

How to prevent abuse in teenage relationships

9 February 2018, by Nicola Bowes And Karen De Claire



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The UK has made [some positive shifts](#) in legislating against intimate partner violence among adults in recent years. However, physical, psychological and sexual violence in teenage relationships is still a very real problem.

A [recent study of young people](#) – aged 15 to 18 years old – in relationships in the UK and Spain, found that 21 percent experience serious victimisation by partners (an example given was one partner slamming the other into a wall). A further 30.1 percent meanwhile are subject to mild aggression including pushing, grabbing or shoving.

Across Europe there are similar findings. 42 percent of young women and 39 percent of young men (aged 16 to 17-years-old) [experience physical violence](#). And a Portuguese study has revealed that 31 percent of girls age 15 to 16-years-old [experience sexual violence](#) in relationships.

Psychological victimisation – including hostile attitudes, intimidation or restrictive control – is the most prevalent type of [relationship violence](#) that young people (aged 14-20) experience. Some studies report rates as high as [94 percent of girls and 93 percent of boys](#).

Ending the violence

Having positive peer relationships during adolescence has been shown to be one of [the most important things](#) for teenagers' well being, health, school attendance and achievement, and self-esteem. Lack of peer relationships, loneliness, or negative [peer relationships](#) have a hugely negative affect on [those same things](#).

Our teenage years are when we develop the skills we need to form, maintain and enjoy healthy relationships. Adolescence is a time to fall in love, to have our hearts broken and learn how to mend them again. It's the time when our peer group is most important to us. We rely on them to help us through that roller coaster journey and we support our friends as they ride the same.

But if that journey is marked by violence, it can potentially take years for the victim to recover from what they have experienced. So how can we get teenagers to see that either acting violent or suffering under it is a problem?

Some researchers have suggested a [focus on changing attitudes](#) to things like traditional gender-related roles and myths about them – for example, that women can't do certain jobs or roles at work or home – but it has [not been proved](#) that addressing these issues might reduce violence in young people's relationships.

Light ahead

We are working on a project that takes a new approach to teenage [relationship violence](#). Rather than simply educating or trying to change attitudes, our method draws on the assets that young people already have, to help them identify their own problems and develop their relationship skills.

One [review of the research](#) suggested that school projects are more successful at preventing violence in relationships when they involve participation (using drama). That is as well as addressing factors

such as gender equality, healthy relationships and non-violent conflict resolution. It has [also been suggested](#) that specific training for young people to improve skills such as communication, negotiation and conflict resolution may also be helpful.

Provided by The Conversation

So our EU-funded project puts these ideas into practice. We are working with teenagers aged between 13 and 15 at schools in six European countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Poland, UK). Our aim is to help them identify, share and strengthen their positive assets and relationship skills by using drama, film and peer learning.

Many projects in the area of teenage dating violence focus on [deficits and risk factors](#) – such as [trauma or a disadvantaged family life](#) – that may be implicated in the violence. But [Lights 4 Violence](#) uses a different approach, focusing on individual strengths such as assertiveness, pro-social problem solving, as well as the attributes individuals can rely on within their families, peer groups and school.

The teenagers will learn about communicating their feelings, recognising the feelings of others – and develop assertiveness skills to address and resolve conflict in their relationships. In addition, teachers will be equipped with the skills to help the young people empower and protect themselves from abusive relationships.

It is hugely important that schools are not only supported in stopping teenage relationship [violence](#), but also given the right methods to do it – and that is why we are taking this new approach. Simply talking to teens won't work – and we hope that our project will prepare the [young people](#) participating to engage in and enjoy positive, [healthy relationships](#).

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