



# **Red flags we don't see**

Missed signs and missed support  
in teenage relationships.

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# Executive summary

**Anyone experiencing harm within a relationship deserves support from those around them to understand what's happening and receive the help they need. That's as true for teenagers as it is for adults. Yet our report finds that, for many teenagers today, the professionals and systems intended to keep them safe and help them thrive are failing to recognise and respond to harm within their relationships.**

Teenage relationship abuse (TRA) is a widespread and under-recognised form of harm affecting large numbers of young people. While awareness of healthy relationships among young people has improved, national and local systems continue to struggle to recognise TRA and respond effectively to prevent and limit harm. It remains only partially recognised, even though domestic abuse policy in England has undergone significant reform across the last ten years. Crucially, there is no dedicated legislative or policy framework for identification, recording, or response, leaving many young people invisible to the professionals and systems meant to support them.

## Key findings

### **Prevalence, nature, and understanding of teenage relationship abuse**

Young people experience disproportionately high rates of abuse within relationships compared to older age groups. While teenagers' awareness and understanding of relationships has evolved in recent years – with a notable increase in their confidence in spotting signs of harm – many still struggle to recognise abuse within their own relationships, particularly when it happens online.

While TRA shares some characteristics of adult domestic abuse, it is shaped by the distinct realities of adolescence. Young people rely on intimate relationships to build their sense of self-identity and belonging. The highly interconnected peer networks in which they exist therefore play a clear role in both sustaining and entrenching abusive dynamics. Behaviours such as bullying, coercion, emotional manipulation, and violence often extend out from young people's relationships to the peer groups around them.

Digital technology and social media – described by young people as intrinsic, not separate, to their own real-life experiences – also considerably amplifies TRA. Online platforms offer a shared space for both beginning and sustaining harmful behaviours and patterns, including intense affection, rejection, monitoring and control.

TRA is also an evolving form of harm that can span a continuum of behaviours, including those broadly understood as bullying, harmful sexual behaviour, peer-on-peer abuse, child exploitation and child sexual abuse.

### **Drivers and risk factors**

Gender and wider social and cultural attitudes play a role in driving relationship harm among young people. Most cases of TRA identified were male to female, with few girls experiencing abuse from other girls or boys experiencing abuse. Television programmes, social media, influencer culture, and pornography were all described as being associated with misogynistic, sexist and, ultimately, harmful behaviour within relationships.

Children who experience trauma and harm at a young age – including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – were also at risk of causing and experiencing TRA. Similarly,

those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with experience of the care system, or who have experienced school exclusion may be disproportionately affected. At the same time, we found that many young people experiencing or causing TRA had previously had no interaction with statutory support services and did not neatly fit into professionals' traditional understanding of who may be at risk of harm.

### System responses

TRA is a hidden harm, inconsistently defined across local areas and with poor data collections to match. Less than a quarter (21%) of local authorities reported having a dedicated policy, protocol or written guidance in place on how to identify and respond to TRA, and less than a third (31%) collected data on the number of children affected. While not directly comparable, reviewing similar questions from the FOI analysis for our 2021 report **Missing the mark** suggests a potentially concerning decline over the last five years in local authorities' ability to identify and respond to harm.

Support provision for those both experiencing and causing harm in teenage relationships is insufficient. Huge variety in service type, availability, and age thresholds exist between local areas, creating a patchwork of support for young people. In many cases, support is available exclusively through adult domestic abuse frameworks, which fail to meet their needs. Those causing harm in relationships are particularly at risk, with under one third of local areas commissioning or providing specific support, and meaningful intervention often coming too late, after young people have been criminalised.

These issues are compounded by inflexible commissioning frameworks for support services, low confidence among professionals in identifying TRA, and child safeguarding responses that silo harms such as child sexual abuse, exploitation, and poor mental health, often failing to address abusive relational dynamics.

## Recommendations

### To improve the national and local response to TRA, we make a series of recommendations.

First and foremost, the government must develop a definition of TRA which is shared consistently across local areas. Dedicated pathways for identification and response must then be established, building on this joint understanding.

Guaranteed access to effective, specialist support – which can flex to meet the complex needs of young people – is essential to both prevent and limit harm. Genuine early action must go beyond educational initiatives for young people, and instead focus on upskilling the workforce, supporting parents and carers, and investing in open-access youth provision where teenagers can explore their identity and relationships with others safely.

Importantly, we are clear that the government must prioritise this systemic reform before changing the age threshold for domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Act. Young people's voices must be at the front and centre of this work. Meaningful opportunities for young people to engage with and co-produce the support systems that are designed to keep them safe must be established, recognising their expertise in their own lives.

# Introduction

## Purpose of this report

**Teenage relationship abuse (TRA) is a significant and growing concern affecting young people across the country. While policymakers and practitioners have started to turn their attention to the issue in recent years, teenagers experiencing abuse in their relationships continue to face inconsistent recognition and support. For parents, carers and other adults in their lives, knowing how best to support those who have experienced or are causing harm remains unclear.**

TRA is not, however, a new issue. The Children's Society first examined understandings of abuse and harm in teenage relationships in our report **Missing the mark**<sup>1</sup> in 2021, finding significant shortcomings in the response for young people. Five years later, this report examines whether these failings have been addressed, and what barriers remain.

Since 2021, some policy and legislative progress has been made. Under the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act, children witnessing domestic abuse and violence within the family are legally recognised as victims in their own right. The government's 2025 Freedom from Violence and Abuse strategy<sup>2</sup> for tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) focusses clearly on the need to deal with harmful stereotypes and behaviours early on in children's lives, and frames TRA as a significant harm that must be addressed.

However, progress has been slow, and many young people are still being harmed. Recent research from the Youth Endowment Fund highlights the prevalence of domestic abuse and violence within teenage relationships. It found that 39% of those aged 13 to 17 who had been in a relationship in the past year had experienced emotional or physical abuse by a partner.<sup>3</sup> In 2024, half of all police-recorded instances of child sexual abuse in England and Wales were perpetrated by other children aged 10 to 17.<sup>4</sup> And a recent report by the independent Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that, despite legislative developments, many statutory services still fail to recognise children as victims of domestic abuse, leaving them vulnerable to further harm.<sup>5</sup>

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to uncover new insights about the nature of and response to TRA today. It will explore understandings of TRA by both young people and professionals, the life experiences of those who cause and experience harm, the availability of support, and how existing services and multi-agency partnerships respond. Drawing on findings from our work in 2021, we will consider how practice has changed and make further recommendations for improving the national policy response to TRA.

## Language

**The language used to describe TRA can be contentious and inconsistently applied. There is no single definition, and various terms can be used to describe different forms of abuse and harm in teenage relationships. These include youth intimate partner violence, adolescent domestic abuse, teenage relationship abuse, and teenage relationship harm. At the time of writing, there remain live policy debates at a national level on whether to amend the legal definition of domestic abuse to also capture relationships involving young people under the age of 16.**

In this report, we choose to use the term teenage relationship abuse (or TRA), reflecting the academic and policy evidence base on the issue, including the UK government's approach in the recently published VAWG strategy.<sup>2</sup>

We recognise that many of the behaviours and relationship dynamics detailed in this report may fall outside what some professionals and policymakers typically understand as being TRA. Instead, our findings reflect the evolving and overlapping nature of harm in teenage relationships, which can span a continuum of behaviours – including those broadly understood as bullying, harmful sexual behaviour, peer-on-peer abuse, exploitation, and child sexual abuse. We also include behaviours which would constitute the legal definition of domestic abuse if the age threshold was lowered, including coercive control, and physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse.

We have also chosen not to describe young people as victims or perpetrators in the context of TRA, instead saying that they experience or cause harm. We feel it is important not to stigmatise children who cause harm, and also acknowledge that many young people do not recognise their experiences of TRA through a victim's lens.

## Methodology

**This report seeks to explore an understanding of TRA in 2026. To do so, we explored five main research questions:**

1. How is TRA understood and characterised, both by young people and professionals?
2. What makes it more likely for young people to cause or experience abuse in teenage relationships?
3. What support is available for young people experiencing or causing abuse in teenage relationships, and how effective is it?
4. How does the children's social care system, alongside other multi-agency partners, respond to TRA at a local level?
5. What more can be done to improve the system response to TRA?

We thank VotesforSchools for developing resources to facilitate classroom conversations on healthy and unhealthy relationships, and for gathering the thoughts of over 58,000 young people aged 5 to 18 across England. These young people (45,897 aged 11 to 18, and 12,276 aged 5 to 11) were asked to vote yes or no on two questions:

- Do you know what a healthy relationship feels like? (Children aged 5 to 11.)
- Do you feel confident recognising unhealthy relationships? (Children aged 11 to 18.)

We conducted a series of one-to-one and larger focus group discussions with professionals employed by The Children's Society. We spoke to a total of 18 practitioners and managers working across our services responding to risk.\*

\* These include: support services offering therapeutic interventions for child sexual abuse; support services for young people being criminally and/or sexually exploited; services working with young people involved in youth violence; and services supporting children and young people who are victims of domestic abuse in a family context.

