

**Christine Barter, NSPCC Senior Research Fellow at the School for Policy Studies,  
University of Bristol**

**Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships  
- Results from current UK Research**

*Are you his princess one minute and a stupid bitch the next?  
Does he tell you you're pretty? Pretty ugly. Pretty stupid. Pretty frigid.  
Does he think you're fit? Fit for a beating.  
This is abuse. You don't have to stand for it.*

*Do you make your girlfriend weak at the knees ....because she's scared of you?  
Does her heart beat faster when you threaten her?  
Do you charm the pants off her, or does a slap work better?  
This is abuse stop yourself*

*Does your boyfriend tell you you're pretty? Pretty ugly, pretty stupid, pretty frigid.  
Are you his princess one minute and a stupid bitch the next?  
Did he steal your heart and then crush your confidence?  
This is abuse. You don't have to stand for it.*

*Are you a dream boyfriend by day and a control freak by night?  
Are you the only boy for her because you don't let her talk to anyone else?  
Do you make her weak at the knees, because she's scared of you?  
This is abuse stop yourself.*

These advertisements form part of a recent Governmental £2 million pound media public awareness campaign on teenage relationship violence which was commissioned following the publication of our research findings on teenage partner violence. The study's findings received unprecedented, well at least for us, media and policy attention. This interest and concern related to the level of violence which our study uncovered and the impact of this on young people's, and especially girls, lives and wellbeing. This was the first UK wide research, spanning England, Scotland and Wales, to look at this problem and I am delighted to come to Stuttgart today to speak about this study and to look at some of the messages it holds for research and intervention in other European countries.

Hopefully my presentation today will provide some clarity about the facts concerning young people's experiences of teenage partner violence and also challenge some of the misconceptions associated with this form of violence.

Previously no UK wide evidence on incidence rates existed. In the UK we had little understanding of how much of a problem this was for young people and what risk

factors underpinned young people's victimisation and instigation. In contrast, in the United States a great deal of research on 'dating violence' has been undertaken over the past two decades – although we cannot simply transfer this evidence to our European context. We can though ensure we don't replicate the same mistakes they have made.

Some recent research on relationship violence has been undertaken in European countries, this is still very much in its infancy. However, this means that we have the opportunity to ensure that a body of European evidence is developed which enables us to make meaningful comparisons across European countries to understand how young people's experiences of intimate partner violence differ both within each country and also between different countries. This is an opportunity not to be missed.

### **Definitions and meanings**

Violence is itself a disputed concept. In this presentation I will use a wide definition of violence which incorporates physical, sexual, emotional and verbal forms of violence. In our study we did not impose a pre-determined hierarchy of harm in which, for example, physical violence is given priority above other forms. This reflects children's and young people's own evaluations where non-physical forms of violence can be seen as damaging as violence involving physical force. This is illustrated by the following quote from Fiona aged 14 who was interviewed for an earlier research project I undertook with colleagues on peer violence in residential children's homes:

*Fiona stated: 'Having names called is worse... because it hurts you more...if you have a fight...the pain goes and it heals, but having being called whatever is always at the back of your head.'*(Fiona, aged 14, quoted from Barter et al 2004, p29)

I would like to say a little about the use of terminology. Most of the US, and indeed wider international, literature has adopted the term 'dating violence' to describe this area of work. However, this terminology does not transfer well to the UK or European context, as young people do not use, or indeed recognise, this term.

In addition, 'dating' seems to imply a degree of formality which does not necessarily reflect the diverse range of young people's intimate encounters and relationships. In our study when we asked young people about the term date many felt it was something adults went on - involving the giving of flowers and chocolates - most young people stated this didn't happen with them.

Furthermore, young people we spoke to perceive the term 'domestic violence' to be something which relates to their parents rather than to themselves. Young people decided that the term 'partner violence' seemed more appropriate as a partner could be long-term or just for the night, although we acknowledge this also has some limitations.

A 'partner' was defined in our research as any young person with whom they had been intimate; ranging from a serious long-term boyfriend or girlfriend, to a more casual partner or a one-off encounter. Importantly, terminology is not simply an interesting academic exercise as, unless appropriate definitions are used by professionals, young people may not perceive intervention as being relevant to them or their particular circumstances.

