

# From Boys to Men Project



## FROM BOYS TO MEN: OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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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 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.

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

This report provides a brief overview of what we found and what recommendations follow from the project's findings.

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## Key Findings

In 2013 the UK government began to use the terms ‘domestic abuse’ and ‘domestic violence’ interchangeably to refer to *‘any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality’*. In the *From Boys to Men* project we explored how domestic abuse and violence were featuring in the lives of young adults and teenagers, including some below the age of 16.

### The Extent of Domestic Abuse in Young People’s Lives

The project surveyed young people in schools to measure the extent of their exposure to ‘domestic abuse’, the term operationalized in our questionnaires to include controlling behaviours, being checked-up on and being put down, as well as physical and sexual assaults and coercion by a partner or ex-partner. Over half of 13-14 year olds in our sample had some direct experience of domestic abuse, whether as victims, witnesses or perpetrators. Nearly half had experienced at least one type of domestic abuse in their relationships; a quarter had carried out at least one abusive behaviour against a boyfriend or girlfriend; and over a third had witnessed abuse between parents and adult carers at home. Emotional abuse and controlling behaviours were the forms of domestic abuse young people most frequently reported experiencing as victims, witnesses and perpetrators.

### Attitudes towards Domestic Abuse

Our research found that most young people think that it is wrong to hit a partner, but many can think of exceptions to this rule, most typically when a partner has hit them first or cheated on them. Boys are more likely than girls to endorse such exceptions. Both boys and girls regarded violence from women to men as more socially acceptable than violence perpetrated by men against women.

Many young people do not see controlling behaviour or ‘put downs’ as domestic abuse. Similarly, many of those young men who have physically assaulted partners tend not to describe their behaviour as ‘domestic abuse’ or ‘domestic violence’. More commonly, young men refer to ‘fights’ between themselves, partners and/or other family members; fights caused by peculiarly stressful circumstances, such as personal crises or the provocative behaviour of a difficult or uncaring partner.

Betrayal is a circumstance many young men worry about. Most can understand how the fear of betrayal generates controlling behaviour, which though not necessarily right, can be construed as necessary and hence justifiable in some circumstances. Pervasive concerns about trust help explain apparent contradictions in many young men’s attitudes towards domestic abuse, including their apparent willingness to excuse particular instances of violence that they would ordinarily condemn if described more abstractly.

### Gender Differences

Gender differences emerge subtly both in terms of vulnerabilities and in terms of how domestic abuse is perceived. A substantial minority of girls will endorse the attitudes of boys who think it is okay to hit a partner who has been unfaithful or hit them first. When young men construe domestic violence as a ‘fight’ it becomes possible to see how general acceptance of ‘hitting back’ among many young men and young women contributes to a set of dynamics in which those young men who are unprepared to ‘lose’ perpetrate potentially lethal assaults against female partners.

## Multiple Experiences of Domestic Abuse

It is difficult to differentiate perpetrators, victims and witnesses of domestic abuse in the general population of male teenagers given the substantial overlaps in such experiences. Among those young men known to service providers in the criminal justice system there are also substantial overlaps in experiences of victimization, exposure to abuse between parents and problems with violence perpetration towards partners, parents and step parents. The experience of living with older adult men who were cruel and sadistic also makes it harder for some young men to recognise their own seemingly less calculating forms of violence as abuse. Young men who have grown up in violent homes are at increased risk of becoming perpetrators, though many of those who abuse partners reassure themselves that they are more measured in their use of threatening behaviours than other adult men they have known to 'lose' their tempers. Some of those who have behaved in controlling ways towards partners are, nevertheless, desperate not to become the kinds of abusive men their fathers were.

## Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

Trust appears to be of general concern among young men entering their first relationships, many failing to realize that controlling a partner is unlikely to increase feelings of security and respect in intimate relationships. Nevertheless, many of those young men who are criminalized perpetrators have good reasons to struggle with trust, negotiating conflict peacefully and providing care and understanding. Many of those who have grown up in homes where there were problems with crime, domestic violence and drug abuse have found it necessary to become skilled in the capacity to mount a credible threat of physical force. Experiences of vulnerability borne out of exposure to violence in infancy appear to shape some young men's ambitions with regard to being able to 'look after' themselves and others, sometimes but not always, in very physically tough ways.

Young men are prone to defining domestic abuse in terms of the characteristics of the perpetrator. Class based and racialized forms of stereotyping fuse with loosely psychological images of perpetrators as manipulative and bullying characters. This stereotyping is sometimes drawn upon by young men who have been abusive but who find it uncomfortable to see themselves as 'real' perpetrators. Such stereotyping provides an impetus for physically confronting those deemed 'perpetrators'. Using violence to 'teach' other men a lesson enables some young men to depict themselves as heroic protectors of women. Other means of 'challenging' perpetrators are rarely evoked in discussions between young men about domestic abuse.