In April and May 2026, we submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 151 local authorities in England.\* All these authorities have legal responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area, and to assess need and provide support to victims (both children and adults) of domestic abuse in their area under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Mirroring our approach to collecting data for our 2021 report, we asked about policies and procedures local authorities have in place to respond to TRA, data collections, and a description of available support services for both those causing and experiencing harm in teenage relationships. Of the 151 local authorities we contacted, 100 provided responses (a 66% response rate).\*\*

\* Our intention was to FOI all local authorities in England, however an administrative error in our data collection meant that two local authorities were not contacted.

\*\* This is a similar response rate to the FOI request analysed as part of our 2021 **Missing the mark** report (65%). The two datasets cannot be directly compared, as responses to the **Missing the mark** request were provided by different local authorities to those responding in 2026 (partly as a result of changes to local authority footprints in the intervening time). Furthermore, the questions asked across both FOI requests varied slightly. However, where general comparisons about the changing nature of support provision in this area could be made, we have sought to do so.

This was furthered by qualitative insights on TRA from five professionals working across four different local authorities. These professionals held roles within children's services, adult domestic abuse commissioning, and youth violence teams.

This is all in addition to desk-based and contextual information on the policy and evidence. We conducted a literature review of academic and grey literature on the issue of TRA and associated topics (including young people's experience of misogyny, peer-on-peer sexual abuse, harmful sexual behaviour, and wider adverse childhood experiences).

All the professionals we spoke to referred to TRA in England only. In addition, we were unable to engage directly with young people either experiencing or causing TRA. Instead, we relied on the VotesforSchools work, which sampled young people's understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships. We recognise these limitations and propose that future research addresses them to ensure that young people's contexts and experiences are more fully represented, along with the other nations in the UK.



# Policy context

**Over the past decade, domestic abuse policy in England has undergone significant reform. The Serious Crime Act 2015 introduced the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour, while the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 established the first statutory definition of domestic abuse, strengthened protections for victims, and recognised children who see, hear or experience the effects of domestic abuse as victims in their own right. Together, these developments reflect a broader shift in understanding domestic abuse as a serious harm requiring coordinated intervention.**

Since the publication of **Missing the mark**, there have been further positive developments. Statutory guidance on domestic abuse includes a recognition of abuse within teenage relationships. Recent policy initiatives, including the government's 2025 VAWG strategy,<sup>2</sup> have also highlighted the importance of preventing harmful behaviours among young people, alongside supporting healthy relationships. Updates to the relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education curriculum<sup>6</sup> in 2025 include teaching pupils about respecting boundaries and consent, and supporting young people to identify controlling behaviour. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has also undertaken substantial work examining children and young people as victims in their own right.<sup>5</sup>

However, TRA remains only partially recognised, with no dedicated legislative or policy framework for identification, recording, or response. Abuse occurring within relationships involving children under 16 is not captured within the statutory definition of domestic abuse, and is instead addressed through child protection frameworks. In this way, TRA is understood as a child

safeguarding risk and, if reported, is not necessarily recorded as a harm occurring within an intimate relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Support for young people experiencing both domestic abuse and TRA is also extremely limited.<sup>8</sup> Specialist advocates who work directly with children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence – known as children's independent domestic violence advocates (CHIDVAs) and children's independent sexual violence advocates (CHISVAs) – play an important role in helping children navigate their experiences of harm. This includes advocating for their needs and rights with other professionals making decisions about how best to support them.<sup>9</sup> But funding for these roles remains insecure. New initiatives like the Steps to Safety programme, which will connect patients to specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence services within their local area through their GP,<sup>10</sup> may open doors for the better identification of young people experiencing relationship harm, though at the time of writing, detail about delivery is unclear.

Progress against the majority of **Missing the mark** recommendations has also been limited. No standalone statutory guidance on TRA has been issued, and no duty has been introduced to commission specialist support for young people affected by TRA. There has also been little progress on national data collection, service mapping, or legal reform relating to coercive and controlling behaviour or abuse among young people. **While recognition of TRA has increased, this has not yet translated into the comprehensive policy and system reforms needed to improve prevention, identification and support.**

# Understanding teenage relationship abuse

## Prevalence

**Current evidence indicates that young people experience disproportionately high rates of relationship abuse compared to older age groups. In 2025, a significantly higher proportion of people aged 16 to 19 (18.2%) and 20 to 24 (12.9%) were victims of domestic abuse in comparison to those aged 25 years and over.<sup>11</sup> Data shared by Refuge aligns with this trend, indicating a concerning rise of abuse experienced by girls aged 16 to 25 who comprised 16% of new referrals to their services between 2024 and 2025.<sup>12</sup>**

Evidence also points to high levels of abuse among younger teenagers. Research by the Youth Endowment Fund in 2025 estimated that two in five teenagers aged 13 to 17 in relationships experienced emotional or physical abuse from their partner within the preceding year – the equivalent of 390,000 13- to 17-year-olds across England and Wales.<sup>3</sup>

Of these, 36% of young people reported forms of emotional abuse, including criticism of their appearance, and technology-facilitated abuse such as partners checking their devices and monitoring their location. A further 15% said they had experienced physical or sexual abuse, including being pressured or forced into sex, being physically hurt, or having explicit images of them shared online.

## Impact

**Although the impact of TRA is an emerging area of research, current insights paint a concerning picture of how this form of harm is affecting young people.**

Research points to the compounding negative impact of relationship abuse on the self-esteem and wellbeing of young people.<sup>13</sup> A recent study found that teenagers who have experienced TRA feel it affects their everyday lives, impacting anxiety, self-esteem, and the ability to sleep, eat and concentrate.<sup>3</sup> Over one in five said that they avoided school or college because of something that had happened with an intimate partner, while 32% of boys and 45% of girls shared that it had increased their feelings of worry. Others shared that their partners made them feel negatively about their appearance, which led them to change how they looked. This was disproportionately reported by girls: 30% shared this concern compared to 17% of boys.

There is also emerging evidence about how TRA can escalate to some of the most serious harms, including suicide and murder.<sup>14</sup> The murders of Holly Newton<sup>15</sup> and Ellie Gould<sup>16</sup> are both examples of how coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse, and threats of self-harm can escalate, tragically resulting in both of them losing their lives at the hands of intimate partners. Holly Newton's partner reportedly accessed her social media accounts, changed her passwords, and emotionally blackmailed her before she

died, while Ellie Gould experienced coercive control and educational sabotage as her boyfriend undermined and challenged her efforts at school.

Experiencing TRA has also been connected to self-harm and suicide. A young person was recently identified as the first teenager whose death was reported as a suicide linked to domestic abuse. This is a worrying trend in domestic abuse-related deaths among adults – according to the Domestic Homicide Project, suicides related to this harm have outstripped homicides for the third year running<sup>17</sup> – and may well foreshadow similar trends soon to be uncovered among young people.

Practitioners strongly reflected these concerns in interviews. Many recalled cases of serious self-harm, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and serious overdoses as particularly common among those who have experienced harm in relationships. They described an increasing number of young people presenting in serious mental health crisis as a direct result of TRA, and questioned whether there would be a further increase in suicides as a result of relationship harm in the coming years.

## What young people tell us about recognising unhealthy relationships

**Our findings suggest that young people's awareness and understanding of teenage relationships has evolved in recent years. This perhaps reflects increased public and political attention on violence against women and girls, alongside an upward trend in the discussion of healthy and unhealthy relationships in schools, online and through wider media.**

In our 2021 **Missing the mark** report, we found that more than half (51%) of the 17,783 secondary school pupils who took part in a vote at the time did not believe that young people could recognise the signs

of an abusive relationship. Many felt that awareness was limited among their peers, and that existing education was not sufficient to help young people identify or respond to harmful or abusive behaviours.

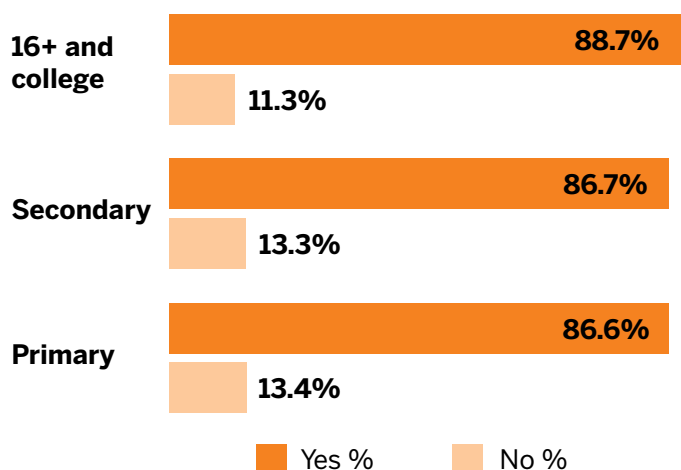
By contrast, our work with VotesforSchools in April 2026 suggests a marked and welcome increase in young people's confidence in spotting the signs of harm. 87% of the 43,966 secondary school pupils taking part in this year's work reported feeling confident recognising unhealthy relationships, rising to 89% among the 2,311 college-age respondents. A large proportion (87%) of the 13,224 students in primary school taking part also told us that they know what a healthy relationship looks like. Young people referenced personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) lessons on the topic, wider public discussion of relationships, and social media as factors that had helped them understand the signs of unhealthy or harmful behaviours in relationships. In many sessions, they were able to mention specific things they would look for, like using violence or "when someone is no longer being their true self".