### **Background to Previous Research**

The majority of US and other international studies have used large-scale surveys to investigate the incidence or prevalence rates for teenage partner violence, often across different sample communities. This body of research has testified both to its high prevalence within teenage relationships and its serious consequences for the well-being of victims and their future life prospects. US research has also identified that teenage partner violence is associated with a range of adverse outcomes for young people, including mental health, depression and suicide. In addition, some studies indicate that adolescent partner violence is strongly associated with experiencing domestic violence in adulthood.

However this survey-dominated approach has meant that young people's own experiences, views and agency has largely been neglected. In addition, US research has largely focused on physical or sexual partner violence, although psychological and coercive control mechanisms have now begun to be explored.

The small number of UK and wider European studies, undertaken in a range of countries including Spain, Italy, Netherlands and Belgium, confirm the seriousness of teenage partner violence for young people's welfare. It is however surprising given the critical nature of adolescence as a developmental period, and the amount of research on adult experiences of domestic violence across Europe, that so little attention has been paid to this form of intimate partner violence.

However, at least in the UK, other forms of children's and young people's violence, and anti-social behaviour have received extensive attention. Violence between children and young people is a complex and controversial area and one where media-fuelled trepidation about the epidemic of violent children has come to dominate UK and US public perceptions and debate.

Adolescents are often demonised, and a climate of moral panics has emerged in which society is seen as being in need of protection from deviant and out-of-control youth rather than these young people being seen as in need of protection in respect to their own welfare.

I do not want our research, or research from European colleagues, to further add to this demonisation of our young people. It is imperative to remember, when looking at some of the stark figures contained in our study, that two decades of International research has clearly identified adult domestic violence as a profound social problem – intimate violence is therefore not an issue associated with out-of-control delinquent youths, or something which shows how the young of today are more violent than we were, but a reflection of a much more ingrained and wider problem concerning the tolerance and presence of intimate violence - in whatever guise it takes - in all societies.

We should however ask why some countries, including the UK and US, have so readily embraced such harmful depictions of their young, whilst other European countries question what their society has done to fail their children and how this can be amended?

In the UK some commentators have argued for a similar European approach to be adopted. Maggie Atkinson, the Children’s Commissioner for England, recently stated that serious reconsideration should be given to how other European countries’ methods of dealing with youth violence that are ‘more therapeutic, more family- and community-based, more about reparation than simply locking someone-up’ - which unfortunately has been the prevailing UK response to youth delinquency without addressing the reasons, including societal factors, which may underpin such actions. In this context colleagues here are in a much more strengthened position to respond to young people’s instigation of relationship violence than we are in the UK.

The UK has however begun to respond to the problem of teenage partner violence in a more balanced through the media awareness campaign, although evaluations of its impact have still be released and in recent child welfare guidance which now strengthens the need for child welfare professions to respond to this form of violence – although how this will be implemented in schools, social work practice and wider children’s services is unknown.

In addition a range of school initiatives have been undertaken, mostly through the voluntary sector, and we await evaluations of their short-term and long-term impact. The lack of robust evaluations has hampered the effective development of initiatives

in this area – which is why the Heartbeat project is so important in developing our understanding of what works in prevention and intervention.

So having spent some time setting the scene I would now like to focus on the research we undertook in the UK.

The research was undertaken by the University of Bristol and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the largest children’s welfare charity in the England and Wales. It was funded by the Big Lottery Fund and the team consisted of the following members (Melanie McCarry, Kathy Evans, David Berridge and Annabel Lander).

### **Research aims**

The research aim was to measure the incidence of partner violence and to explore with young people their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual forms of partner violence, including their coping strategies and views on intervention.

The more specific aims included exploring:

- the nature, impact, frequency and dynamics of different forms of partner violence
- whether any groups were particularly vulnerable to becoming victims and/or assailants
- the wider social processes and structures which underpin such violence.

### **Methodology**

The study used a multi-method approach. A confidential survey was completed by 1,353 young people, roughly the same number of girls and boys, aged between 13 and 17 years-old, from eight schools in England, Scotland and Wales. A total of 91 in-depth interviews were undertaken with 62 girls and 29 boys.

### **Findings on teenage relationships**

Before we look at violence in teenage relationships it is important to understand more about the relationships themselves and the wider factors which influenced young people’s experiences in this area of their lives. Overall 88 per cent of young people responding to the survey ported some form of an intimate relationship. However, a lower percentage of south Asian participants reported a relationship experience compared to all other groups.

