Tackling the issue of domestic abuse in teenage relationships

Greater awareness of the vulnerability of young people to domestic abuse has led to a call for more support. A new partnership project is getting schools involved in safeguarding their pupils from this type of abuse.

Recent research has shown that young people experience a range of interpersonal abuse within the context of their own intimate partner relationships. In addition to physical, sexual and emotional abuse, this can include a range of overlapping abuse, for example, sexual exploitation, cyber-stalking, gang-related violence, forced marriage and so called ‘honour’-based violence, with some victims suffering multiple forms of related violence.

High risk
A smaller cohort of teenage victims experience abuse which can be defined as ‘high risk’: likely to cause severe harm or potentially endanger lives. Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA) estimates that there are around 3,500 16 and 17 year olds in the UK today at risk of severe physical, sexual or emotional abuse in their own relationships. This represents a significant number of vulnerable young victims in need of specialist help. Research in this area shows these victims experience at least the same level of violence as adult victims, and many endure additional problems which increase their vulnerability:

- 67% of the young people in the research by CAADA experienced at least one severe abuse incident, for example, threats to kill, stalking, rape, serious sexual assault, broken bones or strangulation.
- Nearly a third (32%) had attended A&E due to injuries, compared with 21% of adults.
- 21% were suicidal.
- 26% had self harmed.
- 26% were experiencing financial problems – an identified barrier to leaving abusive relationships.
- 22% were pregnant. Recent data from CAADA shows that under 18 year old girls who experience domestic abuse are three times more likely to be pregnant than their older counterparts.

Information on the referral routes taken by these younger victims demonstrates that they are much more likely to be identified by the police, children’s safeguarding and health agencies, and only 4% would self refer to a specialist domestic abuse service. Practice on the ground suggests that many young victims are unaware that they are experiencing domestic abuse, and where they are able to identify abusive behaviour, they may be unwilling to engage with adult specialist domestic abuse services.
Multi-agency responses to severe teenage domestic abuse

To date, there has been very little recognition of the prevalence and severity of domestic abuse in teenage relationships amongst agencies. Most teenage relationship abuse goes unnoticed. A minority of young victims are referred to safeguarding for a different presenting issue and as a result, social workers are frequently unaware of the domestic abuse the young person is experiencing. In addition, safeguarding teams may not have the referral pathways to refer victims to specialist domestic abuse services.

There is also a lack of such services. Until very recently, the government definition did not recognise that domestic abuse could affect the under 18s, and as a result, many local specialist domestic abuse services supported only adults. Specific services for teenage victims of domestic abuse are patchy in some areas, and in others, non-existent.

In March 2013 the government changed the definition of domestic abuse in England and Wales to include 16 and 17 year olds. This has opened up opportunities for young victims at high risk of harm to be formally referred to a local Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). A MARAC is a multi-agency meeting where statutory and voluntary sector partners are mobilised to support the highest risk victims in a local area, through a coordinated safety plan. However, whilst the definition change is warmly welcomed by both CAADA and the domestic abuse sector, local authorities are still ill equipped to make referrals of 16 and 17 year olds to MARACs and other specialist domestic abuse services, owing to an absence of partnership working in this area, and a lack of established local care pathways on the ground.

The Young People’s Programme

To this end, CAADA and partners Barnardo’s, the Marie Collins Foundation, Leap Confronting Conflict and the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (IKWRO), have developed a new partnership project. The Young People’s Programme helps local areas to meet the definition change and to better support teenage victims in their area. The two year programme is funded by the DfE and will be rolled out across England over the next few months.

The programme aims to support local areas to develop a recognised care pathway for young people, which will bridge the gap between children’s safeguarding and high risk domestic abuse services, including MARACs. Free training covers the key forms of violence and abuse:

- intimate partner violence and abuse
- sexual exploitation
- gangs/young people who cause harm to others
- ‘honour’-based violence / forced marriage and cyber abuse.

The training is offered to a practitioner with safeguarding expertise from each local authority area, enabling them to become a Young People’s Violence Advisor. Each advisor will act as the ‘entry
point’ for support for young people in their local area, facilitating referrals to other specialist domestic abuse services and liaising with children’s safeguarding and other partners as required.

In NI Women’s Aid provide, on request, awareness raising sessions for school staff, and a tailored programme for pupils (Healthy Relationships programme).

**Young People’s Development Officers**

To help embed the model, advisors will receive support through five regional Young People’s Development Officers and a national helpdesk managed by CAADA. An outcome measurement service is also offered so that the advisors can collect anonymous case management data in relation to the young people they support, which can be analysed locally and nationally to inform the work of the programme and provide a basis for a national young people’s dataset. The programme will also benefit from young people’s input and views, gathered through advisory panels run by Leap Confronting Conflict and Barnardo’s.

It is recognised that different models of practice and service structures are in place across England and CAADA have been careful not to take a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Advisors have only just started their roles and as such, care pathways for both young victims and young people who cause harm to others have yet to be established: it is expected that these will be developed over the coming year.

In some areas local authorities have not been able to resource the advisor role but are planning to resource it in the near future. Through arming individuals with the skills to develop a clear care pathway, the programme can help authorities make a step in the right direction. This will help to start working together to provide a more effective and accessible safety net for these vulnerable young people.

**The role of schools**

Schools have a duty to make a safeguarding referral if they believe a pupil to be at risk of significant harm. It is important that the designated teacher becomes acquainted with the Young People’s Violence Advisor in their local authority. Although local care pathways are only just beginning to be developed, the advisor will have a clear understanding of safeguarding procedures in their local area (with some advisors co-located within the children’s safeguarding team). They will also be aware of what specialist domestic abuse support services are available locally.

To make contact with the Young People’s Violence Advisor (YPVA) in your local authority area please contact CAADA’s Young People Development Officers. However, this is still a relatively new role and some local areas will not yet have an advisor in place. If there is no YPVA in place then the CAADA regional officers will be able to liaise with the designated person and let them know what other services are available that could help instead.

CPD training can increase confidence in making pupil referrals to the Young People’s Violence Advisor. CAADA is currently developing a CPD course on Young people and domestic abuse to be launched in late 2013/early 2014. The one day course will support a wide range of professionals to recognise interpersonal violence and abuse amongst young people, risk assess and make appropriate referrals to the local Young People’s Violence Advisor and associated multi-agency
forums. To express an early interest in this new course, please contact CAADA by emailing cpd@caada.org.uk.

References
2. CAADA (2012) Insights into domestic abuse 1: A place of greater safety. Bristol CAADA
3. Young people experiencing domestic abuse three times more likely to be pregnant. CAADA http://www.caada.org.uk/news/caada-enews-jun2013-number-crunch.htm