### Our questions to young people:

**Do you know what a healthy relationship feels like? (5 to 11)**

**Do you feel confident recognising unhealthy relationships? (11 to 18)**

**Figure 1: Proportion of young people responding to our questions on healthy and unhealthy relationships by age group.**



However, the voting data, interviews with professionals, and the wider evidence base all point to an important distinction between young people's ability to identify behaviours which they consider to be unhealthy in principle versus their ability to identify these behaviours in their own lives.

Discussions with young people facilitated by the VotesforSchools resources suggested challenges with knowing how to spot the signs of abuse in their own relationships, especially when these were played out online. Others indicated that, even when young people had identified harmful dynamics, knowing who to turn to for support or how to challenge abusive behaviours (particularly in the relationships of friends or peers) was also challenging.



**We feel it's easier to recognise an unhealthy relationship in person than it is online.**



**Everyone thinks they can recognise a bad relationship ... but your own judgement is easily clouded.**



**It's pretty hard to spot the signs of an unhealthy relationship while you're in it, and thinking you can spot the signs may end up leaving you more vulnerable as you think it would never happen to you.**



**Although we think it's quite easy to recognise unhealthy relationships, it's difficult to tell someone they are in one. They might not want to hear it.**

Secondary school students

Practitioners also frequently described working with young people who could confidently identify unhealthy relationship behaviours in educational exercises, yet struggled to recognise the same patterns when reflecting on the behaviours shown by their own partners. These findings reflect our 2021 voting data, where young people similarly suggested that knowing the signs of relationship harm was not necessarily enough to recognise it in their own lives.

More widely, we found a clear gap between how young people and the adults in their lives use and understand terminology to describe their relationships. Professionals working to support young people reflected on the use of terms like 'toxic', 'red flags', 'gaslighting', and 'love bombing', alongside so-called 'therapy speak' – language and concepts borrowed from psychology, counselling or mental health therapy that are frequently used by young people and circulated widely on social media. Many professionals were clear that the language young people used with them was likely to differ from how they speak about abuse and harm within friendship and peer groups. They even reflected candidly about how often young people used language which they did not recognise.

At the same time, practitioners also cautioned that young people's familiarity with these terms may not always mean they fully understand them. One noted that "sometimes I do think they put false labels on things", making it harder for professionals to fully assess the scale and severity of risk being disclosed.

Professionals also made clear that young people do not relate to the term 'abuse'. They suggested that language like 'domestic abuse', 'sexual harm' or 'child sexual abuse' can feel stigmatising or disconnected from young people's own experiences. They also said that those they support were far more likely to engage in conversations framed around 'healthy relationships'.

This aligns with evidence that suggests a further gap between young people and adults' understanding of what constitutes TRA. A Refuge poll showed that just 57% of people aged 18 to 24 surveyed did not recognise that sharing an intimate image of someone without their consent is a form of abuse, in comparison to 88% of adults aged over 55. The same poll further showed that, in comparison to older adults, young people are less likely to identify location tracking and demands to see a partner's phone as potential indicators of relationship abuse.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, professionals suggested that the use of the language of abuse was not only a barrier to young people's identification of harm, but to support in and of itself.

**“What we’re finding ... is we’re even having young people who won’t or don’t want to access the higher-level services where their identity is around domestic abuse or sexual harm. However, they will engage with the service where we’re talking about healthy relationships, even though the relationship is probably abusive. Because of the identity of the service being offered, that’s a barrier to their engagement.”**

#### Local authority professional working in TRA

In these ways, while young people's confidence recognising unhealthy behaviours in relationships is seemingly on the rise, for many, drawing a distinction between these and their own experiences remains a challenge. While this makes the response from professionals around young people potentially more difficult, it does highlight clearly the need for further action on TRA that goes beyond education and awareness raising among young people.

## The nature of teenage relationship abuse

**The evidence base on TRA suggests that it is a significant but under-recognised form of harm affecting young people. In line with the Domestic Abuse Act's definition, research indicates that the nature of TRA encompasses a range of harms, including emotional, economic, physical and sexual abuse, as well as coercive control. Though technology-facilitated abuse is not currently covered in the act's definition, this has been established as an increasing risk young people face.**

This mirrors how practitioners characterised TRA across interviews. They viewed it as a form of unhealthy or abusive relationship that occurs between young people, primarily teenagers (though several noted that unhealthy relationship dynamics can emerge at a much younger age during primary school). While many of the behaviours typically associated with domestic abuse between adults – threats and intimidation, coercive control, and physical, emotional, sexual or economic abuse – were reflected in practitioners' accounts, TRA was understood as distinct in several important ways.

Most obviously, teenage relationships primarily occur where partners do not live together. Practitioners emphasised how young people's relationships are instead significantly shaped by the peer networks and groups around them – whom they rely on for emotional support, social belonging, and the development of their identity. These networks exist both on and offline, but for many young people, the distinction between this is unclear. As one local authority professional put it: “the online space is as much of [young people's] own reality as the real world.”

Therefore, peer relationships experienced in school, communities, and online platforms can all play a significant and intersecting role in both developing and reinforcing abusive dynamics.

### **Identity, self-worth, emotional dependency, and control**

A consistent theme in our interviews was the dual roles of emotional dependency and self-worth within TRA. Practitioners frequently described young people who were deeply reliant on their partners for emotional regulation, stability and their own sense of identity, seeking within relationships a sense of safety and belonging, often in place of what may otherwise have been provided within the context of family or wider community. As one local authority professional explained, young people's intimate relationships are an "essential part of their journey around identity and understanding." Intimate relationships offer opportunities for young people to explore and learn how to navigate their place in the world and with those around them. As such, the fear of losing a relationship which provides security, emotional stability, and strong personal bonds (whether perceived or genuine) was seen as both a significant driver of unhealthy and harmful behaviours and a major barrier to leaving abusive relationships.

Within this context, practitioners described relationships that often developed with intensity and pace. Common dynamics included very strong feelings emerging over a matter of days or weeks, often through the sharing of psychological intimacies as a way of making connection. In many cases, this process was initiated or sped up through use of online platforms and social media. Intense affection early on, described as 'love bombing', was frequently referenced, followed by cycles of rejection, withdrawal, or 'blowing hot and cold'.

Emotional abuse and manipulation were identified as particularly common characteristics of TRA. This included the use

of degrading or abusive language, behaviours that undermined a partner's confidence and self-esteem, threats of violence, and efforts to isolate young people from their friends and support network. In particular, threats of self-harm and suicide were frequently described as a tool to prevent partners from leaving unhealthy relationships.

### **Sexual coercion and violence**

These dynamics of dependency, control and manipulation extend into young people's sexual relationships. Practitioners commonly described young people moving quickly into sexual activity, often through pressure, coercion or violence. Non-fatal strangulation was referenced repeatedly across interviews, and commonly linked to young people's perceptions that such behaviours were normal or expected because of what they had seen in pornography or elsewhere online. Practitioners also said that young people mentioned engaging in sexual activity in order to please a partner or because it was something they believed their partner was owed.

There was broad consensus – and concern – among professionals that the prevalence of serious sexual assault and rape within teenage relationships was increasing. Many noted that, after many years of working with children being harmed by adults, the number of referrals for serious sexual abuse by other children (so-called peer-on-peer abuse) has increased significantly in recent times. This reflects national trends in child sexual abuse and exploitation offences involving young people causing harm. Where age is recorded, children aged 10 to 17 account for half of all recorded offences, with 93% of these being committed by individuals known to the young people being harmed.<sup>4</sup>

Concerns about the seriousness of sexual offending among young people in relationships were compounded by practitioners' observations that many have a varied understanding of consent. Examples included young people not believing rape can be classified as such when occurring within

a relationship, and the normalisation of “not taking no for an answer”.