Girls’ partners were generally older, and just over one in 10 had a ‘much older’ partner. Although we did not ask in the survey what ‘much-older’ constituted, within the interviews girls spoke about an age-gap of around two or more years as constituting a ‘much-older’ partner – the serious implications of this for girl’s safety

will be addressed later in the presentation. Boys’ partners had been either the same age or slightly younger. 50 young people stated they had a same-sex partner.

### **Family Violence**

We asked young people if they had experienced any family violence: overall nearly a third of girls and 16 per cent of boys reported some form of violence towards themselves or another adult in their family. Comparing family violence to relationship experiences, we found that young people who reported family violence were more likely to have experienced an intimate relationship, and more likely to have experienced one at an earlier age than young people with no family violence. This may be due to young people seeking to compensate for their negative family experiences through forming external intimate relationships or, more pragmatically, it may be due to young people wanting to remove themselves physically from their family situations by entering a relationship at an early age. Additionally, girls with a history of family violence had an increased likelihood of having a much-older partner.

So how big a problem is partner violence in the lives of UK young people?

### **Physical partner violence**

Looking first at physical partner violence, we asked have any of your partner’s ever used physical force such as: punching slapping, hitting, or holding you down. And then young people were asked if they had experienced more severe force such as punching, strangling, beating you up, hit with an object?

Survey participants self-defined which level of violence they had experienced. We then combined these responses to give an over-all measure of physical violence.

The survey found that a quarter of girls and 18 per cent of boys, who reported a relationship, experienced some form of physical partner violence. Disconcertingly, one in nine girls (but only four per cent of boys) reported *severe* physical violence.

The incidence rates for physical violence we found are comparable to those found within US studies, where between a third and a half, both of female and male teenage respondents, report physical aggression. However, our findings also reflect previous research which has clearly demonstrated that girls generally suffer more severe forms of physical violence than do boys.

Given the some what similar incidence rates for girls and boys some US commentators have argued that boys and girls experience similar levels of physical

violence from their partners. This has led to propositions that teenage partner violence demonstrates a greater degree of gender symmetry compared to adult domestic violence, where women are predominantly the victim. However, as demonstrated in both our survey and in-depth interview findings, once *impact* is acknowledged, the gender-symmetry contention becomes less plausible – as we shall now see.

We asked young people in the survey to report the subjective impact of the violence they experienced and we then ranked their responses into no impact or negative impact. No Impact was defined as feeling loved or protected; having effect or thought it was funny. A negative impact included feeling scared/frightened upset/unhappy angry/annoyed or humiliated.

As can be clearly seen it is only when incidence rates are looked at alongside impact that a comprehensive understanding of partner violence can emerge. Three-quarters of girls compared to 14 per cent of boys stated that the physical violence had negatively impacted on their welfare. Girls more often stated that the violence made them feel scared /frightened and upset/unhappy. This is illustrated by the following quote from Kelly:

*He raised his fist to hit me...and I was thinking ...I know it sounds stupid but...I felt as if I deserved it, but I was scared.*

The interviewer asks Amy:

*Int: Did you think that Joel loved you?*

*Amy: At one point.*

*Int: At one point, did it stop feeling like love at some point?*

*Amy: Yeah. When he started hitting me and beating me up... I was really really scary....*

However, boys' evaluations concerning the impact of physical partner violence, both in the survey and interviews, were very different. In all sources of data, boys strongly argued that they viewed girls' use of violence against them as amusing, sometimes annoying, but none reported a negative emotional effect.

*Callum: She tried to batter me but I'm too strong...it's nothing... just a laugh.*

Callum's response was typical of the boys' reaction to their girlfriends' attempts at violence. It could be argued that due to pressures to portray a certain form of non-

emotional form of masculinity, boys found it especially difficult to acknowledge their vulnerability to victimisation and the negative impact this may entail. The interview data showed little evidence to support a 'hidden impact' theory. Boys were able to voice their vulnerabilities in other areas of their lives, but continued to state that in respect to their partner's use of violence they felt no effect, except at most annoyance, or felt that it was funny. Most just ignored it or retaliated – often with much greater force.

