

Influencers and Attitudes

How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?

Listening to children and young people to build a better future

Authors

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Women's Aid

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the children and young people who responded to these surveys for your time and for sharing your experiences with us

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. For almost 50 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of approximately 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse, whilst using research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice, and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Women's Aid Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

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Executive summary

The purpose of this research was to ensure an evidence base for the design of education about relationships for children and young people (CYP), highlighting the positive influence that well-structured Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) programmes can have and to ultimately investigate 'what works well'. The findings are particularly important as they are presented alongside the other influencing factors that CYP are contending with today, some of which may potentially have a harmful impact on how CYP perceive and navigate relationships.

This report draws on the findings from two surveys, one with CYP aged 7-18 years and the other with young people aged 18-25 years. The surveys used scenario- and statement-based questions to investigate attitudes and beliefs.

The research found that important aspects of RSHE were missing from the educational experiences of young people. A quarter of 18-25-year-old survey respondents recalled no education on 'sexual harassment' (24%). Additionally, a quarter of young people (23%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, 'you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship'. A third (35%) of 18-25-year-old respondents recalled no education about controlling behaviours throughout school, and behaviours exhibiting coercion and control were consistently not recognised as problematic both by children and young people surveyed in the scenarios.

Alongside inconsistent knowledge about unhealthy relationships, the research found hesitancy amongst young people to access support if needed. Whilst 70% of CYP said that they would be likely to seek support if they were worried that domestic abuse was affecting them, six in ten of these were unsure (50%) or did not know where to go (11%) for this.

Whilst the majority of CYP held healthy attitudes towards relationships, this was not the case for everybody. Some CYP agreed with statements

that could be said to fall into gender stereotyping and displaying inequality between partners within relationships. The findings of this report showed a direct correlation between potentially harmful social media content and unhealthy perceptions of, and attitudes towards, relationships. Whilst we cannot identify causation, whether the harmful content creates the attitudes, or those with the attitudes seek the content, the direct correlation suggests influence. Children and young people who reported being exposed to misogynistic content on social media were significantly more likely to agree with all the statements that reflected unhealthy perceptions of relationships compared with those who had not seen this content. In particular, those exposed to misogynistic content were more likely to think that there should be a more dominant person in relationship (31% compared to 14%), and also viewed hurting someone physically as more acceptable (19% compared to 4%).

At the same time, this research found that CYP are also viewing 'positive' content on social media and participants in the survey with young adults (18-25-years-old) highlighted the powerful effect that positive social media content can have on shaping attitudes and increasing knowledge on issues related to violence against women and girls (VAWG), domestic abuse and patriarchy.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at the Department for Education's 2023 RSHE Guidance review, as well as for the Home Office, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and schools directly. Recommendations include the need for RSHE to be designed based on an understanding of gender inequality, with sensitivity to preexisting gendered experiences and beliefs, as well as to follow a 'whole school' approach, with positive messaging focused on empowerment and thinking critically. Other sites of learning, including parents, community groups and positive online spaces are highlighted as valuable opportunities to provide counternarratives to harmful messaging online.

Key findings

Children and young people exposed to **misogynistic social media content like Andrew Tate** were almost 5x more likely than those not exposed to view hurting someone physically as acceptable if you say sorry afterwards.

misogynistic social media content
5x more likely

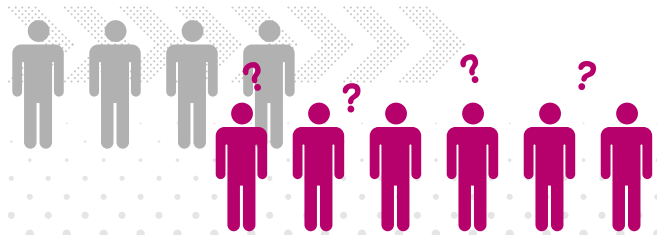


1 in 3 women experienced the RSHE they had in school as **rushed** and **awkward**.



1 in 4 women felt that it had **no understanding of pre-existing trauma**.

Whilst **70%** of children and young people said they **would seek support** if affected by domestic abuse, **61% of them were unsure or did not know where to go for this**.



Foreword



Farah Nazeer
Chief Executive, Women's Aid

As we approach our 50th year at Women's Aid, we continue in our vital work towards a better future, one where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated. We all have a responsibility to help end domestic abuse and a vital part of this work is engaging with children and young people to educate, provoke discussion and ensure that their understanding of relationships is rooted in respect and clear communication. As this seminal report shows, much remains to be done when it comes to educating young people about the misogyny that is still so prevalent in our society. To do this properly, and to do it well, we must continue working with them in the spaces they occupy – be this at school, at home, amongst their friends and

especially on social media. Our findings create a unique opportunity to adapt how we respond to these issues, and have already informed the development of Women's Aid's training offer to schools, Expect Respect, and our website for young people, Love Respect, with the goal of addressing the clear need for a revised curriculum that takes a gendered lens, and lessons that challenge misogyny and gender stereotypes.

Given young people's reliance on social media as a source of information, our report shows a clear and worrying link between viewing dangerous misogynistic content and unhealthy perceptions of relationships. For example, 19% of those exposed to content from misogynistic influencers viewed hurting someone physically as more acceptable, compared to 4% amongst those who have not viewed this content. Similarly, those exposed to this form of content were also more likely to view abusive behaviours associated with 'love bombing' as 'romantic', with 35% saying that it was 'romantic for someone to buy you gifts and turn up everywhere you go'.

Despite the negative influence of misogynistic content, children and young people highlighted the powerful effect that positive social media content can have on shaping attitudes and increasing knowledge on issues related to domestic abuse, patriarchy and violence against women and girls. This presents a unique opportunity for our sector – by producing, and making more readily available, content about overcoming unhealthy relationships, identifying red-flags, or signposting where to go for support if someone has treated you badly - we could make significant strides in changing young people's perceptions of unhealthy relationships.

Our report also highlights some worrying trends, especially around the low levels of awareness that young people have when it comes to consent and sexual harassment, both amongst young boys, but also amongst recent school leavers, with 23% of

those surveyed saying that they didn't think you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship. We also found that the education about coercive and controlling behaviours (CCB) was especially limited, with only a third of those aged 18-25 recalling any education around CCB. It is unsurprising then that one in three women found that the relationships education they had in schools was rushed and awkward. In correlation with this lack of education, a staggering six in ten said that they weren't sure where to seek support if they were worried about domestic abuse.

These findings make it clear that to be truly impactful and successful, changes must be made to the curriculum to encourage young people to think critically, something that will be reflected in the materials produced as part of our Children and Young People programme. It must be rooted in the understanding that domestic abuse and violence against women and girls are part of the unequal gendered power dynamics in wider society and seek to address them. We must also take a 'whole school' approach to educating children and young people, going beyond the classroom and engaging at all levels to affect true change.

As we make strides towards improving the relationships education of children and young people, we must also strive towards holding online platforms accountable for the dangerous views they perpetuate – they have a unique position in preventing and tackling violence against women and girls, and must capitalise on this now to prevent further harm.

Much remains to be done and these findings, alongside the recommendations of this report, are crucial to helping our society move into the future that has no room for misogyny, where girls and women are safe and relationships are safe and rooted in consent. I hope you find this report informative and encourage you to look beyond it at the resources Women's Aid has available, such as training courses to encourage conversation with young people, promote their understanding of healthy relationships and of course encourage critical thinking.



Introduction

Domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships do not take place in a social vacuum but are rooted in structural inequalities of power, alongside expectations about behaviours and roles in relationships, especially around gender.

Every case of domestic abuse should be taken seriously, and each individual should have access to the support they need. We know that domestic abuse is most commonly perpetrated by men against women and is part of the wider societal issues of misogyny and male violence against women and girls (Norman, 2020; McCarthy and Davidge, 2021; Women's Aid et al, 2021). Women are disproportionately impacted by domestic abuse. They are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse (ONS, 2022), and much more likely to be seriously harmed (Walby and Allen, 2004) or killed (ONS, 2023) by male perpetrators.

Research conducted in May 2022 as part of the Women's Aid Come Together Campaign¹ gathered insight on attitudes towards domestic abuse in order to better understand where and why domestic abuse is 'tolerated' in our society. Through a quantitative survey, the research found that young adults (16-24-years-old) were consistently the least likely to believe that the problematic behaviour described through scenarios was extremely wrong. This was particularly apparent across the set of scenarios exploring controlling behaviour (Women's Aid, 2022). This variation was closely linked to gender and was predominantly driven by young men who consistently showed more tolerance and less awareness of domestic abuse than women in the same age group and were also more likely to hold underlying misogynistic views. These

attitudes and, furthermore, what influences them, warrant further investigation so that they can be addressed effectively. At the same time, throughout most of the scenarios, young people (16-24-years-old) were more likely to report that they 'don't know' how wrong the man's behaviour was, or how much harm was done to the woman. This indicated a need to further educate young people on these topics, and to ensure this education engages with young men.

Over the past almost 50 years, Women's Aid, alongside our national network of member services, has delivered life-saving services to women and children experiencing and escaping domestic abuse. Today, this includes an online support package including our Live Chat Helpline, Survivors' Handbook, directory of services and the Survivors' Forum. However, domestic abuse can never be truly addressed if we neglect to consider the ways in which abuse can be prevented in the first place, and fundamental to this is the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of children and young people. Since its launch in 2021, the Women's Aid Expect Respect Healthy Relationship Toolkit, alongside the Love Respect² online resource, have raised awareness of the root causes of domestic abuse against children and young people and the need to challenge sexism and gender stereotypes from a young age. Furthermore, following the surveys conducted as part of this piece of research, both resources have been further refined to reflect the findings and recommendations.

Schools and other educational environments are one of the essential ways to educate children about domestic abuse and healthy relationships,

¹ In celebration of the 50th birthday of Women's Aid in 2024, the Come Together to End Domestic Abuse campaign (www.womensaid.org.uk/get-involved/endabusetogether) aims to demonstrate how we can make a difference if we come together across society and across communities to do what we can to end domestic abuse. The campaign measures attitudinal change and provides evidence for what we need to change, as well as the reach of the campaign.

² Love Respect (www.loverespect.co.uk) is a Women's Aid website that gives information on what a healthy and unhealthy relationship is, so children and young people can spot the signs.

as well as the gendered dynamics that underpin these issues. Following a long-running campaign from the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector, from 2019, the Children and Social Work Act (2017) sought to place increased emphasis on education around 'relationships' for children and young people (CYP). This legislation made 'Relationship and Sex Education' (RSE) statutory in all secondary schools and 'relationship education' statutory in all primary schools. This year marks three years since the statutory Government guidance on Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) came into effect, with the requirement that the guidance be followed in full by all schools in England from September 2020.

Change to the school curriculum was clearly needed. Ofsted's 2021 rapid review into sexual harassment and sexual violence in UK schools revealed that 90% of girls and 50% of boys had been sent unsolicited explicit photos or videos, and 92% of girls and 74% of boys had endured sexist name calling. The report concluded that sexual harassment occurs so frequently in schools it has become 'commonplace' (Ofsted, 2021).