**“I’ve had conversations with [young people who have harmed their partners] who have said to me ... ‘I know the rules, if I ask three times and they say no, then that means no.’ And my response has always been, you shouldn’t have to ask three times.”**

Local authority professional working in TRA

**“I assumed that we would be picking up coercive control, emotional harm, that kind of stuff ... but actually, our highest indicator has been sexual harm. And a number of those are really serious sexual assaults or rapes.”**

Local authority professional working in TRA

### Peer networks

Several practitioners highlighted the role of peer networks in sustaining and deepening abusive dynamics. Unlike many adult relationships, teenage relationships exist within highly interconnected peer groups, creating opportunities for those causing harm to influence peers and shape perceptions of events. Many professionals spoke of similar stories of young people being shamed, blamed and harassed by their peers having disclosed concerns about their relationship or actual abuse. In many cases, this harassment begins on social media and extends out into young people’s real lives, with practitioners recalling various cases where large numbers of young people, sometimes entire year groups, were involved in abuse or bullying both online and at school or college. Others recounted examples where young people facilitated harm or abuse through peer and friendship groups:

**“We had two young people who had split up and the one that didn’t want the relationship to end was kind of threatening the other one, trying to set up a fight, but then also going to their friends and saying, ‘I’m going to have no mercy, we’ll see which one of us ends up in hospital first.’ Those kind of comments, but not to the young person directly, via their friends.”**

Local authority professional working in TRA

Many professionals reflected on the prevalence of victim-blaming culture among peer groups, entrenching shame and distress for those who have already experienced harm. Practitioners broadly felt that young people in abusive relationships were often criticised or blamed by their friends and peers for “not seeing the red flags” or taking action to prevent themselves from being harmed, rather than being offered support.

### Technology-facilitated abuse and the role of online platforms

These dynamics are both initiated and amplified through digital technology, with practitioners describing the use of online platforms for coercion, surveillance and abuse as an essential element of TRA. Social media, messaging platforms and other online functions (including AI) create new opportunities to develop intimacy, connection and trust between young people – and make these bonds easier to exploit.

Practitioners again emphasised how quickly relationships between young people can be built online, to a degree of intensity that differs within adult relationships. Many felt that, online, young people choose to be more open about elements of their lives that may leave them particularly vulnerable to abuse, for example sharing intimate details or feelings about their mental health and emotional wellbeing, their sexual or romantic histories, or their gender or sexual identity – and that they are doing so in the early

stages of a relationship. These findings speak to some of the qualitative insights shared by young people highlighted earlier in this report, that abusive dynamics can be harder to spot when facilitated by online platforms.

Monitoring and tracking were particularly prominent concerns. Practitioners described young people routinely checking partners' social media activity, messages, and locations. GPS tracking and location sharing were often normalised by young people, with behaviours that practitioners viewed as controlling interpreted instead as signs of care and concern. Practitioners noted that these understandings could be difficult to challenge, particularly when young people experienced similar monitoring behaviours from the adults in their lives, particularly parents and carers.

The rapid development of AI tools was also frequently discussed. A number of practitioners reflected on the prevalence of AI being used to doctor and sexualise images of young people, and young people's increasing reliance on chat bots for emotional support in place of trusted adults. They noted how affirming and reassuring these chat bots can be, and were concerned about the potential for unregulated AI technology to normalise and even encourage the actions of young people who are harming their partners.

Practitioners also described forms of digital co-dependency facilitated by smartphones and social media. Examples included young people remaining on the phone for extended periods, sleeping on calls overnight, and feeling unable to function when digital contact was interrupted. One practitioner described working with a young person who remained connected to their partner on a muted call throughout a support session, and that the young person had been on the phone continuously for nearly 36 hours.

These findings clearly reflect the growing literature about digital technology and its use within TRA. Research indicates that technology-facilitated abuse and behaviours such as controlling social media use, monitoring a partner's location, and coercion to share intimate images online were all highly prevalent among young people.<sup>19</sup> Cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) offences are also rising sharply: in 2024, 42% of all recorded CSAE offences were perpetrated via digital platforms, representing a 26% increase on the previous year.<sup>4</sup> These trends highlight the growing challenge of addressing abuse that occurs online, where harms can proliferate rapidly and are more difficult to monitor as technology evolves.<sup>20</sup>

### **Escalating and shared vulnerabilities**

A particularly distinctive feature of practitioners' accounts of TRA was the way that risk and vulnerability could escalate and deepen for both partners within a relationship. In this sense, TRA did not always conform to conventional understandings of adult relationship abuse that involve a clearly defined 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. Examples of this included young people going missing together, engaging in substance use together, making suicide pacts, or becoming involved in increasingly risky behaviours as relationships intensified. In many cases, these vulnerabilities sharpened and escalated when interventions were made by adults to break up the relationship.



# What are the drivers of teenage relationship abuse, and are some young people more at risk?

Adolescence is a critical stage of development during which young people navigate complex social and emotional challenges. Given this, both social and environmental factors can shape how harm is understood by young people, and their ability to recognise and respond to unhealthy relationship dynamics.<sup>21</sup> In interviews, many professionals described a range of factors that can make young people more vulnerable to both experiencing and causing harm in relationships, and indicated that there is no clear, homogenous description of a 'victim' or 'perpetrator'.

Within current safeguarding practice, it is well understood that some of these factors, namely family environment and ACEs, can potentially impact young people's experience of a range of harms later on. Other factors, however – including the role of wider societal and cultural attitudes towards gender, relationships and sexism, alongside the influence of online harms – are less well understood in a safeguarding context, making responses to TRA more challenging.

## Gender, misogyny and harmful social norms

Evidence shows how gender norms, misogyny and sexism are frequently identified as important drivers of gender-based harms.<sup>29</sup> It also highlights the way traditional gender stereotypes can both normalise abuse and shape behaviour within intimate relationships.<sup>22</sup> This is reflected in available data: Safe Lives has reported that 95% of young people experiencing abuse within relationships identify as female,<sup>29</sup> while the Office for National Statistics has shown that girls are more likely to report the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviours, including sexist comments and being sent or coerced into sharing sexual images among their peers. In contrast, boys are less likely to perceive these behaviours as affecting themselves or those around them.<sup>23</sup>

Our interviews with professionals reflected these gendered patterns. Most cases of TRA identified by practitioners were male-to-female harm, with very few cases of either girls experiencing abuse from other girls, or boys experiencing abuse in relationships. When this was the case, female-to-male harm was most commonly characterised by girls using emotional abuse and manipulation against their partners.

Practitioners interviewed felt that different understandings of gendered harm – namely female-to-male, female-to-female, and male-to-male – were less clear.

**“If it was a male punching a female, then there may be the idea of domestic abuse within that. But a female punching a male, or a male punching a male would probably be lost within [what is understood by professionals as] just ‘teenage behaviour’”**

Practitioner working in a child sexual abuse and exploitation support service

Experiences of male-to-male abuse, when identified, predominantly came from practitioners who were supporting young people in services designed to respond to cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation. In these instances, practitioners noted that experiences of harm within relationships may look different to heterosexual dynamics. They reflected on cases of gay and bisexual boys and young men who had been in abusive relationships where “the abuse is short and sharp ... rather than being with someone for six months over the year that is groomed and abusive over time”, and where young people were pressured, manipulated or otherwise coerced into take part in activities like ‘chemsex’, or drug use while engaging in sexual activity. Specific apps like Grindr were also frequently referenced as platforms where opportunities for harm within relationships between boys and young men were first established.

More widely, the role of social and cultural attitudes about sex, relationships and gender were considered influential in shaping young people’s beliefs and experiences of relationships. Television programmes, social media, influencer culture, and pornography were all described as factors which contributed to the normalisation of unhealthy relationship dynamics. Many practitioners also spoke of young people whose experiences of both causing and experiencing harm were closely connected to what practitioners would describe as sexism and misogyny.

Students working with VotesforSchools resources in colleges also spoke to the normalisation of unhealthy relationships in society today, and how this can create added pressure for young people to behave in a certain way, or put up barriers to challenging harmful dynamics.



**Behaviours become more obvious as they become unhealthy; however, unhealthy relationships are becoming the norm and people are beginning to romanticise it in this generation, making people believe that they have to act a certain way in a relationship.**

College student

Across interviews with professionals, there was particular concern about young people’s exposure to misogynistic content online, including so-called ‘manosphere’ influencers. These people promote traditional gender roles and expectations that female partners should be subservient, acquiescent, and accommodating of male needs. Many professionals connected these online experiences with the increasing prevalence and ease of access for many young people to pornography, much of which is violent and degrading towards women.

Others commented on the role of platforms like OnlyFans in bringing young people closer to the sexualised versions of girls and women portrayed in pornography, closing the gap between what may once have been perceived as fantasy or pure entertainment and the realities of young people’s own lives.

**“They’re not imaginary figures, in like how [pornography] stars used to be ... now they’re real people that [young] people feel they have a relationship with ... they have access to their lives ... The women boys are watching having sex in really violent, really extreme ways are women they feel they know ... And because**

**they've become real, it becomes easier, I think, to apply ... to the real girls in their life."**

**"Pornography existed in magazines. The idea of knowing the person was incredibly distant, like they were just images. Then we progressed to films, but they were very clearly porn stars. It was a version of like, fantasy, like very clearly fantasy. And I don't think there was as much of an expectation of what you see there, you would transfer into your own relationship ... Whereas now it's a very different thing."**

**Professionals working in a national programme on issues of child abuse and exploitation**

These concerns mirror emerging evidence on the influence pornography and violent content can have on sexual violence among young people. Research by the Youth Endowment Fund found that 33% of 13- to 17-year-olds had encountered content promoting violence against women and girls, while more than a quarter (27%) had seen images or threats of sexual assault.<sup>3</sup> A survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner further found that those who had viewed pornography were more likely to agree that girls could be persuaded into having sex after saying no than those who had not.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, however, practitioners' views diverged regarding the extent to which misogynistic culture can be understood as a substantive driver of, or explanation for, young people causing harm in their relationships. While some felt that the influence of cultural and social attitudes were inextricably linked to cases of TRA, and further, evidence of a tangible change in how young people navigate relationships with peers today, others disputed this. For this group, there was a concern that framing TRA through the lens of wider cultural misogyny obscured the specific dynamics of harm within relationships, and particularly how

those causing harm can manipulate and exploit opportunities to entrench abuse against a partner, ultimately reducing accountability for those responsible.

