

YOUTH REALITIES

The Prominence of Abuse within Teenage Relationships

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The newest members of the Youth Realities research team who have demonstrated incredible dedication and have not only challenged themselves but also one another.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the prominence of teenage relationship abuse (TRA), which we consider to be an extremely pressing issue within society. Unfortunately, the urgency with which this issue should be addressed is not reflected in the investment into support for the young people affected, or the infrastructure and resources for statutory bodies, charities and grassroots organisations working with the young people affected.

TRA refers to several forms of abuse that occur within the relationships of young people aged between 13 to 25 years old. For the purpose of this research, participants were aged between 18 to 25 years old, but reflected on their experiences of teenage relationship abuse from age 13 to 25.

The questionnaire elicited 320 responses, which was reduced to 303 during the screening stage, due to incomplete surveys. This was a structured survey which was distributed online through Google Forms, and advertised across multiple social media platforms. Hard copies were made available and distributed throughout various communities, such as educational institutions and workplaces.

Overview of findings

- 37% of participants had experienced abuse in a teenage relationship, and a further 37% of those stated that the abuse began prior to the age of 18 – **this finding shockingly equates to more than 1/3 young people**
- Worryingly, 55% disclosed that this abuse had a significant impact on their employment and/or education.
- 204 participants that answered the optional survey questions, 68% reported that they did not seek support for the abuse they were experiencing from their family, friends or professional services.
- 47% of participants have been verbally abused by their partner whilst in a relationship and 41% stated that they had been the subject of sexual abuse by their partners

Introduction

Although TRA has been a tenacious issue within UK social policy of late, as an area of study it has been very under researched (Barter, 2009). Abuse within relationships has materialised into an eminent social and public health issue in recent years however, much of this research has been focused around abuse suffered within adult years, neglecting the abuse which occurs in the adolescent stage of one's life (Chung, 2005).

Studies have shown that for most adolescents, the relationships which are established during this stage of life create a platform for healthy development later in life. However, as this issue is under researched, we still do not know much in relation to how teenagers understand TRA or their personal experience of it and involvement in it. The negative impact that TRA can have on an individual's health and future relationships, highlights the importance of on-going research (Barter, 2009; Barter et al 2009; Lyons and Rabie, 2014).

Other research has found that victims of TRA suffer from the effects of the abuse long after the period of abuse has stopped. The victims who have suffered such abuse have been noted to display life threatening behaviours which can include but are not limited to, depression and self-harm. In addition to this, there is an increased risk that victims will experience domestic abuse later on in life or become abusive in future relationships (Woman's Aid, 2009; Sutherland, 2011; Darlington Needs Assessment Board, 2016).

The purpose of this report is to produce an easy to understand piece of primary research to highlight how young people themselves perceive the issue of abuse within teenage relationships. This includes first hand anecdotes of the abuse that some participants have experienced and the detrimental effects that these acts of abuse have had on individuals.

The authors recommend that social policy calls for the implementation of a more rigid structure within schools in relation to educating both young people as well as staff on TRA. We believe that by increasing the awareness and understanding of TRA, we can minimise the stigma associated with this issue in society.

Method

Participants

The population of interest for this research were young adults aged between 18 and 25, residing in the United Kingdom. There were 303 valid responses in total, comprising of 75.8% Female ($N = 229$) and 23.5% Male ($N = 71$) participants ($N = 3$ prefer not to disclose gender). Prior screening (to match the appropriate age range of 18-25), the number of participants was 320. Due to time constraints, convenience sampling was used, as it was the most efficient method of sampling.

Materials

‘The Prominence of Abuse within Teenage Relationships’ questionnaire, which consisted of two screening questions (age and gender), seven questions with yes/no responses (relating to being victim to an abusive relationship), and an optional section including two questions (relevant to the impact of experiencing abuse) and additional information (written personal comments).

Design

Structured Questionnaire - with a combination of closed and open ended questions.

Procedure

Following a general group discussion, ‘The Prominence of Abuse within Teenage Relationships’ questionnaire was constructed and made available online through Google Docs, in addition to hard copy formats. The Youth Realities research team proactively sought out participants, printed hard copies of the questionnaire and distributed them to individuals in universities, local communities, workplaces, accommodation, etc. Additionally, the issue of TRA was shared across social media, with a link to the survey being provided, urging young people to take part in this important area of research. Participants were thanked for their time and contribution.

There were no motivational rewards involved, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Complying with ethical guidelines, no psychological and/or physical harm was caused to the participants and the researchers ensured that individuals were comfortable enough to take part in the survey as it was of a personal nature.

Informed consent and information on the purpose of the research were

given. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any given time. Participants remained anonymous and their data were treated as confidential. Contact details were provided in case of any queries or doubts, in addition to further resources to support services.

