

RAISING THE ISSUE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

Literature suggests that around 30% of children may be exposed to domestic abuse. However, there is little direct evidence from older children. In order to address this gap, South Ayrshire Women's Aid was invited into a Scottish secondary school to raise awareness of the issues around domestic abuse.

The project

All year groups across the school were given the choice of whether or not to participate in this project. The broad aims were to initiate discussion and gather young people's views of domestic abuse. The pupils were told that the findings would be written up and disseminated for future planning, preventative work, and training. A single one hour session during the time-tabled slot for 'Personal and Social Education' was used and classes were accessed from May to July 2002. Assurances of anonymity were given several times during each session.

The session was split into two parts, the first consisting of a wide-ranging discussion of the issues, the second comprised an anonymous structured writing technique. For the written part, pupils were asked four questions and given time to write their responses and seal them in an envelope.

Results

98% of the pupils consented to participate in the project. A total of 32% disclosed that they were currently experiencing domestic abuse. In comparing their responses with those of pupils who said they were not experiencing domestic abuse, a number of differences were apparent in the attributions assigned to perpetrators' motivation, the kinds of things that might be said to an abuser, and views on how a young person might feel.

Table 1 – Why pupils thought men might behave in the ways discussed

	Experiencing pupils (n=81)	Non-exp. pupils(n=170)
Power/control	40%	34%
Enjoyment	10%	3%
Lack of punishment	9%	2%
His emotions	8%	12%
Ill or sick	5%	13%
Family history	4%	10%

Power and control were the most common reasons cited (Table 1) and both groups included comments like *'to be in charge,' 'to feel hard,'* and *'to be the big man.'* Only 'experiencing' pupils suggested the man might think he has *'the right to abuse'* might want to make the woman *'too scared to leave'* and used the word *'bully.'* Pupils who said they had no experience of domestic abuse were more likely to attribute the man's behaviour to external causes such as having witnessed domestic abuse/experienced it as a child or to him being ill or sick (a category that includes *'mentally ill'* and all its colloquial descriptors e.g. *'nutter'* and *'mad.'*

Table 2 – What pupils would like to say to abusing men

	Experience-ing pupils (n=81)	Non-exp. pupils(n=170)
Level insults	21%	20%
Ask why	19%	17.5%
What should happen to them	17%	24%
They have a problem	9%	13%
Abuse is always wrong	8%	1.5%
Nothing	4%	0.5%

Insults levelled by both groups included *'scumbag,' 'pathetic,'* and *'waste of space.'* The suggestions for what should happen to the men were a mixture of saying they should experience the same things as they had put women through and threats on their life or liberty. However, only pupils in the 'experiencing' group involved themselves in carrying out any threats made e.g. *'I would like to drive a screwdriver through your heart.'*

While a greater proportion of the ‘experiencing’ pupils felt it would be pointless to say anything to the men involved, twice as many of this group (32% compared to 16% of ‘non-experiencing’ pupils) gave two or more responses to this question. This may indicate a depth of emotion and a need in these pupils to unburden themselves.

Table 3 – Views on how a young person might feel on witnessing domestic abuse

	Experience-ing pupils (n=81)	Non-exp. pupils(n=170)
Frightened	21%	23%
Sad	15%	14%
Lonely/isolated	10%	0
Suicidal	9%	0
Angry	8%	40%
Worthless	7%	0
Like hiding it	4%	0

Fear, sadness, and loneliness were the most frequently cited emotions the ‘experiencing’ pupils wrote while pupils who said they did not have this kind of experience thought anger would predominate. ‘Experiencing’ pupil responses exhibited a strong internalisation of the effects of domestic abuse, whilst the other group projected anger against perpetrators. The difference in strength of feeling expressed was also marked, with 35% of those who said they were experiencing domestic abuse writing more than the single word they were asked for (one used six different descriptors) whereas all but four of the other group wrote a single word.

Perhaps of most concern is the fact that only ‘experiencing’ pupils cited suicidal feelings or that life would be ‘*not worth living.*’ Only this group used descriptors like feeling ‘*worthless*’ or suggested a young person might be ‘*trying to pretend nothing’s wrong.*’ Armed with this information, it is not difficult to imagine the impact of domestic abuse on these pupils’ mental health.

Conclusion

This project illustrated the prevalence of domestic abuse within one secondary school and allowed a comparison between some views from pupils who said they were currently experiencing it and others who were not. The impacts described were highly negative for the ‘experiencing’ group, particularly in terms of their mental health. These results need to be taken forward now in relation to recognising the likely impact on these pupils’ education. This may highlight the crucial supporting role that schools could offer (and may already be offering to some extent) at the very least in relation to understanding the impact on pupils’ performance and behaviour. To this end wide dissemination of these results could form a part of further training for teachers/school staff.

Acknowledgement

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For further information contact

Dr Helen Alexander, Vascular Network Manager,
Wishaw General Hospital,
tel 01698 361100 x7144
email Helen.Alexander@laht.scot.nhs.uk

Dr Elspeth MacDonald
Email Elspeth.Macdonald@slpct.nhs.uk

Sandra Paton, Training & Development Worker
South Ayrshire Women’s Aid, 14 Green Street, Ayr
KA8 8AD. Tel01292 880060
Email sandra_paton@yahoo.com