Despite legislative changes, the existing RSHE provision still has a long way to go. The Sex Education Forum's 2022 poll with young people aged 16-17 in England found that one in five (18%) young people rated the quality of RSE as 'bad' or 'very bad', down four percentage points on the results from their 2021 poll. They concluded that "basic, mandatory aspects of the curriculum, such as healthy relationships, and how to access sexual health services are frequently missed", with over half of young people (54%) saying that they had not learnt enough about healthy relationships (Sex Education Forum, 2022, p. 5; 2023). Critical components of understanding and navigating relationships were absent from education for many young people, with 28% reporting that they learnt 'nothing at all' about power imbalances in relationships and a further 30% learnt 'some, but not enough' (Sex Education Forum, 2023). Similarly, a survey conducted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) found that 80% of girls think schools need to do more to support young people's sex and relationships education, and to tackle sexual harassment in school (EVAW, 2023).

Nonetheless, research has demonstrated that effective RSE can be a powerful mechanism through which to challenge the cultural and social dynamics that underpin sexual and gender-based violence. Comprehensive RSE seeks to acknowledge young people's rights, participation, agency and autonomy, whilst aiming to support positive, mutually respectful peer relations, and addressing gender and power (Berglas et al., 2014; Miedema et al., 2020). The UNESCO 2018 Technical Guidance for Sexual Education cites potential effects of RSE in contributing to changes beyond health outcomes, including increasing gender equitable norms and building stronger and healthier relationships (UNESCO, 2018). Furthermore, a systematic literature review conducted by Goldfarb and Lieberman examined the past three decades of research on school-based RSE, demonstrating how it can reduce sexual and domestic violence. The review found that, compared with controls, intervention schools reported 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less physical violence perpetration with a current dating partner (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021).

The findings reported in this research aim to contribute to this evidence base and highlight the positive influence that well-structured RSHE programmes can have for CYP, and ultimately investigate 'what works well'. These findings are timely, as at the time of publication the UK Government is in the process of reviewing the RSHE Guidance, expected to conclude by the end of 2023 (Department for Education, 2023). Furthermore, the findings are particularly important as they are presented alongside the other influencing factors that CYP are contending with today, some of which may potentially have a more harmful impact on how CYP perceive and navigate relationships.

The increasing influence of what we see on social media continues to shape how we perceive and interact with the world, and this can be particularly the case for younger audiences. Understanding the impact of harmful content and problematic influencers on shaping attitudes among young people is crucial as they continue to hold power in public life.

One notable example of social media influencers causing harm is the recent prevalence of online content featuring Andrew Tate, a social media personality whose online commentary on work, success, relationships, and masculinity presents views that are, by his own self-proclamation, underpinned by misogyny (Radford, 2023). Tate has also been charged with rape, human trafficking and forming an organised crime group to sexually exploit women (Williamson and Wright, 2023). Concerningly, recent research suggests that Tate has considerable popularity amongst young men. A 2023 YouGov poll found that 27% of young men aged 18-29 had either a 'very favourable' or 'somewhat favourable' view of Tate (Smith, 2023). Moreover, whilst most Britons who had heard of Tate said they strongly disagree with his views, the differences of opinions between men and women were significant, with 38% of 18-29-year-old men saying they agreed with him, compared to 10% of women of the same age. Differences were also found between younger men compared to older men, with 15% of men aged 40-49 agreeing or strongly agreeing with his views (compared to 38% of 18-29-year-old men and 37% of 30-39-year-old men) (Smith, 2023).

However, alongside this, more 'positive' social media content, particularly that which uses storytelling to highlight the experiences of those affected by unhealthy relationships and survivors of domestic abuse, can provide a counternarrative to these problematic viewpoints. This research will begin to investigate the impact of 'feminist' social media content and 'positive' influencers and how this can be a powerful educational tool to equip CYP with knowledge around sex and relationships.



Methodology

Research questions

This report draws on the findings from two surveys, which collected mostly quantitative data. Combined, the surveys aimed to understand the following questions:

- ▶ What perceptions about healthy and unhealthy relationships are held by CYP in the UK?
- ▶ What are the belief systems and attitudes that shape these perceptions?
- ▶ What influences the belief systems and attitudes that shape these perceptions in CYP, particularly the belief systems that promote VAWG, domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships?
- ▶ What influences *change* to the belief systems and attitudes in CYP that underpin these perceptions, especially the belief systems that promote VAWG, domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships?
- ▶ How can school education prevention work & digital interventions effectively influence these belief systems and help us to address harmful attitudes towards relationships?

Survey design

Women's Aid worked with the research and polling agency, ORB International, to support with the quantitative data analysis and to try to reach a nationally representative sample. Women's Aid and ORB International designed two surveys, each with questions aimed at understanding the perceptions and attitudes of CYP around healthy/unhealthy relationships, as well as the belief systems that underpin these and what influences them. Survey 1 was distributed online to CYP aged 7-18 in March-April 2023, and Survey 2 was distributed online to young adults aged 18-25 in July 2023.

The current research builds on the Women's Aid Come Together Campaign. The surveys adopt a similar approach to the Come Together research (Women's Aid, 2022) by including scenarios

describing particular situations and statements, which participants were asked to respond to, rating their agreement or disagreement. The research also builds on findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted by Women's Aid and ORB International in November 2022 with male participants of mixed relationship status, aged 18-25 or 55+. That research highlighted the prevailing impact that social media content and influencers (for example, misogynistic online commentators, such as Andrew Tate) were having on shaping attitudes around gender roles and relationships amongst the male participants. Furthermore, the FGDs began to explore the dynamics within how gender roles and relationships are discussed amongst men and the influential role that hegemonic masculinities and avoidance of vulnerability can play within how

these discussions are framed and participated in. The challenge of how these discussions can be navigated in an open, non-judgemental, positive way also underpins the aims of the research detailed in this report.

For this research, questionnaires included elements in the design that addressed the following considerations:

- ▶ The prevalence and influence of gender stereotypes, especially those around power and control.
- ▶ What a healthy and an unhealthy relationship looks like.
- ▶ What social media platforms and content are being viewed by CYP.
- ▶ How this social media content influences or correlates with attitudes around healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- ▶ The prevalence and influence of viral trends and/or high-profile influencers.
- ▶ How interests and attitudes can change over time and what shapes this change.
- ▶ Preference for methods of education around sex, healthy/unhealthy relationships, and domestic abuse.
- ▶ What makes different methods of education around sex, healthy/unhealthy relationships, and domestic abuse successful or unsuccessful.

Age-appropriate adaptations

Within Survey 1, questions were tailored to the different age groups, to ensure their relevancy and appropriateness of younger children. For Key Stage 2 (KS2), alternative terminology based on language used in the curriculum was used to inform the survey questions. For example,

‘unwanted touch’ was used in the place of ‘sexual harassment’, ‘asking permission’ was used in the place of ‘consent’, and ‘nudity’ was used for ‘nudity/pornography’.

Healthy and unhealthy relationship statements

Throughout both surveys, statements about relationships were used to investigate respondents’ attitudes. Some statements described a ‘healthy’ relationship dynamic, such as ‘you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship’, and ‘relationships are better if you’re able to compromise’. In comparison to this, the statement ‘the most important thing is to make your partner happy no matter what’ is an example of an unhealthy attitude towards relationships, as it removes autonomy and choice at the expense of oneself.

Other statements described scenarios or beliefs that exhibited coercive and controlling behaviours and, therefore, which should be considered an ‘unhealthy’ relationship dynamic. Coercive and controlling behaviour is at the heart of domestic abuse and has been a specific criminal offence since the end of 2015. Coercive control is defined in statutory guidance as “an intentional pattern of behaviour which takes place over time, in order for one individual to exert power, control or coercion over another” (Home Office, 2023, p. 13). These are abusive actions designed to limit a person’s freedom and autonomy and to dictate most aspects of a person’s everyday life. A need for wider and more consistent understanding of coercive and controlling behaviour is evident in the fact that there are a relatively small number of reports and convictions compared to the prevalence of domestic abuse (Women’s Aid, 2022). Statements used in the surveys such as ‘it’s okay to check your partner’s outfits before they go to the gym to prevent unwanted attention’, and ‘if your partner is jealous, it shows they care about you’ demonstrate attitudes around controlling behaviours that may feature in an ‘unhealthy’ relationship. Controlling behaviour, specifically ‘love bombing’, is central to the ‘unhealthy relationship’ statement ‘it’s romantic for the

person you're going out with to constantly buy you loads of gifts and unexpectedly turn up everywhere you go'.

Other statements were based on gender stereotypes, which reinforce the gendered beliefs that contribute towards, and increase tolerance of, domestic abuse and VAWG. Gender stereotypes are represented by statements such as 'women are naturally more caring and keep the peace in a relationship'.

'Andrew Tate content'

As noted above, the increasing influence of Andrew Tate's online content was highlighted in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as an area warranting further research due to his popularity and impact, especially amongst younger men. As such, questions within this research refer specifically to 'Andrew Tate content' (or 'AT content'), and the surveys themselves were distributed at a time when Tate was regularly featured in the media. However, it is important to note that the popularity of Tate is not a phenomenon in and of itself and, instead, is a current representation of existing misogyny. The content also correlates with a wider increase in the prevalence of so-called 'incel' ideology, hatred against women and girls and backlash against the feminist movement, alongside other media influencers that assert these viewpoints. Therefore, we would suggest that the findings within this report around 'Andrew Tate content'

are taken as a proxy for similar such content, both that which is popular currently, as well as what may emerge in the future and have a similar level of influence on the attitudes and beliefs, in particular amongst children and young people.

Limitations of the design

Some questions within Survey 2 relied on participants to recall their experiences from when they were in primary school, secondary school and university education. It should be noted that their responses were potentially susceptible to recall bias, whereby accurate information may have been forgotten or misremembered in their responses. For this reason, this survey specifically included participants who were aged 18-25 years old only, rather than any older, to try to mitigate this potential limitation and ensure the period of recall was within recent memory.

The samples for both surveys were drawn from nationally representative parameters based on gender and region, however, there were no hard ethnicity targets set, so ethnicity was subject to variance. Ethnicity for Survey 1 (7-18-year-olds) fell almost in line with national figures (England and Wales) in terms of ethnicity, however, for Survey 2 (18-25-year-olds), ethnicity fell out slightly from national representation within the sample invited. As the target age group for Survey 2 can be one of the most difficult to reach, and in order to ensure the full 1,000 participant quota was achieved, no amendments were made to the sample.

Sample

Survey 1: 7-18-year-olds

This survey questionnaire received 1,000 responses from CYP aged between 7-18, covering Key Stage 2 (KS2) (age 7-11), Key Stage 3 (KS3) (age 11-14), Key Stage 4 (KS4) (age 14-16) and Key Stage 5 (KS5) (age 16-18), with 250 participants from each Key Stage. Overall, 52% of participants identified as girls, 47% identified as boys, and 1% identified as 'other'. Boys and girls are evenly represented in the data for

KS2 (50% vs 50%), KS3 (50% vs 49%) and KS4 (47% vs 52%), with 1% or less identifying their gender as 'other' at these Key Stages. Participants in KS5 were the hardest to reach, resulting in a slight increase of girls (58%) sampled for this Key Stage, compared with boys (40%) and those identifying with another gender (2%).

The majority of participants identified as heterosexual or straight (87%), 10% identified

as non-straight (either gay, lesbian, bisexual or another orientation), and 3% selected 'don't know' or refused to answer the question. A breakdown by Key Stage can be seen in **Graph 1** (below). Sexual orientation was not asked to those in KS2.

Parental consent, as well as participant consent, was obtained for all respondents under 18 years.