Thus, when incidence rates for physical violence are contextualised by impact, it is clear that for girls physical violence from a partner represents a significant social problem which negatively affects their well-being. This is not the case for boys. In addition, the interview findings show how, for girls physical and sexual violence are intrinsically linked. In many accounts, girls' first experience of physical violence often occurred due to their refusal to undertake certain sexual acts. As Sian states

*I only went out with him for a week. And then ... 'cos I didn't want to do what he wanted to [have sexual intercourse] he just started... picking on me and hitting me*

I will now look at young people's experiences of sexual violence before focusing on emotional forms of exploitation and control.

### **Sexual partner violence**

Previous findings concerning sexual coercion and violence in teenage relationships have found disparate incidence rates, ranging from 4 per cent to as high as 78 per cent. This wide variation reflects, in part, a definitional problem of what constitutes sexually aggressive acts. However, what nearly all studies consistently show, as does ours, is that girls are most likely to be victims and males perpetrators.

Our research sought to overcome this methodological dilemma by including in the survey a range of specific aspects of sexual violence, and analysing responses both on an individual basis and as a combined category of sexual violence. We asked respondents if a partner had ever:

- **Pressured** you into kissing, touching or something else
- **Physically forced** you into kissing, touching or something else
- **Pressured** you into having sexual intercourse
- **Physically forced** you into sexual intercourse

As anticipated, girls were significantly more likely than boys to experience sexual violence. Combining all four categories into a single measure of incidence we found

that no fewer than *one in three* girls aged 13 to 17, and 17 per cent of boys reported some form of sexual partner violence.

Breaking this down into the specific questions asked, for both genders 'pressure' was used much more frequently by partners than physical force. Concentrating on girls' experiences first, just over a quarter of girls stated that they felt pressured into doing something sexual against their wishes. Worryingly, more than one girl in eight had been physically forced into doing something sexual. In relation to sexual intercourse, 16 per cent of girls reported that they had been pressured into intercourse and as many as 6 per cent stated they had been physically forced. Tasminder explained: See with my relationship it wasn't up to me (when to have sex). But when it happens it just kind of happens and then afterwards you think oh my god.

*Louise said: Um ... well yeah, he was pressuring me a lot. But there'd be a few times where he was like really trying to force me...a few times he did .*

Boys reported lower levels of sexual violence, although some discrepancies exist which call into question the validity of their responses. When we looked more closely at boys' sexual victimisation, we found that a group of boys, each aged 14, from the same school and class had reported high levels of sexual violence from female partners. In our fieldwork research notes it is reported that many of the boys in this class were very disruptive and messing around. So it may be that these particular boys have a specific problem with female perpetrators of sexual violence or, and perhaps more realistically, these youths were untruthful in their answers.

None of the boys interviewed stated they had experienced sexual violence or used physical force themselves for sexual advantage. However, boys did reveal a range of coercive 'tactics' they used to pressure girls into sexual contact. In the one group interview undertaken with boys, the participants responded to descriptions of each others' coercive tactics with admiration, illustrating how male peers reinforce the use and acceptability of sexual coercion.

The impact of sexual violence, as can be seen by this table is heavily gendered. It was striking that girls as young as 13 were as likely as those aged 16 to experience sexual violence. However, older girls were more likely to report being physically forced. It may be that, as girls get older, they are more able to resist sexual pressure and therefore some boys resort to physical force. However, we should not assume that sexual coercion involving persistent pressure is less harmful to girls' well-being than the use of physical force. Our survey findings did not show any significant difference

between impact ratings for pressure compared to the use of force. This is further elaborated within the interview data. For girls, issues of self-blame were very prominent, especially in relation to sexual coercion, where girls felt they had 'given-in' to sexual pressure from their partners. Often it was this aspect of the sexual violence, rather than the act itself, which girls said affected them in the long-term. For example Rebecca told us:

*I can't believe I've done it (pressured into oral sex)... It was the most horrible thing...it makes me sick, It's the fact that I don't know why I done it.*

Rebecca was aged 12 when this occurred and her boyfriend was 15. After this happened he finished with Rebecca and then told everyone at their school what she had done. For Rebecca the emotional impact of the incident, the public loss of her reputation, and the label of 'slag' which was then associated with her, lasted for years.

### **Emotional partner violence**

Emotional forms of violence are possibly the most difficult to recognise and quantify, due to the wide range of behaviours that may constitute victimisation.