This reflected a much broader tension in practitioners' views on how best to respond to young people harming others, and the difficulty of finding a balance between supporting young people to understand the impact of their harmful behaviours, addressing the wider experiences and vulnerabilities that may have contributed to those behaviours emerging in the first place, and creating genuine space and support for the person who has been harmed.

## **Family dynamics and early experiences of harm**

**Exposure to violence at home, poor mental health, social disadvantage, and experiences of exploitation have all been associated with increased risk of both causing and experiencing harm in intimate relationships.<sup>3, 13, 17</sup> The influence of family life on young people's vulnerability to both experiencing and causing TRA was a common observation from practitioners. Many shared examples of young people who had grown up in disruptive, unsafe environments, and witnessed or experienced abuse, violence, exploitation or neglect. Experiences of domestic abuse and violence between parents or carers was commonly referenced, as were experiences of growing up in care.**

In these instances, practitioners reflected on the impact of either unhealthy or absent relationship dynamics being modelled to children and young people by the adults around them. Many felt that children and young people growing up in these environments were more likely to seek emotional safety, security and regulation through their own intimate relationships, in doing so, interpreting behaviours that may be seen by adults to be abusive or controlling as evidence of care and connection.

**“A lot of the children that we work with never understand healthy relationships [when they are first referred]. They’ve never been modelled to them.”**

Practitioner working in a child exploitation support service

Experiences of witnessing or experiencing harm and violence in a family context were also described as common to those who caused harm in relationships. Practitioners frequently reflected on young people exhibiting behaviours like hitting, punching or strangling their partners, where these same behaviours had been witnessed from a young age between parents. Indeed, many also spoke of the prevalence of TRA co-occurring with child-to-parent violence, and in some cases, other violence outside of the home, including carrying and using weapons. This mirrors evidence on the overlap between TRA and other forms of violence, including research which showed that 79% of young people experiencing criminal exploitation also reported violent or controlling behaviour within an intimate relationship.<sup>3</sup>

More widely, experiences of trauma as a result of both intra- and extra-familial harm (including child sexual abuse and child sexual or criminal exploitation) were also referenced by practitioners as potential drivers of later TRA. This is particularly the case when coupled with a lack of intervention or support at the right time to help a young victim understand and recover from these experiences.

**“Where does that need to control come from? From an absolute lack of control in other areas. They themselves have often faced abuse and different forms of harm ... they feel the need to exert power and control over something because they’ve been so powerless before.”**

Practitioner working in a child exploitation support service

**“If you’ve been exploited as a 15-year-old and you don’t know any different and you’ve not had support, you’ve not had somebody break that cycle ... it just carries on.”**

Practitioner working in a child exploitation support service

## Different experiences of risk and harm

**Further, some groups of children and young people may be disproportionately affected by TRA, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, those supported by a social worker, and those who have experienced school exclusion.<sup>3, 25</sup>**

In our interviews with professionals, there was strong consensus that young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were overrepresented in support services working with both young people who had been harmed within relationships and those causing harm. In both cases, practitioners felt that neurodiverse young people found it much harder to identify healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships than their neurotypical peers, and had different understandings of safety and consent within relationships. This was also reflected in our VotesforSchools findings, where teachers commented that their neurodiverse students felt less able to notice the signs of relationship abuse in discussions.

Further, practitioners reflected on how cultural, religious and community contexts can shape how young people understand, experience and disclose harm within relationships. For example, several reflected on the ways in which expectations of relationships, gender roles, and family life can differ across communities, influencing both young people’s own perceptions of healthy or unhealthy behaviour, and the responses of adults around them.

# How are young people who are experiencing or causing teenage relationship abuse identified and supported?

Despite growing policy attention and legislative developments since the publication of Missing the mark in 2021, the picture painted by our research suggests that significant barriers remain. From identifying abuse in the first place to accessing meaningful support once concerns are recognised, young people continue to encounter a fragmented system that struggles to respond to the complex realities of harm in teenage relationships.

## Teenage relationship abuse is a hidden harm

A key finding from our FOI analysis is that local authorities and multi-agency partners continue to struggle to effectively identify TRA. Less than a third (31%) of local authorities who responded to our FOI request collected data on the number of teenagers who experience abuse within relationships. Of those, just 10% could distinguish whether these young people were between the age of 13 to 16, or 16 to 17, suggesting younger teenagers in particular are being lost within existing systems.

**Without reliable data, local authorities cannot accurately assess levels of need.**

Moreover, while not directly comparable, our findings suggest a worrying potential decline over the last five years in the proportion of local authorities collecting data on TRA. In 2021, 45% of respondents said they collected data on the number of older teenagers (aged 16 and 17) experiencing domestic abuse, compared to 21% in 2026.

Qualitative insights supported this finding of a lack of robust data collection. Many respondents were upfront that their current data collection for 16- and 17-year-olds was hidden within wider datasets on all legally defined victims of domestic abuse, including adults, and therefore could not be disaggregated. Others explained that where domestic abuse was flagged on their systems, they were unable to distinguish between 16- and 17-year-olds who were victims of abuse in their own intimate relationships and those who were victims of abuse by parents or carers within a family context.

Against this backdrop of hidden harm, we also found a considerable disconnect

between data collection and the provision of support. While less than one third of local authorities who responded to our request told us that they collect data on the number of teenagers experiencing TRA, only 12% do this as well as commissioning support services for this harm. Moreover, 40% of our respondents said that they commission support services for TRA without being able to collect corresponding data on the number of teenagers affected. This raises significant questions about whether current services are reaching the young people they intend to support, and the wider impact of these services on reducing overall need.

Even where data on the number of teenagers experiencing TRA was collected, the numbers recorded appeared strikingly low. Of those local authorities who were able to provide figures, the median number of 16- to 17-year-olds identified as experiencing abuse within their own relationships (during the 2025-26 financial year) was just 17, while the median figure for 13- to 16-year-olds was 25. The overall numbers of young people identified by local authorities as experiencing TRA will vary according to region, recorded harm type, and overall population numbers, but given wider evidence of the prevalence of abuse in teenage relationships at a national level, these findings suggest significant under or misidentification by local authorities.

However, this is not only a data collection issue. There remains no consistent or shared definition of TRA at either a national or local level. Just 21% of local authorities reported having a dedicated policy, protocol or written guidance in place on how to identify and respond to children and young people who have experienced abuse within their own relationships. Again, while not directly comparative, our 2021 report found that 30% of local authorities had a policy in place on TRA, suggesting a worrying potential decline in the last five years.

Where guidance did exist, it was commonly embedded within broader adult domestic abuse policies, and often consisted of little more than a brief acknowledgement that

abuse can occur between teenagers. These findings echo what was discovered in 2021, suggesting considerable lack of progress in many local authorities' ability to effectively identify harm.

## Operating without shared understanding

**In the absence of a shared definition or clear framework for identifying TRA, professionals are often left relying on existing safeguarding frameworks and responses designed for other forms of harm. Practitioners spoke to the uncertainty this creates. While some felt confident identifying TRA, others described the “blurred lines” between TRA and many other harm types, including exploitation, peer-on-peer abuse, bullying, or wider concerns about emotional wellbeing. A number of professionals commented on how toolkits or resources specific to TRA would aid their ability to identify harm. Tools like a young person’s DASH (domestic abuse, stalking, and ‘honour’-based violence) risk checklist<sup>26</sup> – which support professionals to identify children and young people’s needs in relation to both domestic abuse and TRA – do exist, but we found that many professionals were unaware of them, or were using them inconsistently.**

Concerningly, practitioners reported this lack of shared understanding leading to some professionals dismissing or minimising indicators of TRA. Many recalled hearing harmful relationship dynamics described simply as “adolescent development”, “teenage behaviour”, or that young people are simply “experimenting” with relationships and sex. In the worst examples, we heard of cases where professionals had repeatedly not believed a young person who made allegations of rape against their partner.

Many also reflected on the extent to which professionals rely on ‘known’ safeguarding indicators to identify young people

affected by TRA. Practitioners told us that, while experiences of trauma, ACEs, and challenging harmful dynamics are frequently present in the lives of young people affected by TRA, they can also present with few of these 'traditional' experiences associated with higher risk or vulnerability.