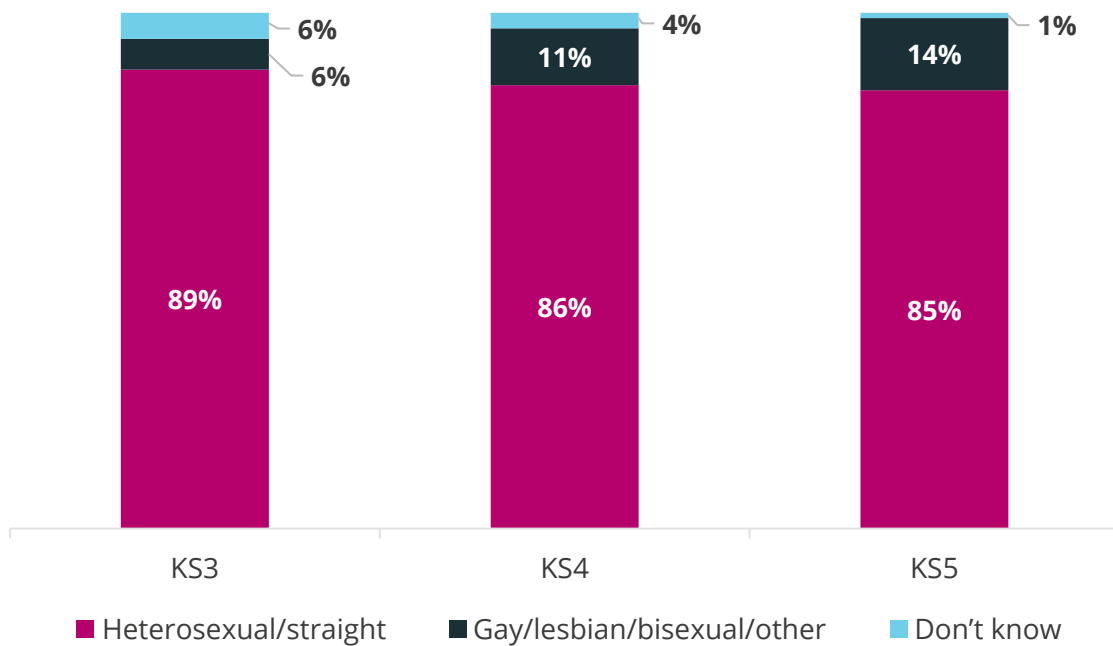
Survey 2: 18-25-year-olds

This survey questionnaire received 1,000 responses from young people aged 18-25 years. 50% of respondents identified as 'female', 48% identified as 'male' and 2% of respondents identified as 'other'. The majority of participants

(80%) identified as heterosexual, alongside 10% who identified as bisexual, 5% gay or lesbian, and 5% 'don't know/refused' or 'other'. Almost half the sample (44%) did not identify with a religion, with one third being Christian (33%) and just over 1 in 10 (13%) being Muslim. Each age within the sample was evenly represented (10-14%), with the exception of 23-year-olds who were slightly more common in the sample (18%).

All participants were asked for informed consent, which detailed the survey's content, before agreeing to participate. Respondents were also signposted to support services where they could get support if they had been impacted by the issues included in the survey.

Graph 1: Sexual orientation reported by participants in KS3, KS4 and KS5



Statistical significance

All described differences in the text (i.e., between different demographic groups) are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or above. This means that the probability of having found a difference of at least this size, if there was no

actual difference in the population, is 5% or less or $p < .05$. The term 'significant' is used in this report to refer statistical significance and not intended imply substantive importance.

Results

1. Educational experiences and preferences

1.1. Current knowledge of related topics in 7-18-year-olds

To explore how education can be adapted to better support learning around healthy and unhealthy relationships, this research began by measuring the existing awareness of these issues amongst children and young people.

Participants were asked about their awareness of a range of related topics to understand their existing knowledge, which may have been covered in their education to date. For KS2 (7-11-year-olds) participants, language in the topics was adapted to reflect the primary curriculum. The topics, alongside their definitions, were:

Consent (KS3-5) or asking permission (KS2):



'Giving someone a choice and respecting their answer'.

Controlling behaviour (KS2-5):



'Forcing someone to do what you want them to do, when they don't necessarily want to'.

Domestic abuse (KS3-5), or unsafe relationships (KS2):



'When someone intentionally hurts the body or feelings of someone they are in a relationship with'.

Healthy relationships (KS2-5):



'Relationships that make you feel good about yourself, safe and happy'.

Sexual harassment (KS3-5), or unwanted touch (KS2):



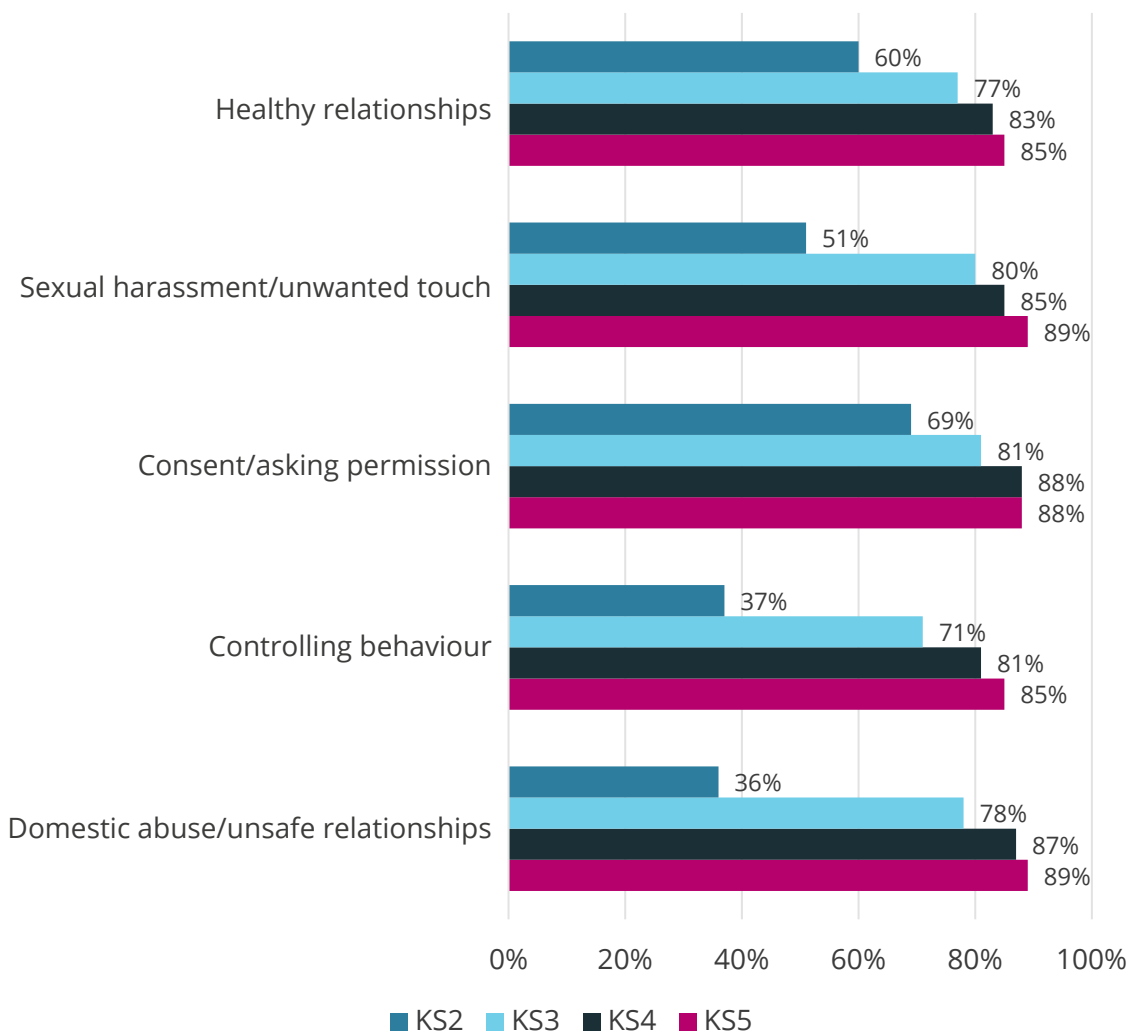
'Touches that might be safe, but you do not want from that person at that time'.

Responding whether they had heard of each of the topics, the survey found that awareness for those in KS2 was lower than the other age groups on almost every topic, however, it had increased significantly by KS3. By KS4 and KS5, more than four in five participants reported having heard of each topic. Further detail can be found in **Graph 2** (at the top of page 15).

Awareness in particular of domestic abuse/unsafe relationships was low for those in KS2 (36%), but increased significantly by KS3 and KS4, by which point almost 9 in 10 (87%) had heard of this topic.

Despite a slightly higher proportion of girls having heard of almost every topic, there were no significant gender differences in awareness of unhealthy behaviours.

Graph 2: Awareness of topics relating to unhealthy behaviours, by Key Stage



As well as measuring participants’ awareness of unhealthy behaviours, the research investigated their understanding of these topics by asking participants to select the correct definition for each topic from a list of options.

Again, participants in KS2 provided the correct response least frequently across all topics. For those in KS2, less than half of respondents (47%) selected the correct definition for ‘unsafe relationships’ and 61% knew the correct definition of ‘unwanted touch’. This indicates a significant gap in the knowledge and confidence on these issues amongst primary school children, which needs to be addressed.

However, those in KS3 and onwards displayed a good understanding of ‘domestic abuse’, with 83% assigning the correct definition, showing improved understanding with age. Overall, ‘healthy relationships’ and ‘controlling behaviour’ were well understood by participants from all ages, with 8 in 10 participants assigning the correct definitions.

Girls were significantly more likely than boys to understand what is meant by ‘healthy relationships’, ‘controlling behaviour’ and ‘asking permission’, as seen in **Table 1** (on page 16). This would suggest that education programmes must work to specifically target the learning of young boys, to prevent a further widening of this gap in their knowledge.

Table 1: Understanding of related topics, split by boys and girls

Correct allocation of definitions of the topics (%)		
Topic	Boys	Girls
Healthy relationships (KS2-5)	74%	86%
Controlling behaviour (KS2-5)	76%	84%
Asking permission (KS2)	58%	73%
Unwanted touch (KS2)	61%	60%
Unsafe relationships (KS2)	50%	44%
Domestic abuse (KS3-5)	79%	85%
Consent (KS3-5)	75%	77%
Sexual harassment (KS3-5)	65%	70%

1.2. Educational experiences of 18-25-year-olds

Following the investigation into the awareness and understanding of topics relating to healthy and unhealthy relationships amongst children, the survey with 18-25-year-olds sought to measure to what extent they had learnt about these topics themselves, when this was, and how much of this knowledge had been retained.

Findings showed that secondary school was the critical time period where respondents were most likely to recall learning about any topic related to sex and relationships. Topics other than 'online safety' (50%), 'biological sex education'³ (37%) and 'sexual relationships' (24%) were recalled from primary education by less than one in five respondents, which correlates with the findings from the survey with younger children, indicating a gap within education on issues around unhealthy behaviours, coercive and controlling behaviour and abuse in primary school.