Consequently, the complexity of emotional violence, and the wide range of behaviours it can comprised, make it difficult to capture in a self-completion survey. Eight questions were used in our survey to ascertain the incidence of this form of violence in young people's relationships. Each was designed to assess a particular aspect of emotional violence; the survey asked if a partner had ever:

- Made fun of you
- Said negative things about your appearance/body/  
Family/friends
- Shouted at you/screamed in your face/called you names
- Threatened to hurt you physically unless you did what they wanted
- Told you who you could see and where you could go
- Constantly checked up on what you were doing
- Used private information to make you do something or
- Used mobile phones/internet to humiliate/threaten you

Overall, nearly three-quarters of girls and half of boys who had experienced a relationship reported emotional partner violence. The majority of these young people recorded more than one form of emotional violence.

By examining responses to the questions individually, a gender divide became more apparent. For each of the eight components of emotional violence, a higher proportion of girls than boys reported victimisation. However, looking at which

types of emotional violence young people were most likely to experience, a similar pattern emerges for both girls and boys.

The most commonly experienced form of emotional violence, irrespective of gender, was being made fun of; nearly half of girls and a third of boys reported this.

The second most frequently reported behaviour was constantly being checked-up on by partners; again slightly more girls than boys reported this form of control.

However, analysis of overt forms of controlling behaviour, determined by asking young people if their partners ever told them whom they could see and where they could go, produced a much more distinct gender divide. One in three girls reported experiencing this, compared to just over one in eight boys. Similarly, more direct forms of emotional violence were also more prominent for girls. Just over a third of girls reported that their partners had shouted at them, screamed in their face or called them hurtful names. A similar proportion of girls also stated that their partners said negative things about their appearance, body, friends or family.

In comparison, one in five boys reported being shouted at and only 15 per cent experienced negative comments about them or their families.

As with both physical and sexual forms of violence, more girls than boys added that it had a negative effect on their welfare, although proportionally fewer participants reported a negative impact compared with other forms of violence. A third of girls and 6 per cent of boys stated that the emotional violence had negatively affected their well-being. Looking more closely at the findings, it is clear that participants, who experienced an isolated form of emotional abuse, such as being shouted at or called a name, generally did not report a negative outcome. Indeed it may be unrealistic to expect young people, or indeed adults, never to lose their temper.

We must be careful not to add to the demonisation of young people, as discussed earlier. Indeed this provides a dilemma for professionals. It seems reasonable to assume that these limited experiences do not always require professional response. If professional responses seek to 'problematise' actions, which the vast majority of young people view as insignificant, this may result in young people viewing the intervention programme as inappropriate and unrealistic.

However, professionals also need to assist young people to question if some aspects of emotional violence may hold unrecognised implications for their welfare. This is a difficult balance to achieve. Practitioners need to ensure that young people do not

feel that their experiences and views are ignored, or invalidated, whilst at the same time challenge normative expectations around relationship behaviours.

It was interesting that in interviews for the study girls often began to question behaviours which they had previously viewed as acceptable, or at least an expected aspect of teenage relationships. Thus, it appears that the actual process of describing experiences, which may initially be viewed as normal, may enable girls to begin to question the acceptability of their partner's actions and intentions.

Worryingly, in a number of interviews the level of coercive control in girls' relationships were highly worrying. Control could result in isolation from peer networks, as in the following situation:

*Emma said: Like when I'd be out with my friends and he'd drag me off  
And say he didn't want me out any longer and I'd got to go in  
and it could be like half past six.*

Girls were subject to high levels of control over their decision making, where they could go, whom they could see or what they could do. Some girls were under constant surveillance through the use of on-line technologies, mobile telephones and text messaging.

*Keira: One thing would happen he would just go mad about it. Like even on  
the computer if I took too long to reply he would be like 'why, what are you  
doing, do you not want to talk to me, do you not have time for me or  
anything?'*

The use of on-line technology meant that victims could rarely get away from their partners abuse, even in the family home, where before they may have been free of any control, they were now under continuous control having to respond instantly to texts, MSM, often throughout the night.

In some cases, girls were unsure if their partner's behaviour was caring concern or coercive control. However, many girls often stated that they were too scared of their partner's reaction to challenge their behaviour. Boys did not experience this fear and mainly ignored their partner's attempts at control, or simply ended the relationship. A common response was reported by Ryan who stated 'I had enough [of the checking-up on] so I just walked away. Similarly asked how he dealt with the constant checking up by phone, Josh answered 'he just turned it off'. In contrast

none of the girls interviewed stated they did this, many said they would be scared of the possible repercussions.