**“Yes, we absolutely have that group of young people that have seen domestic abuse in their own lives, that have been removed from one parent where there's been drug and alcohol use, all those kinds of indicators that we're used to in terms of the ACEs. But there seems to be a group of young people that bounce those, more so than with the other kind of stuff we deal with.”**

Local authority professional  
working in TRA

Broader concerns about identifying complex harm within young people's lives – including the role of gendered biases, misconceptions of victimhood, and the process of 'adulthood' – also apply in the case of TRA. Practitioners reflected on how abuse that is physically or sexually violent can be easier for professionals to recognise, compared to emotional abuse and coercive control – particularly when this takes place online. Moreover, girls displaying distress or emotional dysregulation were more frequently recognised as vulnerable compared to boys exhibiting similar distress through anger. And in many instances, young people, by virtue of experiencing relationship abuse, were often wrongly viewed as older than they seem, and as such, less deserving of support.

Given evidence which suggests that young people may be less likely to disclose abuse for fear of being ignored by professionals, or because professionals are not interested in their lives outside of a family context,<sup>27</sup> these findings paint a worrying picture. It's apparent that, without a clear and consistent understanding of TRA and its many complex ways of presenting in a young person's life,

teenagers in need of support will remain hidden by and from the professionals whose job it is to support them.

## **System responses that are not fit for purpose**

**A consistent theme across existing research, our FOI analysis, and professional interviews is that TRA does not fit neatly within existing systems. Research posits that current systems are ill-equipped to effectively respond to TRA, with existing services often siloed in their approaches and navigating competing harms that leave critical gaps in support. Youth Justice Services can be resistant to criminalising children, while thresholds for social care referrals are high, providing limited access to existing support.<sup>10</sup> Concerns about criminalisation and stigma are also felt by professionals, who lack clarity about how to support the young people who cause relationship harm, as well as their families.<sup>17</sup>**

Our FOI analysis shows that, in the absence of dedicated frameworks or policies which define TRA, local responses varied considerably. Some local areas managed cases primarily through adult domestic abuse frameworks such as MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences), others exclusively through children's safeguarding systems, and some a complicated mix of the two.

There was consensus among professionals that adult domestic abuse frameworks are not always sufficient for responding to TRA. However, it was clear that current child protection responses also fall short of fully meeting the needs of those experiencing or causing harm in relationships. Professionals frequently highlighted a tendency to focus on young people's presenting needs rather than underlying abuse within their relationships. Instead of addressing dynamics like coercion, control or other patterns of abuse, young people being supported by children's social

care were frequently placed on pathways which respond to other presenting concerns, such as poor mental health, harmful sexual behaviour, or peer-on-peer sexual abuse. In these cases, practitioners described young people frequently remaining in abusive relationships without these dynamics ever being fully understood or challenged.

**“It’s a mixed bag at best I would say [when considering how best to respond to TRA]. I think often the initial approach tends to be kind of child protection ... [without necessarily asking] ‘what is the dynamic in the relationship that we ought to be focussing on?’ ... sometimes the [young person causing harm] is supported or removed from the question, sometimes the [person harmed] might well be moved, but there’s not a full understanding of the dynamic ...”**

**Local authority professional working in TRA**

Additionally, many professionals described how the lack of a clear framework or specific pathway for TRA support has led to disagreements between multi-agency partners about who should ultimately hold responsibility for a young person’s case. Many felt this frequently left individual practitioners holding significant trauma, or managing extremely high need, without knowing how to deliver effective or specialist intervention.

**“I [can think of] a couple of [cases] where professionals around [the young person] were worried about the dynamic of the relationship, but not quite able to hold that responsibility.”**

**Practitioner working in a national programme on child abuse and exploitation**

Over one third of respondents to our FOI request (38%) said that it was a common occurrence for abusive dynamics in teenage relationships to first be identified

through statutory or non-statutory services responding to other safeguarding concerns. This reflects the challenges for professionals working in systems that aren’t set up to respond to TRA, and the inevitabilities of working across siloed harm types.

## A patchwork of support

**These challenges are ultimately reflected in the support that is available to young people both experiencing and causing harm in teenage relationships. Existing literature highlights gaps in specialist provision for TRA, limited professional confidence,<sup>33</sup> inconsistent education on healthy relationships and consent,<sup>3</sup> and a lack of interventions tailored to the specific needs of teenagers.<sup>29</sup>**

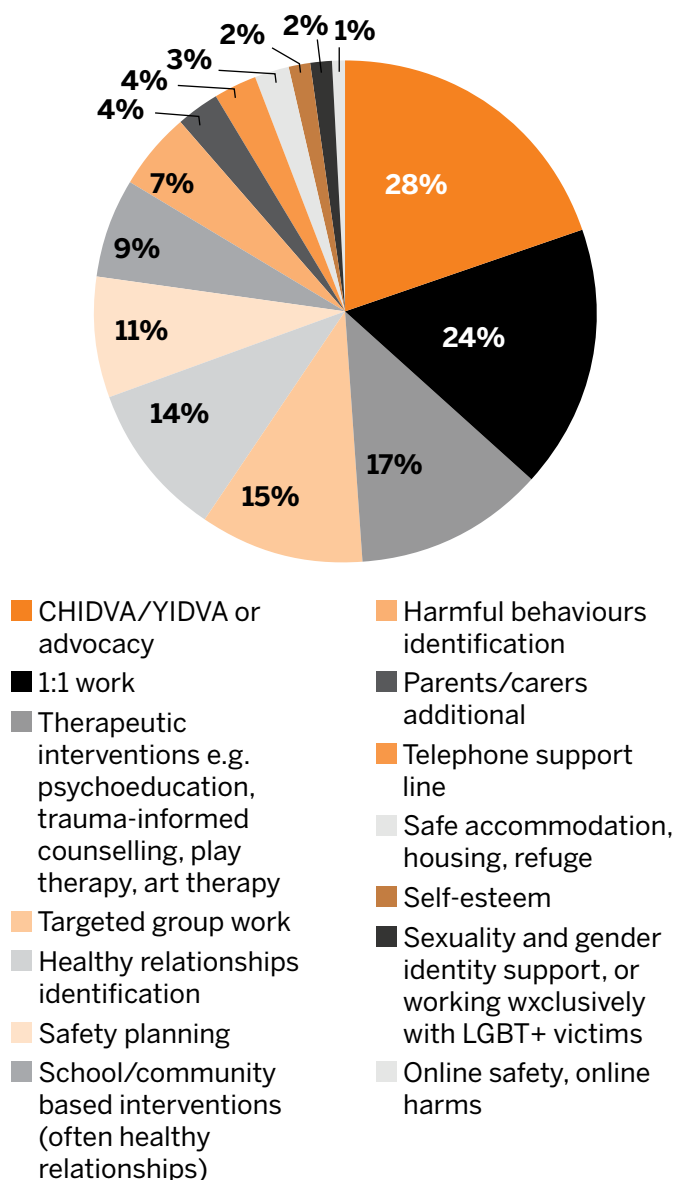
Our FOI analysis similarly suggests that access to support remains highly variable, with provision differing significantly depending on where a young person lives and how their needs are first identified. 59% of the local authorities that responded reported that they do commission or provide specialist support for young people experiencing abuse within their own relationships. However, this headline figure masks considerable variation in both type and availability.

Analysis of key words in the qualitative responses to this question shows that the most common support types offered by those local authorities with some TRA provision are:

- children’s independent domestic violence advocates (CHIDVA)
- young people’s independent domestic violence advocates (YIDVAs)
- other advocacy provisions which offer person-centred advocacy, safety planning, and emotional support for young people experiencing domestic abuse (both as victims within a family context and within their own intimate relationships).

This was closely followed by support that offers one-to-one work with young people, and therapeutic interventions (such as psychoeducation, trauma-informed counselling, or play and art therapy), alongside a wide range of other provision, as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2: Frequently occurring words or terms identified in qualitative feedback describing TRA service types.**



It was unclear, however, the extent to which such provision was designed to respond specifically to TRA. While this provision is important in that it offers some form of support (unlike the 41% of local authorities who do not), many professionals qualified their responses by stating that support for young people experiencing relationship harm was delivered through wider domestic

abuse provision designed for adults or for children as victims in a family context. This risks TRA being perceived as an add-on to existing services, or failing to have the knowledge, staff and set-up required to respond specifically to young people's needs and contexts.

Eligibility criteria and age thresholds were similarly varied. While some services worked with all children and young people under the age of 19, and a smaller number beyond the age of 18 with transitional arrangements, dedicated support provision for 16- to 17-year-olds was far less common. This patchwork of service provision not only points to the postcode lottery in availability of support for young people, but poses challenges at a national level when considering the effectiveness of different interventions.

Support provision for those causing harm in their relationships is particularly lacking. While services for those experiencing abuse were inconsistent, practitioners described support for those causing harm as significantly more limited. Just under one third (32%) of local authority respondents said that they commission this type of support.

Practitioners frequently described cases in which harmful behaviours escalated as a result of a lack of meaningful intervention earlier on in a young person's life, leaving them feeling that they were responding to crises rather than preventing harm. Many described being forced into adopting a 'firefighting' approach, with intervention only being offered when significant harm had already taken place and young people had entered the youth justice system.