Moreover, around a third of participants recalled no education at all throughout primary school,

secondary school nor sixth form on 'controlling behaviour' (35%), 'domestic abuse' (30%) or 'healthy relationships' (28%). A quarter also recalled no education on 'sexual harassment' (24%). Women were significantly more likely than men to have no recall of learning about these issues during their formal education. For example, almost half (46%) of women did not recall learning about 'controlling behaviour' compared with 26% of men, and 35% of women did not recall learning about 'healthy relationships' compared with 20% of men. This may be because women respondents possibly felt the education that they received did not resonate with them or reflect their experiences, therefore reporting 'no recall' of the topics. Alternatively, this finding could be false reporting by respondents, for example as a result of recall bias. Further research involving qualitative questions would improve understanding of this finding.

Comparatively, biological sex education (75%), online safety (74%) and sexual relationships (73%)

³ Referring to the biological aspects of sexual activity/intercourse and sexual reproduction, including, for example, sexual health and contraception

were the three topics most recalled from during secondary school education. In fact, only around 1 in 10 had no recollection of these three topics throughout their education. Whilst biological sex education is an essential part of how young people learn to navigate sex in a safe and healthy way, this finding suggests that other, more emotional dynamics around relationships may have been neglected from education over the past decade.

There were also some gender differences by age that are worthy of note. Older women (aged 22-25) were less likely to recall topics around consent, mental health and sexual harassment compared to men of the same age. Younger women (aged 18-21), however, were the most likely group to recall topics around online safety.

Critically, there were meaningful differences in the recall of subject areas in secondary school when broken down by age. Younger participants aged 18-21 were more likely to recall any topic, particularly

mental health, online safety, sexual harassment and consent, as shown in **Table 2** (below).

This finding could be due to younger respondents feeling more confident in recalling subject areas due to their age, however, it may also be a result of changes in the curriculum between the school years. The 2017 Children and Social Work Act reframed education from leading with 'sex' within 'sex and relationships education' (SRE), to leading with the 'relationship' element (RSE), to ensure education around relationship dynamics and unhealthy behaviours were not neglected, and education was more comprehensive. Furthermore, since 2020, RSE has been compulsory in secondary schools and these changes in the curriculum between the school years may have influenced the level of education received by 18-21-year-olds in comparison to 22-25-year-olds.

Table 2: Recall of education topics in secondary school, by age

Topic	Recall		
	22-25	18-21	Difference
Mental health	51%	71%	-20%
Online safety	69%	81%	-12%
Consent	61%	72%	-11%
Sexual harassment	53%	64%	-11%
Domestic abuse	48%	56%	-8%
Biological sex education	72%	78%	-6%
Healthy relationships	52%	56%	-4%
Sexual relationships	71%	74%	-3%
Controlling behaviours	45%	48%	-3%

1.3. Preferences for educational styles and methods

As well as understanding the educational experiences of children and young people, the research aimed to investigate what can make this formal education particularly useful, or particularly poor, to inform how future education can be designed effectively.



Preferences of 7-18-year-olds on educational sources

As part of this exploration, the survey of 7–18-year-olds asked CYP for their opinions on from whom they would prefer to learn about a range of related topics. Topics included were ‘relationships’, ‘sex’, ‘online safety’ and ‘mental health’.

Overall, families were the preferred way to learn about relationships (62%), mental health (58%) and sex (43%), demonstrating the significant influence that this sphere can have on CYP’s knowledge and beliefs, aside from formal education. Providing supportive resources for parents on how to navigate these conversations is therefore essential to ensuring CYP receive consistent messaging and parents feel confident and empowered to have potentially challenging conversations.

Teachers (57%) were the preferred way to learn about online safety, and around a third of CYP wanted to learn about this topic through an external speaker in school (36%) or e-learning platform (31%). External speakers were also a popular choice to learn about mental health (35%), alongside teachers (49%).

Participants’ preferred way to learn about relationships, mental health and online safety also varied slightly by Key Stage. However, there was a clear pattern for learning about sex specifically. Younger audiences preferred to learn about sex from family and teachers, however, this declined with age. Only 17% of KS2 students preferred to learn about sex from friends, but this increased to 37% by KS5 at which point friends become the most popular source to learn about sex, indicating the strong peer influence within this area. Fostering peer relations that are positive is, therefore, an important aspect of formal RSHE education in schools, to ensure these discussions,

especially in relation to sex, are respectful and helpful for children, offering support to each other rather than reinforcing stereotypes or myths. Furthermore, this may also suggest an added potential spillover effect for interventions with CYP, as they are likely to share what they have learnt amongst their friends and peers, and informally cascade their education.

The importance of peer relations, alongside the popularity of external speakers, also suggests the potential benefits to exploring how other settings which may be more conducive to positive peer relations and providing new perspectives could be utilised. External sites such as community groups could play a positive role in supporting CYP with issues relating to relationships, educating outside of, but in complement with, the school setting.



Experiences of education amongst 18-25-year-olds

In the survey with 18-25-year-olds, participants were asked to reflect on the RSHE they received and consider what they had found particularly good or useful about this education, as well as what they had found particularly poor or not useful.

Learning about where to get support (37%) and having time to ask questions (36%) were the top two reasons stated for finding education on the selected topics good or useful any at any age. One in four also selected that they felt they could discuss things they would not feel comfortable discussing at home (26%) and that they did not feel judged (24%), highlighting the importance of creating spaces within RSHE where CYP feel safe, comfortable and empowered to discuss the issues freely.

Having a learning platform that was engaging, accessible and/or fun was also reported as a useful experience by 24% of respondents.

Men were significantly more likely than women to find education good or useful if they made new friends or if it involved school trips, highlighting the importance of social aspects within RSHE as a means of engaging men and boys. Besides these

areas, there were limited gender differences in reasons for finding education useful.

Reflecting on what had made their education on relationships and sex particularly poor or not useful, having lessons that felt rushed and awkward was identified as a key reason by over a quarter of participants (27%). Again, this indicates that education programmes must create safe and empowering spaces, and that teachers (or specialists) need to be confidently equipped to hold these safe and empowering spaces, and to deliver content within them. Respondents also felt that their education has lacked awareness of their current knowledge level, whereby 24% found they already had an understanding of the educational topic, and a fifth found the lessons to be boring and unengaging (21%). At the same time, the Women's Aid 'Come Together' research found a significant proportion of young people selected that they 'didn't know' whether an abusive scenario was 'wrong' or not (Women's Aid, 2022). As such, despite feeling that they may have a basic level of understanding, CYP may feel less confident about this in practice or may not have the level of knowledge that they believe.

Gender differences were more prominent in responses about features of poor RSHE, particularly in relation to how comfortable they felt in the lessons. For example, whilst 22% of men felt lessons were rushed and awkward, 31% of women reported this issue. Similarly, one in four (24%) women felt that their education had no understanding of pre-existing trauma, compared to less than one in five men (17%). Ensuring sensitivity to pre-existing experiences and beliefs within RSHE works towards all CYP feeling safe and engaged.

Women were more likely to reflect that poor education did not represent them or their experiences (17% of women compared to 11% of men), whereas men were more likely to reflect that their education did not reflect their beliefs (15% of men compared to 8%). Although based on a smaller size, a very significant proportion of respondents whose gender identity was 'other/unsure about my gender' also selected that their education did not represent them or their own experiences, with six in ten (60%) selecting this option.

At the same time, when disaggregated by sexuality, further differences can be seen. Whilst 8% (n=62) of heterosexual / straight participants thought their education did not represent them or their experiences, 60% (n=30) of gay or lesbian participants selected this option, as well as 45% (n=44) of bisexual participants, and 55% (n=12) of participants identifying 'Other' as their sexuality.

These differences highlight the crucial importance of designing RSHE that is situated within an intersectional⁴ understanding of gendered social norms and dynamics. RSHE must avoid taking a heteronormative approach and needs to discuss all experiences and how they can relate to power dynamics, which are at the heart of domestic abuse in any relationship.

⁴ Recognition of the interconnected nature of social categorisations and how marginalisation is compounded for groups on the basis of different intersecting elements of identity, including sexism, racism, ageism, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, cultural and religious discrimination, and disability discrimination, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

2. Knowledge around domestic abuse support

2.1. Accessing support: Children and Young People (7-18-year-olds)

Alongside a measurement of what children and young people were experiencing in RSHE and their knowledge around issues relating to domestic abuse, this research investigated how this education was translating into likelihood and confidence to access support.

Survey results indicated that whilst 70% of CYP said that they would be likely to seek support if they were worried about unsafe relationships/ domestic abuse affecting them, 6 in 10 of these were unsure (50%) or did not know where to go (11%) for this. Those who would not seek support for domestic abuse most commonly reported the reason for this was concern of making the situation worse (36%), and fears of not being taken seriously (27%). Just under a third (29%) also said 'not knowing where to go' was a key reason why they would not try and seek support, showing a key knowledge gap.

Furthermore, differences were observed between boys' and girls' likelihood to seek support for domestic abuse. Boys were notably less likely than girls to seek support in any way if they were worried about abusive behaviour in their relationship or home environment. Gender differences are most prominent for those in KS3 and KS4 between boys (50%) and girls (61%).

Education on procedures around reporting domestic abuse, as well as appropriate signposting and support, is clearly needed within RSHE. This is essential to give CYP the confidence to report and knowledge around what actions will be taken when they do so, to ensure those reporting domestic abuse are protected and given reassurance this will not make the situation worse.

2.2. Accessing support: Young People (18-25-year-olds)

Respondents to the survey of young people aged 18-25 were also asked to consider the likelihood of seeking them support for concerns around domestic abuse. The proportion of 18-25-year-old respondents that either would or may seek support was higher than amongst the 7-18 group, at 90% compared to 70%. However, at the same time, the reasons for being unsure about whether to do so were largely similar. Again, 38% said they would be fearful they would make the situation worse, and a third (31%) felt that either the issue, or they themselves, would not be taken seriously, or that reporting might put those involved in danger (30%). We know from our work with direct services and years of experience supporting survivors of domestic abuse that these reasons also correlate with older adults' reports of why they do not have confidence to report.

Respondents in this age range were also asked to consider whether they felt they would have been likely to seek support at different ages: at 14-years-old and then 18-years-old. Participants felt they were very unlikely to have reported at 14-years-old, with only 32% responding 'yes' to this, alongside to 57% who selected 'no'. Comparatively, 64% felt that at 18-years-old they would have reported, and only 28% thought they would not have done so at the same age.

These responses were then cross-referenced with the participants' answers on recalling an education on domestic abuse and healthy relationships-related topics to explore the impact this may have had. Whilst education did not impact respondents' likeliness to report abuse currently, recalling an education on topics related to healthy

relationships at significantly increased likelihood to report abuse at age 14 and 18.

Additionally, the proportion of those who responded 'I don't know' to whether they would have reported abuse was also significantly higher amongst those who did not receive an education.

This suggests that hearing about experiences that are similar to your own through education about domestic abuse and learning what they were, can have a positive impact in validating these experiences and, furthermore, increasing confidence towards seeking support.

3. Attitudes amongst children and young people

In the previous sections, we investigated the current educational awareness and knowledge around unhealthy relationships, domestic abuse and related topics amongst children and young people and began considering how formal education programmes can have a positive impact on expanding this knowledge. The research will now begin to explore the wider social context for CYP today, and aim to understand prevailing attitudes and perceptions, as well as the belief systems that underpin them, amongst children and young people (aged 7-25).