### **Nature of violence**

It is important to understand how violence changes, either in intensity or nature, over time. To explore this we asked our participants if the violent behaviours stopped, stayed the same or worsened. With regards to the behaviour stopping, we do not know if this was due to the relationship ending or a discontinuation of the behaviour itself. Again, gender divisions emerged in young people's responses. For the majority of boys the violence stopped. Fewer girls reported this. For girls, the violence was much more likely to stay the same or escalate. We can extrapolate from these figures that the majority of girls remained in a relationship after the violence occurred, reinforcing previous US research findings. Many of the girls we spoke to remained in the violent relationship, often for some considerable time. It may be that fears around repercussions for leaving a violent partner inhibit leaving. Or it may be a girl's desire to have a boyfriend, and the social acceptance this brings, outweighs their desire to leave. Our interview data supports both these contentions.

We should not however presume that leaving a violent relationship will necessarily reduce a young person's risk of serious harm. Research findings on adult experiences of domestic violence clearly show that ending a violent relationship can be the most dangerous time for survivors (Abrahams 2007). This was supported in our interview findings. Even when girls were able to leave a violent partner, the violence did not necessarily stop and in some cases it resulted in an escalation of violence from their ex-partner. They knew where girls went to school, how they got there and where their friends lived. As most girls had not told any adults about their experiences, their ability to protect themselves from their ex-boyfriend's violence was severely limited.

Having looked the incidence and impact of teenage partner violence I will now move on to look at help-seeking and then at some of the associated risk factors for this form of intimate violence.

### **Help-seeking**

For all three forms of violence, a very similar and depressing picture emerges regarding young people's help-seeking – which also reflects the US literature – many young people tell no-one.

*Emma said: I felt like I couldn't really talk to anyone about it. I thought it was normal, so I was like 'Okay I'll just get on with it'.*

*Stacy : It's harder talking to no-one, if you've got like nobody you can talk to ... everyone thinks (teenage relationships) are not serious but ... they can be worse ... when you're older you might know how to handle it more but when you're like our age you don't know what to do. And if you haven't got people to talk to it makes it harder again.*

If they did tell someone this was nearly always another young person... Although in many cases friends provided a valuable source of support, interviews also showed that some peers held inappropriate views regarding the acceptability of violence:

*Moira:           Everybody does it [control], I thought he was weird and then I talked to my friends and all their boyfriends are the same.*

It is imperative that young people's own help-seeking strategies, which favour peers, are acknowledged in intervention programmes. Peer support schemes in schools and other services should be expanded to include this important area of peer violence.

Only a minority of participants told an adult about the violence, including their parents. Professionals were even less likely to be approached for help. These worrying findings reflect previous research which consistently highlights the reluctance of young people to approach adults for assistance in this area. It is obviously of great concern that the vast majority of young people feel unable, or are unwilling, to talk with their parents or other adults about these very important issues. Our interviews showed that School Learning Mentors could be an exception to this rule.

One professional group – school learning mentors - were viewed as providing support in an appropriate and accessible way

*Tanisha:       She's [school mentor] really supportive, she understands and knows what our lives are like at home.*

Learning mentors are in a small number of UK schools, they are trained members of the local community who help children and young people who are having problems with learning and the associated issues which inhibit this, which may or may not include abuse. In the young people's evaluations Learning mentors were seen being easily accessible as they were

- not seen as primarily child welfare but educational support – less stigmatising

- school based from local community – esp. important for south Asian young people

### **Risk Factors**

#### ***Age of participant***

As boys got older their reported rates for experiencing partner violence increased. However rates for girls did not increase with age – Thus girls as young as 13 were as likely to experience violence as those aged 16 – although the type of violence did change. In our interviews girls spoke about being 11 and 12 when they experienced violence. Thus interventions aimed solely at adolescents are often too late – we don't want to scare 4 year olds to death but we do need to look closely at pre-teen children and provide them with information and advice on how to have respectful relationships, including intimate ones.

However, the older girls got the more likely they were to experience being physically forced into sexual intercourse. It maybe that older girls are more resilient to resisting sexual pressure and consequently partners use force instead.