**“On the harm, there isn't anything. There's very little support for young people ... until they have harmed and then you've got the youth justice response. But it's [a question of] how do you do the prevent work?”**

**Practitioner working in a child sexual abuse support service**

A number of professionals felt strongly that, for the boys and young men in these circumstances (who make up the majority of those causing harm in teenage relationships), such intervention comes too late, with the system having already let them down. Some reflected on the ways in which young men and boys' mental health is not being sufficiently addressed, linking their lack of confidence and self-esteem to potential harmful behaviours later on. Others noted their concern about the number of boys and young men being wrongfully criminalised as a result of what were perceived as failures by the professionals in their lives to provide support at the right time.

Despite this, it is clear that positive interventions with the potential to reduce harm do exist. But, the system response and ways of working relating to TRA pose significant barriers to access. For example, some practitioners shared that they have been trained in models like AIM (assessment, intervention, moving on), which assess how to best identify and provide support to young people exhibiting harmful behaviours, but that commissioning and funding restrictions limit their ability to refer onwards.

While clear challenges in the availability of specific TRA support remain, our research shows that it rarely exists in isolation. Abuse within teenage relationships often does intersect with trauma, exploitation, poor mental health, and other safeguarding concerns. Our findings also reflect how causing harm in relationships can be bi-directional, with the boundaries between traditional victim and perpetrator narratives sometimes blurred. As such, consideration of TRA within and across other support services is essential.

**"[In one case of TRA], both young people had social workers, so we've had to talk to the social workers about the fact we need to work as a unit. There's absolutely no point [in saying] 'you do your work and you do your work', which is what had been happening for quite a while. So, we brought in a joint consultation with our**

**domestic abuse specialist and our CSE [child sexual exploitation] specialist because there are also elements of CSE [in the relationship], and we've said, actually, we need to work with them as a unit."**

**Local authority professional working in TRA**

One of the biggest challenges of providing effective support is the lack of coordination across statutory and non-statutory systems, inflexible commissioning frameworks that respond to siloed harm types, and an environment in which different support services have to 'compete' with limited funding. In other words, neither the system response nor support provision is effective in being able to fully consider the holistic needs of a young person.

**As one local authority professional reflected:**

**"One of my big things is looking at people holistically as opposed to a sum of parts – you know, lots of individual parts and trying to treat them that way. They're actually a whole person with lots of things going on, and our systems don't respond to that particularly well."**

**Where existing systems fail, schools and families are left carrying risk**

**Across our interviews, practitioners repeatedly reflected on the extent to which support for young people experiencing or causing harm in relationships was often being provided informally by trusted adults in their lives, rather than through dedicated services. Where response pathways were unclear and specialist interventions unavailable, parents, carers and school staff were frequently the first to identify harmful relationship dynamics among young people – and attempt to find resolutions.**

However, practitioners reflected that teachers can be unequipped to manage TRA and other serious overlapping harms like sexual assault and violence within a school context, particularly given rising levels of need and safeguarding complexities. Many spoke of a complete normalisation of sexism, 'low-level' sexual assault like non-consensual touching in lessons, and a 'boys will be boys' attitude within school contexts.

When harm had occurred in a relationship, it was clear that teachers found it extremely challenging to navigate how to support both young people. Practitioners often recalled stories of young people who had been seriously harmed by their partners and had ended up being removed from lessons while their partners stayed. The ways in which peer networks entrench and sustain abuse, as detailed earlier in this report, were seen to exacerbate these challenges for school staff.

**"I've had mixed responses. I've had a lot of teachers and pastoral [staff] really care and conscientiously try and say, you know, we really need some sort of specialist guidance and we're all lacking it. That's a common experience ... It just seems that a lot of teachers are overwhelmed by class capacity ... and there are a lot of safeguarding things cropping up."**

#### **Practitioner working in a child sexual abuse support service**

More widely, practitioners also reflected on the significant burden placed on parents and carers when formal support was unavailable. Many described working with families attempting to manage serious concerns around coercive control, sexual violence, online abuse, and deteriorating mental health, without the tools or language to navigate these issues confidently.

Parents and carers were often expected to monitor relationships, manage escalating risks, and in some cases, navigate harm and

abuse from their own children alongside advocating for their support. When adults themselves were experiencing other significant challenges, including domestic abuse from partners within the family home, the ability to provide support for their young people was significantly limited.

## **Emerging good practice**

**Despite these challenges across under-resourced, and sometimes outdated, systems, there are pockets of good practice that can inform future systems-wide improvements. While evidence on effective responses remains limited, promising approaches include healthy relationship education,<sup>3,17</sup> bystander interventions,<sup>3</sup> and access to specialist, child-centred support.**

One local authority in the north of England operates on a single point of access for what they define as "teenage relationship harm". Embedded within children's social care and with access to the area's domestic abuse and broader criminal justice systems, the aim was described to us simply as "right support, right time". Anyone with concerns about potential TRA comes through the "teenage relationship harm gatekeeper", who is able to identify the right routes for appropriate support, facilitate joint working between services, and track patterns in individual young people's cases.

Pockets of good practice in identifying, responding to, and supporting young people both experiencing TRA and causing harm ultimately rely on existing strong multi-agency working between both statutory and non-statutory services, alongside flexible commissioning. However, even where this is in place, there is wide recognition that more is needed, particularly in fully embedding, learning, and 'catching up' with the holistic complexity of young people's lives, so that support meets need.

# Conclusion and policy recommendations for change

**The findings of this report paint a damning picture. TRA is a significant, complex and evolving form of harm affecting a growing number of young people. Unlike domestic abuse between adults, it is characterised strongly by its interconnectedness with wider peer relationships, the fact that it is facilitated both on and offline, and the way it overlaps with a number of wider harm types. While awareness of unhealthy relationships appears to have increased in recent years, this has not been matched by equivalent progress in how adults and professionals in teenagers' lives identify, understand, prevent or respond to abuse. Moreover, this increased confidence appears fragile, with a language gap between young people and professionals at risk of widening at rapid pace, and young people's perceptions of healthy or unhealthy relational dynamics strongly influenced by fast-moving wider societal attitudes.**

At present, TRA remains inconsistently defined, poorly recorded, and inadequately understood by professionals. Young people causing harm are often the least supported, with interventions dependent more on where they live and which service(s) first identify concerns than a full understanding of their needs. Too often, intervention happens too late, with opportunities for prevention and disruption of harm missed. This leaves young people in increasingly unsafe positions, those causing harm being criminalised, and professionals navigating highly complex cases without clear routes for specialist or dedicated support.

The policy recommendations we outline below seek to address these challenges, proposing a more consistent and child-centred approach to TRA, while recognising the complex and overlapping nature of harm in young people's lives.



## A shared national definition

### What?

The government must establish a shared national definition of teenage relationship abuse.

### Why?

In short, to aid more consistent identification and response. Our findings demonstrate that the absence of a clear and consistently applied definition of TRA is one of the greatest barriers to effectively identifying young people experiencing and causing harm in relationships, recording and assessing need, and ultimately providing support. Professionals regularly described uncertainty about where TRA begins, how it differs from adult domestic abuse, and how it overlaps with other forms of harm including child sexual abuse, harmful sexual behaviour, bullying, and child exploitation. As a result, cases of TRA are being missed by professionals or responded to through siloed support services, without the abusive dynamics within their relationships ever being fully recognised. Inconsistent data collections between local areas compounds these issues and ultimately hide this complex form of harm.

### How?

We believe a revised definition of TRA should reflect the realities of young people's relationships today. It should explicitly recognise the developmental contexts in which TRA often takes place, the importance of both identity and belonging in teenage relationships, and the influence of peer networks in facilitating, legitimising and enabling abuse, both on and offline. Indeed, the use of technology and online platforms to aid abuse should be reflected as a distinctive and essential feature of TRA, noting the lack of distinction between the online and offline worlds for many young people today. It should also recognise that

harm within teenage relationships frequently overlaps and intersects with other forms of vulnerability and abuse, rather than existing in isolation.

We recommend this definition of TRA be brought forward in either statutory domestic abuse guidance, a standalone piece of guidance for TRA (see recommendation two below), or through existing statutory multi-agency guidance on child safeguarding, such as Working Together to Safeguard Children. Once established, this definition must be adopted consistently across multi-agency safeguarding partnerships for children and young adults.

## Dedicated pathways for identification and response via a national framework

### What?

The government should develop a national framework for how multi-agency partners with responsibility for child safeguarding (including education partners) identify and respond to TRA. This must build on a shared definition.

### Why?

Throughout this research, professionals consistently described a system in which responsibility for responding to TRA remains unclear. Cases are managed inconsistently between areas through children's social care, adult domestic abuse, child exploitation, and wider children's services responses, often leading to confusion about ownership and accountability among professionals. The patchwork of variable support, often with inconsistent eligibility criteria, leaves young people affected by TRA too often unable to access support until their needs have escalated.