Attitudes set the scene on peoples' behaviours within relationships and how they are navigated. As noted previously, attitudes in this research were investigated through a series of statements that depicted dynamics of either healthy or unhealthy relationships. This section will explore issues such as consent, jealousy, gender roles, and coercion and control. Statements such as 'the most important thing is to make your partner happy no matter what', were used to investigate to what extent respondents believed their own wants and needs should be consistently sacrificed at the expense of their partners' wants and needs, which may suggest underlying patterns of coercion and control that can often underpin domestic abuse. Alternatively, there may be gendered perspectives surrounding this statement, whereby girls are often brought up to 'people please', or to be overly amenable, whereas boys are encouraged to think and behave more independently and assert their

opinions with confidence. Comparatively, when women and girls do speak out and express their own opinions, they may be labelled as 'crazy', 'over-emotional' or 'bossy' (McCarthy and Davidge, 2021; Women's Aid et al, 2021).

Other statements, such as 'you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship', were used to explore understanding of consent within relationships, which should be obtained every time even for couples. Consent happens when all people involved in any kind of sexual activity agree to take part by choice. They also need to have the freedom and capacity to make that choice (Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2023).

Jealousy was explored in this research as it is an issue that is often underpinned by coercion and control in relationships and may demonstrate emotional and psychological abuse. Jealous behaviours may be an expression of personal insecurities, which are being communicated in an inappropriate and emotionally harmful way. The statements 'men show their love through jealousy' and 'if your partner is being jealous, it shows that they care about you' investigated this issue.

By understanding these attitudes, and furthermore what influences them, we can begin to fully understand the educational landscape and what RSHE programmes, resources and training must do to navigate this effectively.

3.1. Children and Young People (7-18-year-olds)



Attitudes towards friendships and relationships

KS2

Accounting for comprehension and experience, KS2 participants were asked to share what they thought were features of a good friendship. Findings indicated that the majority of participants have a healthy view of friendships as the agreement with positive statements was significantly higher than negative features. Over 80% of participants agreed that all the positive statements presented were features of a good friendship. KS2 participants were most likely to agree that being honest with each other (94%) and making each other feel safe (93%) are features of a good friendship. Gender differences in perceptions of good friendships were limited. However, boys (31%) were significantly less likely than girls (43%) to agree that you should share the same views on everything. This may be the result of boys and girls falling into gender stereotypical behaviours and beliefs, as mentioned above, of girls being amenable and boys being independent. This finding highlights an important attitudinal issue to be addressed in education and promote alternative behaviours and beliefs that do not adhere to socially ascribed gender roles.

KS3-KS5

Older age groups were asked whether they agreed with more general statements about relationships. Again, participants were mostly likely to agree with the positive statements, such as 'relationships are better if you're able to compromise and understand your differences' (87%) and 'it's important to talk with your partner about whether or not you're ready to have sex' (85%).

However, many participants also agreed with some more negative statements. Almost half of CYP (43%) thought that 'the most important thing is to make your partner happy no matter what', which indicates some normalisation of unhealthy

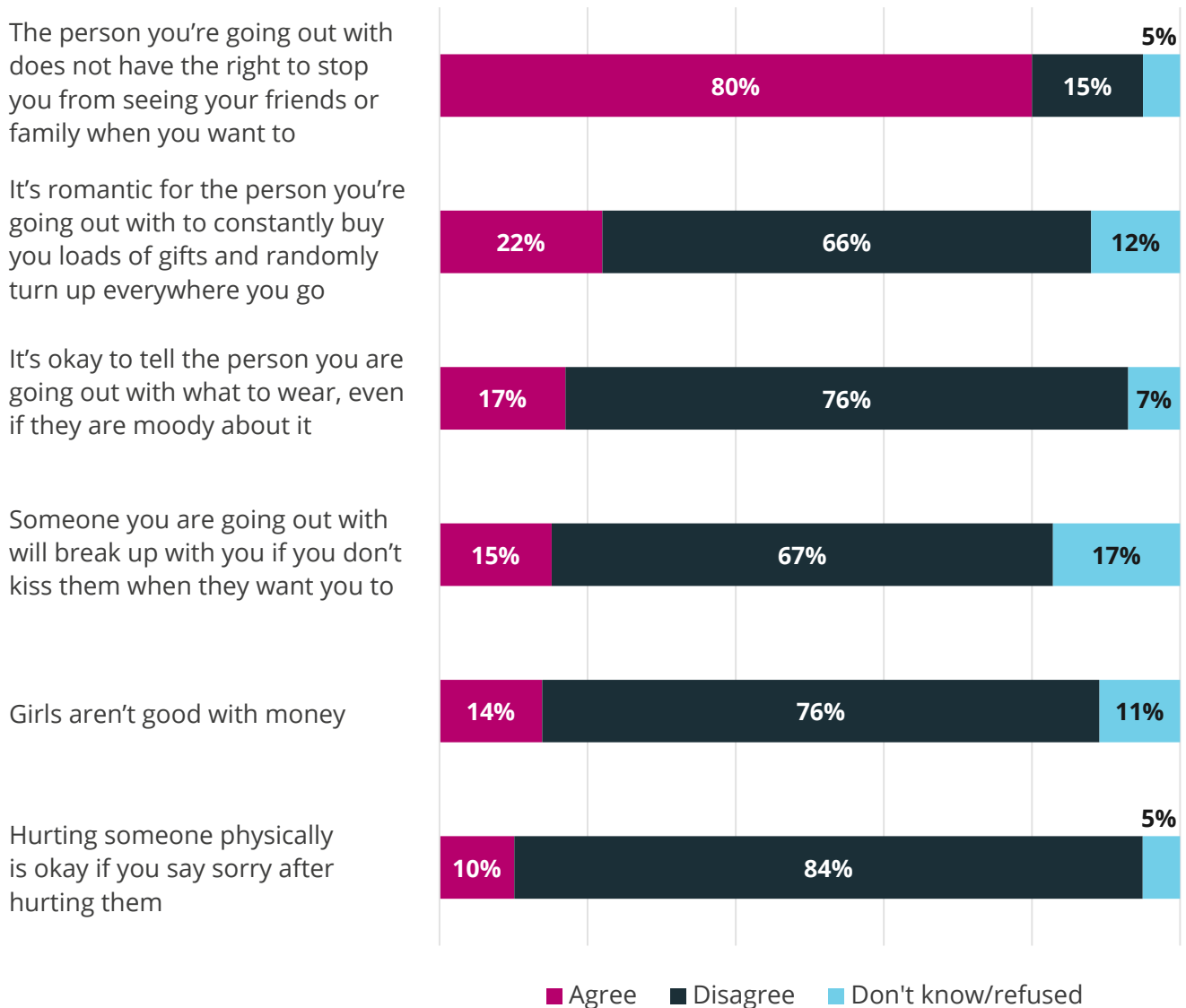
relationships. Over a third (36%) believed that 'if they really loved me, my partner would know what I wanted without having to be told'. One in five (22%) participants agreed there should be one more dominant person in a relationship and that men show their love through jealousy (21%). There was minimal variation in attitudes observed by age/Key Stage. Agreement with these statements highlight a lack of understanding around patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour, which underpins domestic abuse.

KS2-KS5

Participants from all Key Stages were asked their agreement on some additional attitudinal statements about relationships. The majority of participants displayed agreement with behaviours reflecting a healthy relationship, such as 80% agreeing with the statement 'the person you're going out with does not have the right to stop you from seeing your friends and family when you want to'. The majority of participants also showed disagreement with the harmful attitudinal statements.

However, the proportion of those who agreed with some harmful attitudinal statements is still important to note, with 1 in 5 (22%) participants agreeing that behaviours associated with 'love bombing' (constantly buying someone gifts and then turning up everywhere they go) were caring or 'romantic'. Agreement with this statement was higher than all other statements, representing an area of potentially harmful attitudes and behaviours, which can enable a culture that tolerates domestic abuse.

Graph 3: Percentage of 7–18-year-old participants who responded ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ or ‘don’t know/refused’ to attitudinal statements about relationships



Differences in attitudes between girls and boys

Gendered patterns of likeliness to agree with harmful behaviours and attitudes were generally inconsistent, with a few areas of significance. For example, whilst, overall, one in ten (10%) CYP thought that it was ‘okay to physically hurt someone if you say sorry after’, boys (13%) were more likely than girls (8%) to agree with this statement. At the same time, girls (73%) were

more likely to disagree that someone would break up with you if don't want to kiss them compared with boys (61%). Understanding these differences in beliefs and attitudes between male and female students is important and should be incorporated into the design of RSE programmes, working to dispel myths where they are most pervasive.



Attitudes towards gender stereotypes

Participants were also asked for their attitudes towards a series of different personality traits and social roles, considering whether they would choose to associate them with a particular gender, or with neither, or with anyone. The traits included were caring, respectful, jealous, violent, protector, shy, emotional, and confident.

One additional aspect of this was considering whether women are 'naturally more caring and keep the peace in a relationship'. This statement is particularly problematic because it suggests that the responsibility for 'care' within a relationship lies naturally or biologically with female partners and is, therefore, associated with a greater, unequal expectation to fulfil the role of caregiving for children and other family members (McCarthy and Davidge, 2021; Women's Aid et al, 2021). It may also be associated with an increase in expected responsibility for women to 'keep the peace' during disagreements, perhaps at the expense of their own opinions, and comparatively removes responsibility for these behaviours and tasks from male parties. By extension, therefore, these socially ascribed gender roles are harmful as they limit the freedom to choose and share responsibility for care work equally. Overall, more than half of respondents in KS3-5 thought that 'women are naturally more caring in relationships' (56%).

Participants suggested that the majority of personality traits could be associated with 'anyone', however, certain traits were commonly associated a particular gender. The traits

of 'protector' (42%) and 'violent' (32%) were significantly associated with boys, and 'emotional' (40%), 'caring' (30%) and 'shy' (24%) were significantly likely to be associated with girls.

In consideration of the attitudinal statement 'girls aren't good with money', three quarters (76%) of respondents disagreed, however, a not insignificant 14% of children and young people agreed.

Gender differences *within* responses around perceptions of relationships and gender stereotypes were limited, however, there were some key areas of divergence. Girls (61%) were more likely to agree that women are naturally more caring in relationships than boys (51%). Boys (52%) were also more likely than girls (36%) to agree 'you should make your partner happy no matter what'. Boys (16%) were more likely than girls (11%) to think that 'girls aren't good with money'. The need to dispel gender stereotypes amongst boys is often prioritised, however, these findings show that addressing stereotypes amongst all children, including girls, is important.

Furthermore, boys and girls sometimes associated some traits differently with one particular gender or another. For example, girls were more likely than boys to associate the personality traits 'emotional' (44% vs 36%) and 'caring' (36% vs 27%) with girls only. Girls (36%) were also more likely to associate the personality trait 'violent' with 'boys', compared to their male counterparts (27%).

3.2. Young People (18-25-year-olds)

Participants were asked their level of agreement with a series of statements about relationships.

Concerningly, whilst **65% of respondents (67% of women and 62% of men) agreed that 'you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship'**, almost a quarter of young people (**23% overall; 23% of women and 25% of men) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.** Education is needed to provide clarity about what consent is, particularly recognising that consent given once does not mean consent every time, and that 'consent' does not necessarily mean verbally asking permission of your partner, but can be given – and withdrawn – in other ways (Women's Aid, 2022). At the same time, over a quarter of respondents (26%) thought that there should always be one more dominant person in a relationship and over 30% thought that 'you should always try to make your partner happy even if you do not feel comfortable doing so'. Considering these findings in relation to attitudes towards consent, it is clear that further education is needed to ensure CYP do not feel pressured into having sex when do not want to and consent is given voluntarily rather than based on expectation or unequal power dynamics in relationships.