## Preventing and Responding to Domestic Violence

The research found that attitudes can be changed through relationship based education programmes. Social marketing can also encourage young people to reflect critically on the nature of domestic abuse and what can be done about it. Containing and constructive responses to young men who have been violent and/or abusive can help them, in time, to identify with those they have hurt. Intervening with young men can, however, elicit defensive reactions. It is shameful to see oneself as a potential perpetrator and hence easier to blame failings in a particular relationship for abuse perpetrated within it. Some young men are also fearful about becoming like abusive fathers whom they resemble or whose temperament they have been said to share.

There are significant barriers to encouraging young men experiencing domestic abuse - whether as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators - to seek help from adult professionals. Most 13-14 year old boys consider themselves unlikely to seek help from an adult if they experience violence in their own relationships. It is not uncommon for young men to assert that dealing with problems alone is the best response. Young men who are getting into trouble in schools are often distrustful of teachers. Young men who have grown up in homes where social services have previously intervened are often distrustful of social workers. There are few, if any, service providers that young men who are being violent can self-refer to without incurring risks of sanction.

## Recommendations

### Preventative Education

There is evidence that preventative education can change attitudes, reducing the social acceptability of domestic violence. For this reason it should be mandatory in schools. However, there is also a need to engage those teenage boys who are excluded from school, among whom are some of the most multiply victimized and potentially dangerous.

It is also important to ensure that relationship education speaks to boys and young men on their own terms. This means engaging with their condemnation of other men's violence and concerns about trust and betrayal. Young people also need to understand the risks associated with 'hitting back', the counterproductive nature of using controlling behaviours when trust is absent, and the complex relationships between drink and drug use and violence. These issues should be addressed in ways that speak to young gay and bisexual men, as well as to heterosexual men.

Building skills and capacity in the provision of relationship education will take time, resources and a commitment to continuity at the level of government policy. Such investment is justified given the number of teenagers who have experiences of domestic abuse by the age of 14. Consideration should be given to removing references to age altogether in government definitions of domestic abuse, as setting a threshold of 16 years may well confuse younger age groups involved in such incidents, whether as victims or as perpetrators.

### Social Marketing

Social marketing has the potential to open a thoroughgoing conversation between young people and adults about the nature of domestic abuse and what can be done to engage those boys and men who begin to perpetrate it. In encouraging identification with characters in film based scenarios, such campaigning can do more than promote attitude change. It can also expose a deeper set of identifications. There is, however, a need to ensure that the potential of such campaigning is fully exploited by those working with young people across a range of contexts so that the defensiveness it can engender is overcome and that unintended messages are not read into them. Ensuring that the messages conveyed in social marketing campaigns are discussed in schools and other educational settings will help to increase understanding and reduce the potential for misunderstandings to persist. Campaigns that see the development of characters over a longer period could also help overcome the tendency among some young men to construe domestic abuse as merely the outcome of a reaction against the assumed failings of a particular victim. Social marketing campaigns should also help explore some of the ways young men might respond when they are troubled by other men's behaviour, without necessarily having to physically confront perpetrators or endanger victims.

## Family Intervention

Whilst gender remains an important dimension of domestic violence, its relevance in the lives of young men who have lived with neglect and abuse is not always fully understood. Feelings of powerlessness arising from childhood experiences of neglect and abuse can resurface in adolescence among young men who take on caring, disciplinary, protector and provider roles in families where there is, or has been, a threat of harm from other adults. The focus on child protection and immediate risks can overshadow this possibility. There is therefore a need for service provision that addresses young men's feelings of vulnerability, rage and powerlessness while also being sensitive to the ways in which mothers and female partners can be blamed for a host of social, familial and personal problems. Such service provision needs to be alive to the challenges fatherhood and intimate relationships with women present to young men who have grown up in families where care was inadequate, trust was lacking and/or violence was commonplace. While there are localised pockets of expertise, it is currently unclear in the UK who might deliver a nationally coordinated service of this kind. Although there is the potential to reach out to young men in such circumstances through community focussed interventions, many feel that criminal justice practitioners are the only professionals who have grasped the complexity of the difficulties they face.

## Working with Perpetrators

There is a need to develop skills in the field of working with younger male perpetrators. The few that are serviced through IDAP (the UK's Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme) often regard such programmes as only relevant to older men who are still in long term relationships. Meanwhile, those below the age of 18 rarely receive any specialist form of intervention aside from 'anger management'. Interventions developed in this area should not simply assume that all male domestic abuse perpetrators are the same, though there may be some common features of their behaviour. For example, they are likely to attribute violence to past relationships, are unlikely to see themselves as powerful especially when they themselves have histories of disadvantage, and they will rarely trust professionals to help them.

Intervening effectively necessitates careful listening to what young men say about their relationships. It also requires a capacity to engage with mental health, learning difficulties and emotional development issues. In some instances, it also requires a grasp of the dynamics of gang related violence and/or family dynamics that reinforce the behaviour of a particular perpetrator. Whatever the antecedents, young men need enduring relationships with service providers that are built on trust if they are to admit to behaviours regarded as shameful. Many would benefit from professional mentoring that can continue into subsequent dating relationships and beyond the period of conventional criminal justice sanctions. Tackling domestic abuse should not be left until after alcohol or drug problems are resolved. Services need also to be made available to those who have not been arrested or prosecuted for offences involving violence towards a partner.



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