Results

The research revealed that more than half of the participants were restricted from socialising with people that are important to them while in a relationship. 37.2% ($N = 106$) reported to being prevented from socialising when in a relationship, 14.0% ($N = 40$) reported that they were prevented from socialising on some occasions.

Furthermore, 39.6% ($N = 113$) of 18-25 year olds stated that someone who they've dated made them feel insecure about themselves with nasty comments. Another 7.0% ($N = 20$) experienced this from time to time.

There have also been 41.4% ($N = 118$) of participants have been pressured into partaking in sexual acts, when they didn't want to. Physical aggression and intimidation by a partner was noted by 29.1% ($N = 83$) of survey participants.

16.2 % ($N = 46$) reported that their partner attempted to or has taken control of their finances, to the detriment of the persons freedom.

Additionally, 36.9% ($N = 105$) said they have been in an abusive or partially abusive relationship as either the victim or the abusive partner. Of the 105 participants that reported being in an abusive relationship 37.3% ($N = 53$) stated the abuse they experienced began before they turned 18 years old.

Moreover, 67.6% ($N = 138$) did not seek any support from friends, family or other services, 18.1% ($N = 37$) sought support, 13.2% ($N = 27$) reported to seek for support on some occasions.

Finally, more than half of the participants (55.3%; $N = 110$) reported that the abuse they encountered had an impact on their employment and/or education.

Discussion

This research has not only outlined the prominence of TRA, but has also highlighted continued stigma in relation to this issue. Although participants were willing to acknowledge different forms of abuse that took place within their relationship, fewer identified themselves as being in an ‘abusive relationship’.

This is evident through results expressly showing 46.6% of respondents stated they have dated someone verbally abusive, and 41.4% stating they experienced sexual abuse by a partner, however, merely 36.9% said they think they have been in an abusive relationship. The lack of correlation on this part could be due to lack of education as well as individuals avoiding placing a label on their trauma, possibly due to TRA, and domestic abuse in general, remaining a socially taboo topic. Education is vital for helping young people understand the trauma they, or another may be experiencing, have or could experience. Compulsory healthy relationship education, or TRA as a specific focus, is not currently a significant part of our national curriculum. Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) is taught under Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, and is currently statutory in maintained secondary schools; not including academies or Pupil Referral Units.

The need for healthy relationships education was made evident when an astonishing 85.3% of 206 young people aged between 13-18 stated that they now know more about domestic abuse (intimate partner abuse/ teenage relationship abuse) after we delivered an educational workshop in their school. Reflective Arts expressly explores the impact of and solutions to teenage relationship abuse, through the use of arts. A worrying 55.3% of 199 respondents said their abuse impacted their education and/or employment, which displays the fundamental need for further focus and investment of resources and infrastructure to support this detrimental epidemic.

Throughout this research, we were on a strict and tight time schedule, as well as limitations with the age range of participants. Initially, the questionnaire was to be aimed at individuals aged between 15-25. For the purpose of safeguarding, consent, and the time period we had, we had to shift our focus to those only aged above 18, and capable of providing their own consent. This was unfortunate, but

manageable, and still concluded with very valuable results to accurately account for the seriousness of teenage relationship abuse.

We intend to continue this research on a larger scale, as it is paramount to highlighting the need for investment of resources and infrastructure into providing support for victims of teenage relationship abuse. With the appropriate allocation of funding, we can extend the research to reach a younger audience, following the correct safeguarding procedures and with accessible support available to those who disclose sensitive information, to ensure they are supported consistently and safely.

Some of the respondents disclosed some of their experiences of teenage relationship abuse, a chilling and powerful element of the research. One respondent outlined how their abuser “would emotionally manipulate me... saying I had to do it because it was love. Physically assault me in covered areas as punishment, he would take my bank card... make sure I didn’t do things without him”. Multiple respondents outlined their experiences with emotional and psychological abuse, many accounts of “shouting” and “being controlled”, as well as belittled and made to feel “small/worthless”. Some of the anecdotes were worrying for reasons other than the content entailed horrific tales of abuse, some entailed much ignorance and denial. One respondent stated, “I still beg the question whether it was abuse or not? Or whether it was intentional?”.

It is crucial that there is sufficient transparency and clarity amongst our academic system, educators and students regarding the topic of abuse. Young people must understand precisely what abuse is, and what behaviours and characteristics amount to abuse. Ignorance is dangerous and avoidable; and our government owe young people the chance to equip themselves physically and emotionally for their future relationships.

Recommendations

This report recommends the following:

- The implementation of education regarding recognising signs and symptoms of teenage relationship abuse from both victim and perpetrator perspectives. This should take place in all educational and community settings across the country.
- Allocation of resources to localised groups supporting their infrastructure to deliver long-term ground work for young people impacted by teenage relationship abuse in communities.
- Training be provided for all professionals working with young people, including academics, health specialists and youth practitioners, in relation to the impact of teenage relationship abuse.

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