Over a third of the younger people surveyed agreed with the statement, 'if your partner is being jealous, it shows that they care about you' (35%) and that 'it's okay to check your partner's outfits before they go to the gym to prevent unwanted attention' (34%). Rather than expressing personal insecurities through controlling behaviour, RSE content needs to talk about healthy ways to express emotion and communicate between partners, as well as recognise the problematic behaviours themselves.



Differences in attitudes between men and women

Across each of the statements relating to healthy attitudes, female respondents were more likely than males to agree. For example, 72% of women agreed that 'your choices around university should be your own' compared with 63% of men, and 62%

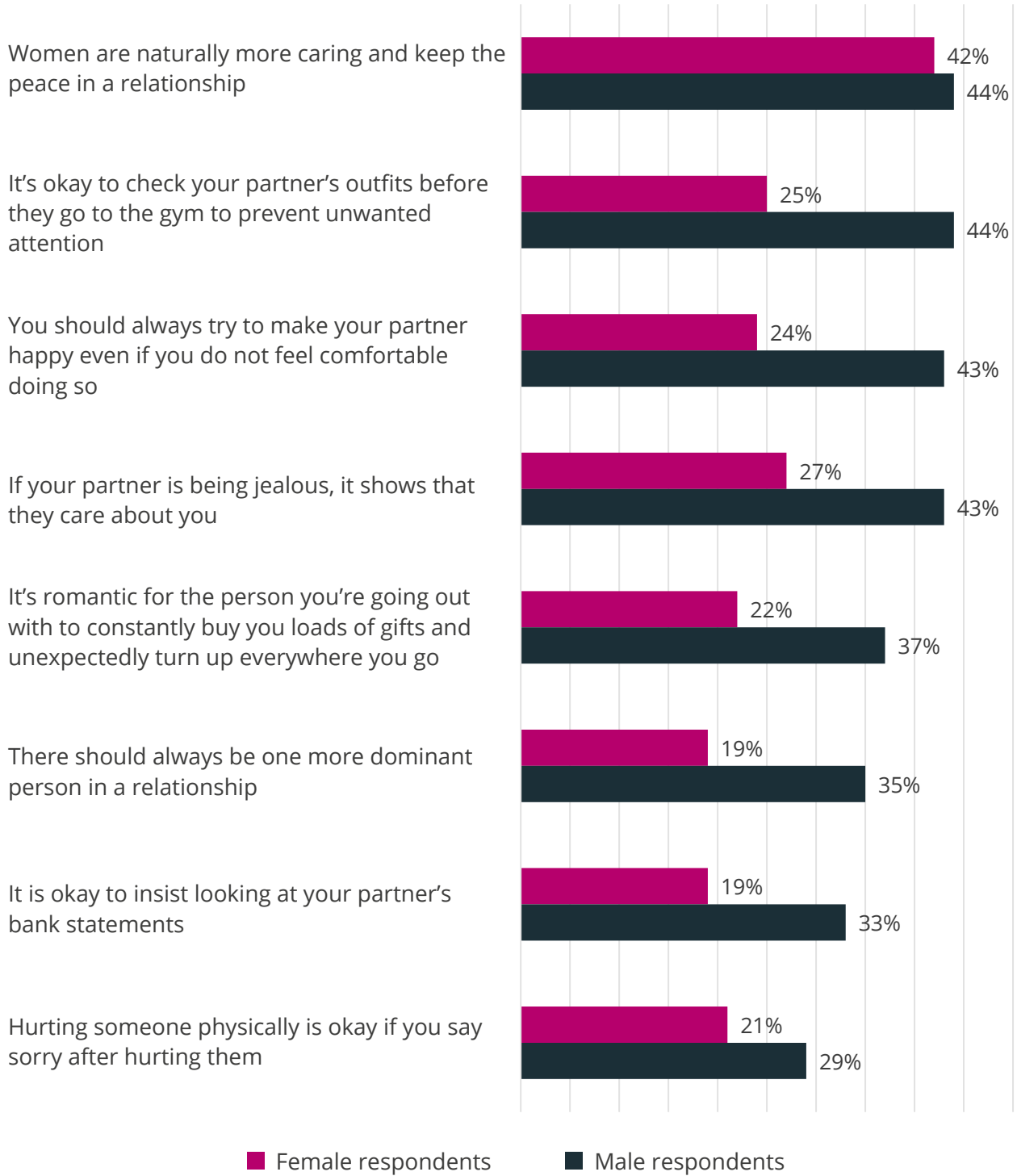


of women agreed that 'abusive relationships can look healthy from the outside' compared with 54% of men.

Strong gender differences were also found in levels of agreement with statements relating to unhealthy relationships. Across each of the statements relating to unhealthy attitudes, men were significantly more likely to agree with harmful attitudinal statements compared with women, including: 'there should always be one more dominant person in a relationship' (35% of men, 19% of women); 'you should always try and make your partner happy even if you do not feel comfortable doing so' (43% of men, 24% of women); and 'being jealous shows your partner cares about you' (43% of men, 27% of women).

Particularly controlling scenarios also garnered considerable acceptance amongst respondents, with just under half of male respondents (44%) believing that 'it's okay to check your partner's outfit before they go to the gym to prevent unwanted attention' (compared with just 25% of female respondents). Results for male and female respondents can be found in **Graph 4**.

Graph 4⁵: Percentage of 18-25-year-old participants who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with attitudinal statements about relationships



⁵ Number of responses from participants with gender identities other than 'male' or 'female' were very small, therefore were not included in this graph.

4. Influences on the attitudes of children and young people

Once we understood the perceptions, belief systems and attitudes about healthy and unhealthy relationships that are held by children and young people, the research looked more closely at what influences the belief systems and attitudes that shape these perceptions, particularly the belief systems that promote violence against women and girls (VAWG), domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships. Furthermore, through surveying 18–25-year-olds, the research investigated what influences change to these belief systems and attitudes. We identified a number of key sites of influence, including formal education (explored in section 1), and now turn to social media, wider media coverage and personal experiences.

Within the exploration of social media, the research investigated to what degree CYP had been exposed to content that contained nudity (KS2) or nudity/pornography (KS3-KS5), as well as images and videos being shared without permission, looking at whether this exposure

correlated with unhealthy attitudes and beliefs. The research did not ask about exposure to pornography websites. However, it is possible that some content containing nudity/pornography on social media may contain links to external sites, including commercial pornography websites, even when limited viewing is enabled on the social media platform itself through age restrictions. Furthermore, this type of content was important to investigate as we know from social media algorithms that exposure to particular content then informs the algorithm and influences what they will continue to receive, which can then increase in frequency and intensity.

In addition, with CYP having frequent mobile phone usage, the potential unequal power dynamics within the sharing of nude images/videos can have a considerable impact and is a relatively recent change in young relationships. With the online space ever-evolving and creating new ways to both abuse and support, training development must be mindful of this.

4.1. Social media: 7-18-year-olds



Exposure of children and young people

Six in ten (62%) participants reported having their own smartphone in KS2. By KS3, this jumped to more than nine in ten (96%) and continued to rise across Key Stages. There were no significant gender differences for owning a smartphone. Exposure to social media content increased with age and was lowest for those in KS2. Amongst participants, TikTok was the most frequently used social media channel, with more than one in three (36%) reporting to access this daily. Other popular channels included Snapchat and Instagram, with participants reporting daily usage at 30% and 26% respectively. Reddit, BeReal and Twitter were the least used channels, with around 1 in 10 accessing these daily.

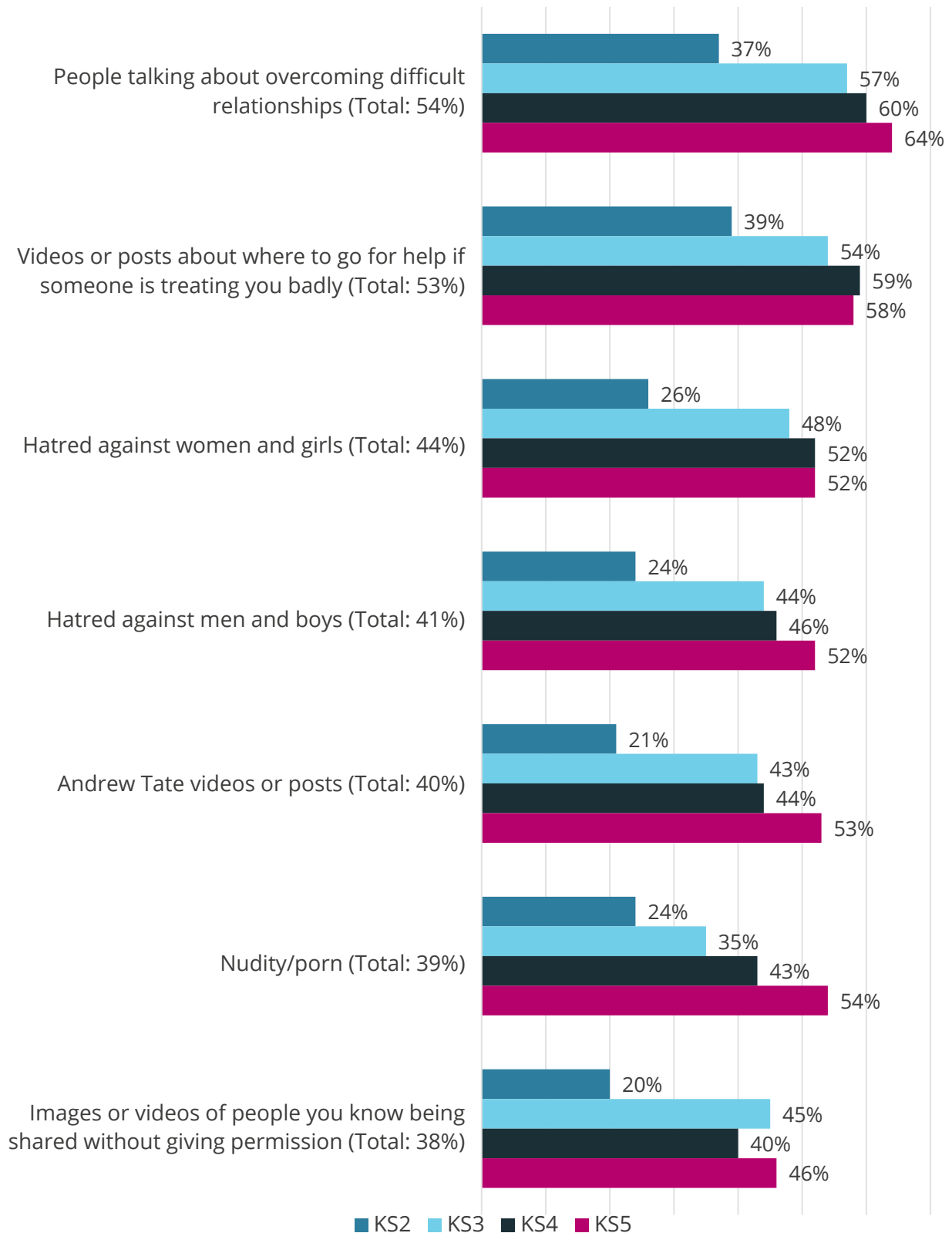
Other than Twitter and Reddit, girls reported more daily use of social media channels than boys. TikTok use is significantly higher for girls – 44% compared with 32% of boys – and differences increased significantly with each increasing Key Stage. At KS2, there are no gender differences in daily TikTok use (17% for boys and 17% for girls), however, by KS5, girls (60%) are accessing daily TikTok content twice as much as boys (30%).



