threatening behaviour in a relationship would be ok?

Sometimes, young people say that they think that violence against a boyfriend or girlfriend is okay if that boyfriend or girlfriend has cheated on them, or slept with someone else.

- What do you think?

## 2) Sarah and Mark

### Dave

Sarah, age 16, has been going out with Mark, age 18, for six months. They had been thinking about moving in together until they had their first big argument. Mark didn't like it when Sarah went out by herself to meet her friends. He said he did not like her getting "dressed up like that" and told her which clothes he would rather she wore. She said that that was unfair at which point he got really angry before shouting "if you do that again you know what will happen" and slamming the door.

- How would you describe this relationship?

### Mary-Louise

- Prompts: just call out the words that come to mind first.
- What do you think about Mark's reaction?
  - Why do you think Mark reacted in this way?
- What would you do if you were Mark/Sarah?

How do you think Mark's friends would react if they found out about what had happened?

- Angry?
- Sympathetic?
- Not care?

### 3) Couple Types

#### Mary-Louise

- Do you think a man being abusive towards his wife or partner is different from a woman being abusive towards her husband or partner?
- Is physical abuse different to other forms of abuse like verbal and the more controlling type behaviours (like Mark's behaviour)? In what way?
- Is being abusive different when couples are older, i.e. adults? Or if they had children?
- Do you think the issues are different for Black, Asian or White couples? In what way?
- Do you think the issues are different if we consider same sex couples? In what way?
  - [- What if a man is violent to his boyfriend?]
  - [- What if a woman is violent to her girlfriend?]

### 4) What would you do? The case of John

#### Dave

John is 15 years old. Today he pushed a girl in his class and called her 'a slag'. He is now waiting outside the headteacher's office.

#### Mary-Louise

- What would a headteacher normally do in response to an incident like this?
- What should the headteacher do?
- Would it make a difference if
  - a) the girl said John had threatened her before?
  - b) John revealed that he was living with parents who were abusive to each other?

If you were in charge, what kinds of things would you do to help young people who are experiencing dating violence?

If you were in charge, what kinds of things would you do to help young people who see domestic abuse at home?

If you were in charge what would you do about young people who are being violent towards their partners or other family members?

Have you had any domestic abuse education in school? How was it?

Do you think domestic abuse education in schools works?





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