#### ***Older male partners***

Having an older partner, and especially a 'much older' partner, was a significant risk factor for girls. Overall, *three-quarters* of girls with a 'much older' partner experienced physical violence, *80 per cent* emotional violence and *75 per cent* sexual violence. All the girls interviewed who had a 'much older' partner, defined by girls as being at least two years older, experienced some form of violence. Interviews showed that all acts of severe physical and sexual violence were instigated by older partners, in some cases adult men.

#### ***Family and peer violence***

US research has identified a range of risk factors which may increase a teenager's susceptibility to partner violence. These risk factors include previous experiences of parental domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and violent peer groups. Our research also found that family and peer violence were associated with increased susceptibility to all forms of partner violence. However, having an aggressive peer group was identified as a greater risk for boys' instigation of partner violence than family violence. Why this association exists is open to interpretation and theorising in this area is lacking. We did not find evidence of young people seeking to recreate their family relationships with their own partners - however the low-self esteem many girls reported from their experience of domestic violence and abuse meant they often felt unable to negotiate issues of intimacy in their own relationships and felt powerless to challenge the control and violence in them. .

### ***Same-sex partner***

Having a same-sex partner was also associated with increased incidence rates for all forms of partner violence. However participants with a same-sex partner also reported higher levels of family violence (say a bit more here if time) and were more likely to have an older partner, both of which were also significant risk factors, the relative weight of each are unknown.

### ***Implications of how partner violence is viewed by young people***

The above research findings on the impact of violence provide the wider context in which teenage partner exploitation needs to be viewed. If boys view the impact of their own victimisation as negligible, they may also apply this understanding to their actions. They may believe that their partners are also unaffected by their use of violence. These observations were upheld in interviews with boys who characterised their own use of violence as ‘messing around’. In contrast, girls’ narratives around their partners’ explanations of their violence as ‘messing-around’ were fundamentally different. There is a need for boys to be made aware of the negative consequences of their behaviour within relationships. It may also be that boys are aware of their actions, as evidenced in some of the interviews, but are unrepentant.

This is not to imply that boys’ experiences of victimisation should be ignored. It is important to recognise that, at least for a minority of boys, their experiences resulted in a negative impact. For these boys, the impact of the violence may be especially difficult to deal with due to the attitudes of their peers. Nevertheless, we must be cautious that attention on this small minority of male teenage victims does not detract from the much wider, and more significant, experiences of girls.

### **Implications for European Research**

Moving on to look at the European context, as research and intervention in this area is still in the early stages, especially relative to the US, it would be good to learn from some of their mistakes – particularly around the problem of comparability of studies. European research is required which seeks to measure:

- Incidence rates for different forms of teenage partner violence across European Countries – using comparable samples (especially age-ranges), methodology and measures which would enable meaningful comparisons to be made
- The differential risk factors associated with different countries including family and peer violence, older partners and the use of new technologies.

- The impact of gender roles, societal perceptions of children and young people, and openness about children's and young people's sexual relationships, including the role of emotional and physical intimacy.
- Wider policy and practice context

### **Conclusion**

These research findings have important child welfare implications for all professionals working with children and young people. They clearly highlight partner violence as a significant concern for young people's well-being, providing unequivocal evidence for the need to develop more effective safeguards in this area. Younger children, as well as adolescents, require protection from this form of violence. It seems that domestic violence starts at a much younger age than previously recognised. Given the incidence rates, it could be argued that partner violence is a greater problem for young people than bullying, and consequently deserves an equivalent degree of research, policy and practice attention.

The impact of partner violence is indisputably differentiated by gender: girls report much higher levels of negative impact than do boys. This is not to imply that boys' experiences of victimisation should be ignored. Nevertheless, interventions in this area of child welfare need to recognise the prominence of female vulnerability to partner violence. Boys require interventions which address their use of violence, irrespective if they are aware of its impact or not. Over 80% of girls with a 'much older' partner experienced some form, and in many cases multiple forms, of partner violence.

The serious implications of partner violence for young people's welfare are unquestionable, how best to respond remains disputed. Ultimately in order to protect young people from this form of intimate violence, a similar degree of professional recognition and concern, which adult domestic violence currently receives in many European countries, also now is required to respond to the experiences of children and teenagers.

Young people should not have to wait any longer for their relationships, and the problems they encounter in them, to be taken seriously. Zoe's response to our research was similar to many of the young people we spoke to:

'That's cool, someone's fighting our corner'.