Types of content

Looking more closely at the type of content that is being viewed, more than half (54%) of participants reported having seen content on social media about overcoming difficult relationships or signposting on where to go for support if someone has treated you badly (53%).

Graph 5: Percentage of participants who reported exposure to social media content by Key Stage



However, at the same time, around four in ten participants reported exposure to potentially harmful content and this increased by Key Stage. Harmful content that was viewed by CYP related to: hatred against women and girls (44%); hatred against men and boys (41%), Andrew Tate's content (40%), nudity (39%), and images and videos being shared without permission (38%).

Meanwhile, 73% of those exposed to AT content also reported exposure to hatred against men and boys compared 20% who had not seen AT content. To note, perceptions of what constitutes 'hatred against men and boys' could be influenced by other content that is viewed. For example, one aspect of AT content is the assertion that the feminist movement promotes hatred against men and boys. This uses simplistic explanations that legitimise the view that men are being wronged by societal efforts towards gender equality (Sugiura, 2023). Narratives that identify toxic (or 'hegemonic') masculinity, which call out the behaviours that are harmful to women, may be viewed as 'man-hating' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, it is possible that 'feminist content' is here reported as 'hatred against men and boys'. In addition, this correlation indicates the escalation towards more and more harmful content, such as the so-called 'manosphere' and 'incel culture', as a result of social media algorithms (Sugiura, 2023).

Critically, gender differences in exposure to harmful content were evident with boys having a higher exposure to this content than girls, particularly for those in KS2. **Table 3 (below)** highlights some of the most significant differences.



Influence of social media content

In order to investigate how these different types of social media content were potentially influencing beliefs, perceptions of gender dynamics and healthy relationships, the data around exposure was cross-examined with the survey findings around attitudes.

'Andrew Tate content' ('AT content')

As noted in the Methodology section, questions within this research referred specifically to 'Andrew Tate content' (or 'AT content'), and the surveys themselves were distributed at a time when Tate was regularly featured in the media. However, the prevalence of Tate's content is not an isolated phenomenon and is, rather, one representation of an increasing online prevalence of existing misogyny and anti-feminist backlash. Therefore, we would suggest that the findings within this report around

Table 3: Percentage of KS2 participants who reported exposure to social media content, split by boys and girls

Content exposed to:	KS2 BOYS	KS2 GIRLS	Difference
Andrew Tate	29%	13%	-16%
Hatred against men/boys	31%	16%	-15%
Nudity	32%	16%	-16%
Images or videos shared without permission	26%	14%	-12%
Hatred against women/girls	31%	21%	-10%

'Andrew Tate content' are taken a proxy for similar such content and for the acceptance of misogyny and sexism more widely.

Being exposed to misogynistic views on social media, specifically 'AT content', was found to be clearly linked in children and young people with having significantly more harmful perceptions of relationships and greater tolerance of doing harm. Whilst this cannot be determined as a causal link, nevertheless, there are clearly significant links between this exposure and harmful perceptions of relationships, which demonstrates the influence of this kind of content.

Those who reported being exposed to 'AT content' on social media were significantly more likely to agree with all the statements that reflected unhealthy perceptions of relationships and harmful attitudes compared with those who had not seen his content. **Nearly a third (31%) of those exposed to 'AT content' agreed 'there should always be one more dominant person in a relationship', compared with 14% who had not seen this content.**

Harmful and potentially abusive behaviours associated with 'love bombing' were also perceived as more acceptable by CYP who had been exposed to 'AT content'. One in three (35%) people in this group believed that 'it is romantic for the person you're going out with to constantly buy you loads of gifts and randomly turn up everywhere you go', compared with 13% amongst CYP who were not exposed.

Finally, a significant difference was observed in the acceptability of physical violence amongst those exposed to 'AT content' and those not. **Almost a fifth (19%) of children and young people who had seen 'AT content' thought 'hurting someone physically is okay if you say sorry after hurting them' compared with just 4% of those not exposed.**

Exposure to 'AT content' also correlated with stereotypical beliefs around gender roles, with 61% of those exposed to AT content agreeing that 'women are naturally more caring in a relationship' compared to 52% of those not exposed. Over half (51%) of this group also associated the personality trait 'protector' with boys only, compared to 37% of those not exposed to 'AT content'. Meanwhile, 30% of CYP who had seen 'AT content' thought that the personality trait 'shy' should be associated only with girls, compared to 20%

31% of children exposed to misogynistic social media content



'there should always be one more dominant person in a relationship'

14% of children NOT exposed to misogynistic social media content



'Hurting someone physically is okay if you say sorry after hurting them'

Children and young people exposed to

misogynistic social media content

were almost

5 x **more likely**

to view hurting someone physically as **acceptable**

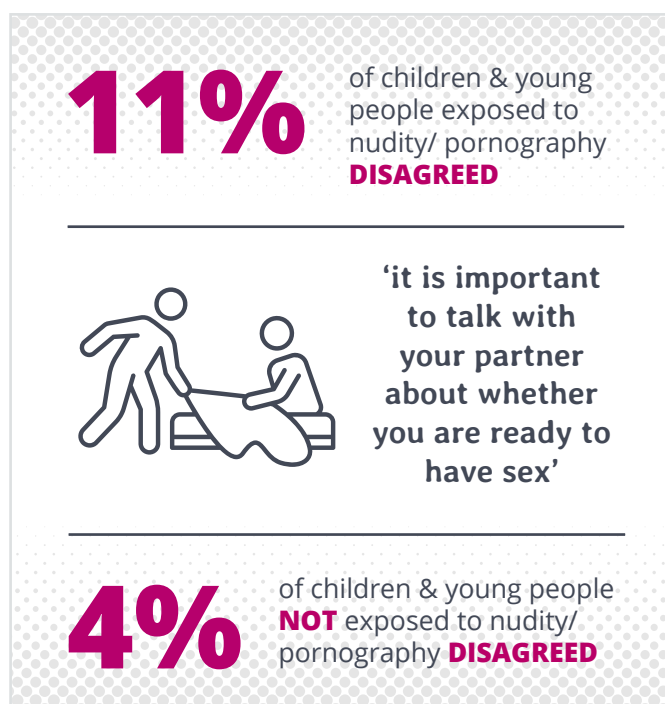
of those not exposed. In contrast, those who had not been exposed to 'AT content' were significantly more likely to associate all personality traits (apart from 'violent') with 'anyone'.

'Nudity/pornography' content

Participants were also more likely to agree with some of the unhealthy perceptions around relationships if they had been exposed to 'nudity/pornography'. Just under one in three (28%) of CYP who had been exposed to nudity/pornography agreed with the statement that 'someone you are going out with will break up with you if you don't kiss them when they want you to', compared with just 8% amongst those who had not been exposed.

Over half (51%) of those exposed to nudity/pornography agreed with the statement 'the most important thing in a relationship is to make your partner happy, no matter what', compared with 37% not exposed. **Similarly, 11% of those exposed to nudity/pornography disagreed that 'it is important to talk with your partner about whether you are ready to have sex' compared with just 4% of these who had not been exposed.**

These findings indicate the potentially significant impact of problematic dynamics within popular pornography, alongside a lack of effective education around sex and sexual relationships, which may be influencing how children and young people perceive and navigate these relationship dynamics in their own lives. Without adequate education on sex and sexual relationships, there is a risk that young people will 'learn' dynamics from the nudity/pornography that they see online and believe it is an accurate representation of sex. RSHE must be mindful of this and include specific information to dispel the myths around sex that CYP may have picked up from online pornography. As evidenced in this research, many CYP access pornography online before they meet the legal age requirements. RSHE must be mindful of challenges in discussing porn within this context. Furthermore, it supports the changes under the Online Safety Bill to include better age verification tools on porn websites to prevent children from accessing pornography.



'Hatred against women and girls' content

A similar pattern was observed for those exposed to content that included 'hatred against women and girls', compared with those who reported to not have seen this content. A particularly significant difference was found in response to the statement 'someone you are going out with will break up with you if you don't kiss them when they want you to', with 27% of those exposed to content involving 'hatred against women and girls' in agreement, compared with just 6% amongst those not exposed to this content.

This exposure also increased the acceptability of controlling behaviours, with 24% believing 'it is okay to tell the person you are going out with you what to wear, even if they are moody about it', in comparison to only 11% for those not exposed. A quarter of CYP (25%) who were exposed to 'hatred against women and girls' content agreed that 'men show their love through jealousy' compared with 17% not exposed.

Finally, personality traits were also more likely to be associated with one particular gender if CYP had been exposed to content that involved 'hatred against women and girls'. Just under half (48%) of those who had seen this content associated the personality trait 'protector' with boys only, 11% more than those not exposed.

4.2. Social media: 18-25-year-olds

The role of social media continued to be prevalent in shaping and changing perceptions and interests amongst the older group surveyed. Just under a third of respondents aged 18-25 thought that the content they had viewed on social media (31%) was a key reason for why their attitudes towards healthy relationships had changed.

To provide further insight into this, participants had space to give open text responses providing examples of social media content that they found influential. Interestingly, this qualitative data highlighted the *positive* impact that social media can have in expanding interests and changing attitudes. The findings indicated that young people found social media posts of people discussing their own experiences of overcoming unhealthy relationships, such as identifying red flags, especially influential.

Content that was influential included:

"Posts by people regarding their experience of assault within a relationship."



"Influencers who focus on women's rights and equality, as well as professionals who specialise in relationships."

"More open conversations about the experiences of people like me."



"Infographics describing how and why certain behaviours can be damaging - it gives you reassurance regarding your own experiences and also helps you reflect on your own behaviours in past relationships."



"Feminist communities on Twitter describing real life scenarios of mistreatment of women and girls."



"News stories of crimes against women such as the Sarah Everard case and the discussions held on social media."



"Seeing things that I would have previously just accepted being labelled as 'red flags' or signs of abuse, even if it's not just physical."



"People sharing things that they didn't realise were unhealthy at the time."



4.3. Other influences: 18-25-year-olds

The second survey aimed to understand to what extent the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions around relationships and gender dynamics can change over time, as well as wider interest in social issues related to violence against women and girls (VAWG) and domestic abuse and, crucially, what can influence this change.

Amongst young people surveyed, just under half (47%) reported a current interest in issues surrounding VAWG, with women significantly more likely to report interest (54%) than men (38%). Over half (51%) of the respondents who had an interest in issues surrounding VAWG, patriarchy, sexism and domestic abuse, reported that their interest increased during secondary school, with no gender variation. This indicates that secondary school is a key timeframe for organising interventions to influence young people and gain their interest in the issues surrounding RSE.

However, in comparison, a quarter of respondents (26%) reported that their interest in VAWG, patriarchy, sexism and domestic abuse was increased because of learning more about these issues in formal school education. This evidence suggests that, at least for some CYP, as they learn more about these areas in school, their interest increases. Whilst it is difficult to determine why this was not the case for other respondents without further investigation, it may be that the education they received on these subjects at the time was not engaging, or that they did not receive this education at all, and therefore did not directly affect their levels of interest.