**How?**

A national framework for TRA should be provided by government through a standalone piece of guidance. It should create clarity about the roles and responsibilities of key partners when concerns about TRA arise. It should also support local areas to establish clear referral routes between services, risk assessment processes, and support pathways for both young people experiencing harm and those and causing it. This must build from a clear recognition of the distinct characteristics of TRA identified throughout this report.

More widely, the findings of this report must be incorporated into the implementation of recent changes to policy and practice in relation to child safeguarding and victim support. The duty to collaborate – a statutory requirement for multi-agency partners to collaborate on the commissioning of support provision for those experiencing domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and serious violence, introduced through the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 – must be commenced as soon as possible as part of work to develop a dedicated pathway for TRA. Going further, TRA should be explicitly included within local needs assessments and support planning for extra-familial harm. Further, the government should amend the Children in need census data collection to introduce a standalone TRA category to improve local authority reporting and data collection.

When established, we recommend that the Child Protection Authority takes responsibility for overseeing and monitoring the effectiveness of dedicated pathways for TRA.

## **Guaranteed access to effective, specialist support that can flex to meet the complex needs of young people in abusive relationships**

**What?**

The government should commit to providing sustainable funding for specialist support for young people affected by TRA, regardless of where they live. Explorations into effective interventions that tackle TRA and wider harmful behaviour, as outlined in their VAWG strategy, must be scaled up and adopted for use as soon as possible, ensuring an evidence-based approach to tackling TRA.

**Why?**

Against the backdrop of a growing body of evidence on the increasing prevalence of TRA, our analysis shows clearly how current support provision is insufficient in meeting demand. As the identification of this complex harm type increases over time, the number of young people needing support to navigate and recover from experiences of TRA will continue to rise. Effective support provision that offers both meaningful early action to prevent harm, as well as risk response, must be fully resourced in order for the government to meet its ambitious goal of halving VAWG over the next decade.

**How?**

Support for young people experiencing and causing harm in their relationships must be trauma-informed, flexible, and centred around their needs. CHIDVA and other advocacy models which enable young people to access trusted and consistent support, and which can flex across multiple harm types, should be expanded and further invested in for those experiencing harm. The government's newly announced Steps to Safety initiative (a new referral system

which will connect victims of domestic abuse to specialist support through their GP) should incorporate TRA referrals as a core element of its delivery offer. As set out in recommendations four and five below, further investment in evidence-based interventions that both limit and prevent harm are also essential.

To facilitate guaranteed access to support, we strongly recommend that commissioning and funding arrangements reflect that TRA rarely exists in isolation from other experiences of trauma, harm and vulnerability. They should also align to a national framework for response, when this is established. Moreover, particular consideration should be given to the language used to describe services for young people affected by TRA, noting potential barriers to access as a result of young people's different perceptions of terms like 'abuse' and 'harm' compared to adults.



## Expanded support for young people already causing harm in teenage relationships

### What?

The government should ensure that all local areas have access to evidence-based interventions for young people who are already causing harm within teenage relationships.

### Why?

Our research highlights the lack of available support for young people who are demonstrating harmful and abusive behaviours in their relationships. Meaningful intervention is often unavailable until behaviours have escalated significantly or young people have entered the criminal justice system. This is not only a missed opportunity to prevent and disrupt future harm; it represents a failure to support children who themselves may have experienced trauma and abuse.

### How?

Increased investment in specialist interventions for young people demonstrating harmful or abusive behaviours should be provided as early as possible, across all areas. National and local commissioners should work to expand the availability of existing programmes that are already showing promise in supporting young people to change harmful behaviours, and more should be done to increase the evidence base on what works to reduce harm.

We welcome the government's ambition (as set out in the VAWG strategy) in respect of those already causing harm in teenage relationships and the need for evidence-based behaviour change interventions. We recommend that further details about plans in this area are published as soon as possible, with a view to increasing access to support.

## A move towards genuine early action to prevent later harm

What? Alongside guaranteed access to the right support when harm has been identified, a national framework for responding to TRA should keep a laser focus on early action to prevent later harm.

### Why?

Our findings suggest that many current responses are reactive, with support offered only after harm has occurred. Prevention must instead begin long before harmful behaviours or abuse emerge within teenage relationships, with investment to match. We welcome the government's commitments on healthy relationship education in the VAWG strategy; however, we are clear that education alone is not the only answer. A young person's ability to recognise the signs of an unhealthy relationship is not the same as being able to act upon them, nor does understanding consent remove the pressures and power imbalances that many young people experience within relationships.

### How?

Where educational initiatives are delivered, these must consistently and meaningfully explore the full range of issues outlined in this report, including healthy relationships, consent, respect, exploitation and grooming, and online safety. Educational programmes must begin in primary school, continue throughout childhood and adolescence, and importantly, meet children and young people where they are. Crucially, they must reflect language that young people understand and use to talk about their own relationships.

While not the full picture, it is clear that earlier experience of harm or abuse may, for some children, be a driver of later unhealthy behaviours within relationships. The government should therefore review opportunities for embedding genuine early intervention on TRA when young people

are already known to statutory and non-statutory services. When young people are identified as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, experiencing exploitation, involved in youth violence, repeatedly excluded from school, or have additional needs such as SEND, consideration should be given as to how to explore their needs in relation to peer relationships.

National and local partners should strengthen support for parents and carers. Trusted adults in young people's lives need access to information, advice and specialist support when concerns about TRA emerge. This should be the case whether their young people are experiencing or causing harm in relationships. Advice and guidance on how parents and carers' own behaviours can shape young people's perceptions of healthy or unhealthy relational dynamics should be given careful consideration as part of this work.

The government should increase investment in youth services and take a more ambitious approach to its "trusted adult" guarantee within the National Youth Strategy.<sup>28</sup> Increasing access to supportive, trusted and safe adults who can provide advice, guidance and a listening ear to young people on relationship difficulties will support the early identification and prevention of later harm, and ease pressure on already stretched services. Similarly, safe spaces like youth clubs that allow young people to be with their peers and build connections to other young people will help foster a sense of belonging, reducing potential vulnerability to harm and creating opportunities to identify concerns before they escalate.

## **Investment in professional training to improve confidence and ways of working around complex harm**

### **What?**

The government must invest in workforce development and training to improve professionals' understanding of TRA. This should apply to all those working with children and young people, including teachers and school staff.

### **Why?**

Currently, good practice in responding to TRA relies on a professional's individual confidence and experience. Too many, therefore, feel uncertainty around recognising harmful relational dynamics (like coercive control) and distinguishing TRA from other forms of abuse and adolescent behaviour, and instead fall back on unhelpful biases and assumptions about victimisation.

### **How?**

Guidance and training should support professionals to understand the specific characteristics of TRA identified in this report, how these compare to adult domestic abuse, and how to respond to overlapping and interconnected harms. Professional development should also address barriers to identification, including gendered assumptions, adultification, and the tendency to dismiss indicators of abuse as simply 'teenage behaviour'.

Alongside training, practitioners require access to practical tools that support effective identification and decision-making. As part of the establishment of a national framework for responding to TRA, the government should support the development and wider dissemination of age-appropriate assessment tools – including young people's DASH risk checklists – and other evidence-based approaches that help professionals recognise and respond to risk.

Once again, we recommend that, when established, the Child Protection Authority must act as the body responsible for overseeing a joined-up workforce training and development offer for those working with children that meaningfully includes TRA.

## **Prioritised systemic reform before an updated age threshold in the Domestic Abuse Act**

### **What?**

Systemic reform to the ways in which professionals identify, assess and provide support for TRA should be enacted before any formal considerations of changing the age threshold in the Domestic Abuse Act.

### **Why?**

Debates about extending the statutory definition of domestic abuse to include under-16s should not distract from the urgent reforms required to improve responses to TRA now. There are legitimate arguments both for and against lowering the statutory age threshold. However, the findings of this report suggest that changes to legal definitions alone will not address the fundamental weaknesses within current systems.

Many of the barriers identified throughout this research – including inconsistent identification, limited professional understanding, inadequate pathways, and gaps in support provision – would remain even if the legal age threshold were amended.

### How?

Government should therefore prioritise enacting the recommendations outlined above before revisiting questions of legal definition. In the meantime, particular focus should be placed on support during young people's transition from children's to adult services at the age of 18.

## Young people's voices at the front and centre of future reform

### What?

Future policy and practice development on TRA must be shaped by young people themselves.

### Why?

It is challenging to engage with young people in a safe manner on a highly emotive and triggering subject, particularly for those who have caused or experienced harm in relationships. However, such challenges must not impede young people's involvement in future policy and practice development on the issue of TRA, and it is critical that future work in this area is informed by their direct experience.

### How?

Future research on the prevalence and nature of, and the response to, TRA should be conducted with diverse groups of young people. The government must also ensure that future reforms are co-produced with them. Definitions, professional guidance, intervention models, educational resources, and service design should all be developed with and tested alongside young people.

Young people are experts in their own relationships, experiences and support needs. If policy and practice are to respond effectively to TRA, their voices must be at the heart of every stage of future reform.



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\* Source: The Children's Society Good Childhood Report 2024

### **Contact us**

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