Teenage Relationship Abuse

Introduction

Relationship abuse can happen to young people and adults in any relationship, including heterosexual and same-sex relationships. It may be overlooked because some young people do not recognise coercive, controlling or harmful behaviour as abuse, and adults may underestimate the seriousness of teenage relationships. Although these relationships may be brief, they can be intense and have a significant impact. Practitioners should remain alert to signs of abuse and respond in a supportive, curious and safeguarding-focused way.



Further Information

- An interview with Dr Christine Barter: Abuse in young people's relationships
- Supporting Young People in abusive relationships animation
- Brook: Guide for parents

What does legislation say?

While the statutory definition of domestic abuse applies to those aged 16 and over, abusive behaviour in younger teenage relationships should still be recognised as a safeguarding concern and responded to through child protection procedures. Young people aged 16–18 should be supported through domestic abuse pathways, with consideration of MARAC referral where appropriate.

What can I do?

If a young person tells you they are experiencing abuse, listen calmly, reassure them they have done the right thing by telling you, and make clear that what has happened is not their fault. Practitioners should avoid assumptions about who may be experiencing or causing harm and should ask open, sensitive questions. Explain what will happen next, record the information accurately, and share concerns in line with safeguarding procedures. In Warwickshire, contact Family Connect on 01926 414144 to report safeguarding concerns.

What are the warning signs?

Abuse in young people's relationships can include physical violence, coercive control, pressure to have sex or perform sexual acts, financial manipulation, online harassment, stalking, and abuse through phones or social media. Practitioners should be alert to changes in a young person's behaviour, presentation or emotional wellbeing, including increased anxiety, withdrawal, isolation, fearfulness, self-blame or becoming more self-critical.

What else do I need to consider?

Young people's experiences of abuse and help-seeking can be shaped by identity, culture, disability, family circumstances and previous trauma. LGBTQ+ young people may experience additional barriers to seeking help, and some young people may fear judgement, disbelief or consequences if they disclose. Responses should be inclusive, sensitive and proportionate, with the young person's safety and voice at the centre. Parents and carers may also need guidance to support safe, healthy communication and relationships.

Who may be at risk?

Abuse can happen in any young person's relationship, regardless of gender, sexuality or relationship type. This includes same-sex relationships. Some young people may face additional vulnerability, including those with experience of care, exploitation, substance use, neglect, parental domestic abuse, or living independently without consistent support. Practitioners should also consider how gender, sexuality, culture and disability may affect risk, disclosure and access to support.

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