Exposure from other media and the news

Respondents were asked to consider what influenced this change in interest whilst they were at secondary school. The most commonly reported reasons for increased interest in issues surrounding VAWG, patriarchy, sexism and domestic abuse were learning more about these issues through the news and other media (35%), as well as the content they had seen on

social media (35%). Just under a third (32%) of respondents selected that they found that exposure to these issues in TV and film during their time at secondary school increased their interest.

Furthermore, around a third (30%) of 18-25-year-old respondents thought that their attitude towards what a healthy relationship is changed as a result of learning more about the issue through the news and other media.

As shown through the qualitative statements around social media, high-profile cases in the news, such as the tragic murder of Sarah Everard, increased awareness around VAWG and begin more conversations around the issue.



Personal experiences and relationships

Personal experiences during secondary school were also commonly reported as reasons behind a change in level of interest in these topics during this time, which was noted more often for female respondents. One in five women noted a personal experience of sexual harassment (22%) and/or a personal experience of domestic abuse (19%), compared to 15% and 12% of men respectively.

Similarly, this pattern increased with age, as personal experiences or connections to sexual harassment and/or abuse continued to shape the interest of respondents in these topics during university.

Eight in ten (80%) respondents felt their beliefs around what a healthy relationship is had changed since being a child and growing into adulthood. Considering what they felt had influenced this change and using the same answer options as in previous questions, respondents most commonly reported that the direct experience of being in a relationship had changed their perception of what a healthy relationship was, with two in five (39%) selecting this reason.

Conclusion

Whilst current RSHE provision is going some of the way in equipping CYP with the skills and knowledge to navigate personal relationships, this research has shown that significant and concerning gaps remain unaddressed.

Awareness and understanding of topics and scenarios relating to consent and sexual harassment including 'unwanted touch' were particularly low, especially amongst younger children in KS2. This was also reflected amongst those who had left school, with almost a quarter of young people aged 18-25 (23%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement, 'you should always have consent from your partner to have sex when you are in a relationship'.

A third (35%) of 18-25-year-old survey respondents recalled no education around controlling behaviours throughout school, and behaviours exhibiting coercion and control in the survey scenarios were consistently not recognised as problematic both by children and young people surveyed. An understanding of the core, underpinning issues within domestic abuse has evidently been neglected in RSHE education over the past decade. This finding also correlates

with the Come Together Attitudes Survey, which showed how the concept of coercive control was not widely understood by respondents (Women's Aid, 2022).

Inadequate knowledge about unhealthy relationships may also translate into how young people may be hesitant to access support if needed. **Whilst 70% of CYP said that they would be likely to seek support if they were worried that domestic abuse was affecting them, six in ten of these were unsure (50%) or did not know where to go (11%) for this.**

Furthermore, some CYP held perceptions about relationships that were problematic, with attitudes that could be said to fall into gender stereotypes and to perpetuate unequal power dynamics. Moreover, this report has shown the direct correlation between certain social media content and these perceptions and attitudes, suggesting their influence. A strong correlation was identified between potentially harmful social media content and unhealthy perceptions about relationships. Whilst it cannot be determined from this research whether this is correlation or causation and if this content is accessed because of participants'



existing views, or if participants hold these views as a result of the content they have been accessing, nevertheless a clear relationship exists.

Children and young people who reported being exposed to misogynistic content on social media were significantly more likely to agree with all the statements that reflected unhealthy perceptions of relationships compared with those who had not seen this content. In particular, those exposed to misogynistic content were more likely to think there should be a more dominant person in relationship and also viewed hurting someone physically as more acceptable.

However, at the same time, this research found that CYP are also viewing content that is considered 'positive', and participants in the survey with young adults (18-25-years-old) highlighted the powerful effect that positive social media content can have on shaping attitudes and increasing knowledge on issues related to VAWG, domestic abuse and patriarchy. If the VAWG sector can build on this and showcase this type of content, for example, about overcoming unhealthy relationships, identifying red-flags, or signposting where to go for support if someone has treated you badly, this could have a significant impact and build confidence.

To live up to the potential positive impact that RSE can have in preventing domestic abuse and VAWG, a number of changes are necessary. The 2023 UK Government review of Guidance around RSHE presents an opportunity to adapt how we respond to these issues, with the clear need for a revised curriculum that takes a gendered lens, and lessons which challenge misogyny and gendered stereotypes.

One in three women surveyed found that the RSHE they had in school was rushed and awkward, and one in four women felt that the education had no understanding of pre-existing trauma. Having sensitivity to past experiences and potentially trauma, as well as pre-existing beliefs, is critical to ensuring CYP feel safe, empowered and remain engaged.

Beginning education on relationships at primary school is an important starting point, but to ensure that messaging is holistic, it must be consistent and engaging at multiple levels, including outside of the formal classroom. The social media 'vacuum' that can occur when narrowing algorithms repeatedly suggest increasingly harmful content can lead viewers of that content to think that those viewpoints are much more prevalent or acceptable than they are. Both surveys in this research have shown that most people, broadly speaking, hold positive and healthy views on relationships and gender dynamics. Greater support for sites of learning outside of social media platforms, such as through parents and community groups, can bring people together outside of narrow online spaces and reflect more positive, real-life perspectives. Together with supporting children to think critically, both of what they see on social media and challenging their peers if they hear harmful comments, alongside online platforms being held accountable for preventing and tackling VAWG, we can begin to tackle the influence of harmful content on social media.

Children and young people have told us how and in what form they would like to learn about these topics, and the older group surveyed have highlighted the ways in which this could be done successfully, or unsuccessfully. It is now time that we listen to them.

Support and information from Women's Aid

If you have been affected by any of the issues or topics that this report mentioned and you would like to access further support, some links are included below.

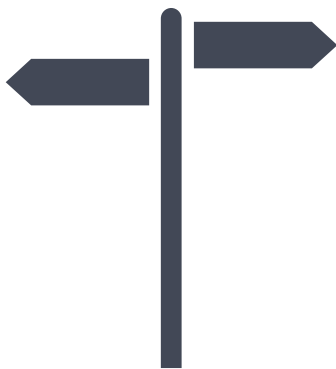
Expect Respect

Expect Respect is our schools delivery program working with teachers and students aged 4-18. We deliver training covering topics including gender stereotypes, domestic abuse, and healthy relationships as part of a whole school approach. If you'd like to find out more or book in an introductory session with our Children and Young People training team, contact cyp@womensaid.org.uk

Love Respect

Love Respect is a dedicated Women's Aid website for young people in their first relationships, which gives information on what a healthy and an unhealthy relationship is, so children and young people can spot the signs.

▶ loverspect.co.uk



Further support

If you're not sure if your relationship is healthy or you're worried about a friend or family member, we're here for help and support. You can talk to fully trained female support workers by email or Live Chat, connect with others with similar experiences on Survivors' Forum, or find resources in the Survivors' Handbook.

▶ www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support



Recommendations

The Department for Education's current review of RSHE Guidance must be informed by experts.

- ▶ The findings and recommendations in this research, as well as other expertise and experience in the VAWG sector should feed into the review.
- ▶ Stakeholders working on the review should engage with and be advised by VAWG sector experts.

RSHE should be designed based on an understanding of gender inequality, with sensitivity to preexisting experiences and beliefs.

The **Department for Education** must ensure that Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE):

- ▶ gives participants an understanding of how gender inequality and resulting power dynamics underpin domestic abuse and VAWG and challenges harmful gendered social norms which contribute to this inequality;
 - ▶ takes an intersectional approach to understanding gendered social norms and represents a variety of experiences, showing how they can relate to the unequal power dynamics at the heart of domestic abuse;
 - ▶ is delivered by **VAWG experts**, or teachers who have had specialist training from VAWG organisations, including 'by and for' organisations who can ensure that lessons are tailored to specific groups of CYP; and
 - ▶ is **sensitive to the preexisting beliefs** of students, with particular attention to how these beliefs may be gendered and may differ between boys and girls, to ensure that all CYP feel safe and remain engaged. Furthermore, **awareness of pre-existing experiences and trauma** is essential to make sure CYP feel safe and empowered in their learning, without judgement.
-

RSHE should begin early and be holistic, following a 'whole school' approach.

The **Department for Education** and the **Home Office** should provide specific resources:

- ▶ for parents on how to navigate conversations about relationships with CYP. This is essential to ensuring CYP receive consistent, holistic messaging and parents feel confident and empowered to have potentially challenging conversations; and
- ▶ for community groups which interact with children and young people to continue to provide this holistic messaging and keep CYP engaged. This needs to be combined with appropriate training from experts to ensure groups are equipped to have conversations about healthy relationships.

Schools must ensure that:

- ▶ education on healthy relationships must **begin from primary school** to address the harm already occurring, ensure that children grow up with healthy expectations about relationships, and free from socially ascribed gender roles; .
- ▶ changing attitudes goes beyond lessons alone and RHSE must be delivered as part of a **'whole school' approach**⁶ to preventing and tackling VAWG; and
- ▶ they have clear policies in place around potential disclosures from CYP which include appropriate safeguarding measures and clear point of contact.

Counter-messaging should be positive, centring on empowerment.

- ▶ When developing policies for RSHE, **schools** must ensure that **messaging is positive and promotes confidence and empowerment** in order to engage and support CYP, emphasising their rights as individuals. By highlighting the positive benefits of healthy relationships between equal partners, free from the constraints of socially ascribed gender roles, CYP are more likely to feel engaged rather than resistant.

The **Department for Culture, Media & Sport** must:

- ▶ work with stakeholders, including specialist domestic abuse organisations like Women's Aid, to ensure online spaces are safe and have the power to provide a **positive counter message to online misogyny** and challenge harmful viewpoints.

⁶ EVAW defines this as an approach that "addresses the needs of pupils, staff and the wider community across the entire school environment, from the curriculum or learning environment to addressing the school's physical environment and what actions are taken to prevent VAWG and ensure safety for both students and staff" (EVAW, 2015, p. 10).

Children and young people should be taught to think critically and influence their algorithm, and online platforms held accountable for preventing and tackling VAWG.

The **Department for Education** must ensure that:

- ▶ education includes **teaching critical thinking** to recognise when something is potentially harmful and give CYP the confidence and empowerment to engage and disagree with it. This should also be incorporated into relevant government guidance to schools.⁷

Schools should encourage:

- ▶ the development of positive **peer relations** to ensure that these discussions, especially in relation to sex, are respectful and helpful for children, offering support to each other and challenging stereotypes or myths, rather than reinforcing them.

The **Department for Culture, Media & Sport** must ensure that:

- ▶ social media companies and online platforms are held **accountable** for preventing and tackling VAWG online.
- ▶ Ofcom's forthcoming guidance, required through the Online Safety Bill, must be developed with specialist VAWG organisations and cover the full range of measures online platforms can take – from 'designing out' opportunities for abuse and harm, to establishing simpler and more effective reporting procedures.
- ▶ robust accountability mechanisms are established to ensure social media companies and online platforms adhere to the above guidance, developed in collaboration with the expertise of organisations working in VAWG.

⁷ For example, the Department for Education Guidance on Teaching online safety in schools: www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-online-safety-in-schools/teaching-online-safety-in-schools



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