

REPORT SUMMARY

Influencers and Attitudes

How will the next
generation understand
domestic abuse?

**Listening to children and young
people to build a better future**

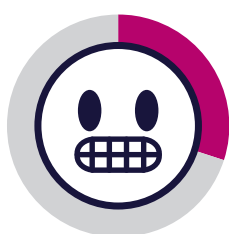
women's aid
until women & children are safe

Key findings

Children and young people exposed to **misogynistic social media content like Andrew Tate** were almost 5x more likely than those not exposed to view hurting someone physically as acceptable if you say sorry afterwards.

misogynistic
social media
content

5x more likely



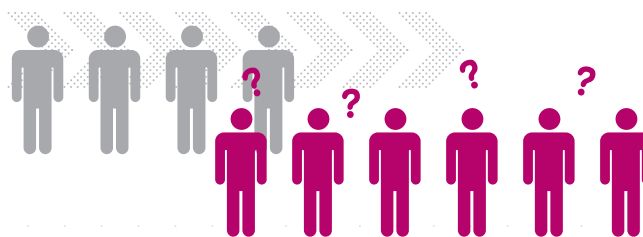
1 in 3 women

experienced the RSHE they had in school as **rushed** and **awkward**.



1 in 4 women felt that it had **no understanding of pre-existing trauma**.

Whilst **70%** of children and young people said they **would seek support** if affected by domestic abuse, **61% of them were unsure or did not know where to go for this**.



www.loverespect.co.uk is our dedicated website for young people to learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships, and where to get help.

Attitudes matter – why children and young people are key to tackling domestic abuse

Attitudes which enable and excuse domestic abuse to continue are still worryingly prevalent in the UK.¹ As highlighted by our **'Come Together' campaign**, challenging these attitudes is an essential part of achieving a world where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated. The knowledge and attitudes of children and young people are critical to this, as they will form the next generation of leaders, decision makers, employees, partners and parents.

Our research, based on two surveys with children and young people, provides insight into their views of gender roles, relationships and sex.² It has important implications for how society invests in preventing domestic abuse – such as through Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE). At its best, RSHE can be a powerful mechanism to challenge the sexism which enables domestic abuse and to help build healthier relationships.³

¹ Women's Aid. (2022). *Come Together to End Domestic Abuse: A survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse*. Available [online](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/resources/come-together-to-end-domestic-abuse).

² Survey 1 received 1,000 responses from children and young people aged between 7-18, across Key Stages 2-5. Survey 2 received 1,000 responses from young adults aged 18-25 years. The samples for both surveys were drawn from nationally representative parameters based on gender and region.

³ Goldfarb, E. and Lieberman, L. (2021). "Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68, 13-27.

Findings

1. Children and young people's attitudes

We found that most children and young people could distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships. However, a significant minority held attitudes that normalised unhealthy relationships and could not identify coercive and controlling behaviour, which underpins domestic abuse.

Those exposed to misogynistic views on social media, such as Andrew Tate content, had significantly more harmful perceptions of relationships and greater tolerance of doing harm.⁴

2. Gaps in RSHE

Biological sex education seems to feature strongly in the curriculum, with 75% of the 18-25-year-olds we surveyed recalling learning about this in secondary school. However, a third (35%) of 18-25-year-old respondents recalled no education about domestic abuse, healthy relationships or controlling behaviours throughout school.

Girls had significantly better understanding than boys of these three issues⁵, suggesting that RSHE should be improved to specifically target boys' relationship literacy. Our research suggests

that RSHE that has a social dimension (such as school trips or making new friends) is particularly effective in engaging boys.

A particularly concerning gap was the lack of awareness about where to get support for domestic abuse experienced at home or in their own relationships. Whilst 70% of children and young people said they would seek support if they needed it, 61% of them were unsure or did not know where to go for this.

3. What children and young people want from RSHE

Reflecting on what they had found useful about RSHE, 18-25-year-olds cited discussing topics they would not feel comfortable discussing at home and not feeling judged as key components. In terms of what had made RSHE poor, having lessons that felt rushed and awkward was identified as a key reason by over a quarter of participants.

Young women were more likely to report that RSHE had no understanding of pre-existing

trauma (24%, compared to 17% of young men) and did not reflect their experiences (17%, compared to 11% of young men). Young men were more likely to say that RSHE did not reflect their beliefs (15%, compared to 8% of young women).

It is clear that current RSHE provision is falling short of what children and young people need – namely, safe, engaging and empowering spaces for discussion and learning.

⁴ Whilst we cannot determine the direction of the causal connection, there are clearly significant links between this exposure and harmful perceptions of relationships, which demonstrates the influence of this kind of content.

⁵ See table 1 in the report.

What needs to change

Strengthen RSHE

- ▶ The Department for Education's current review of RSHE Guidance must be informed by experts from the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector.
- ▶ RSHE must be based on an understanding of gender and intersectional inequalities, with sensitivity to pre-existing beliefs, experiences and trauma.
- ▶ RSHE must be delivered as part of a 'whole school approach'⁶ to preventing and tackling VAWG, with education on healthy relationships beginning at primary school and involving parents and community groups.
- ▶ To effectively engage and support pupils, RSHE must promote confidence and empowerment, including teaching children to think critically about online content and recognise harmful messaging.

Improve online safety

- ▶ Ofcom's guidance, required through the Online Safety Act, must be developed with the VAWG sector and cover the full range of measures online platforms can take to tackle harmful content.
- ▶ Robust accountability mechanisms must be established to ensure social media companies and online platforms adhere to the above guidance.



These changes would contribute towards preventing domestic abuse, a key pillar of the whole-systems approach needed to effectively tackle this national threat. For information about this approach and its benefits, see Women's Aid's [General Election manifesto](#).

For **further information** about this report or to **arrange a meeting**, please contact researchandpolicy@womensaid.org.uk.

Women's Aid delivers **Expect Respect workshops** on healthy relationships, gender, sex and consent to 4–18-year-olds. If schools in your constituency are interested in this offer, they can contact cyp@womensaid.org.uk for more information.

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of 175 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. Over the past 49 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work.

⁶ A whole school approach to domestic abuse involves effective coordination between: teaching and learning; school ethos and environment; and family and community partnerships.