



National Youth Agency

# Intimate partner abuse among 16–25 year-olds

A resource for youth workers

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“I am very pleased to see that the National Youth Agency has created a resource to help practitioners understand and respond to young people’s experience of Intimate Partner Abuse (IPV). Youth workers and practitioners have unique relationships of trust with young people and can enable them to recognise the signs of abuse and find pathways for support.

Children and young people have told me directly that they want to be taken seriously, treated respectfully and be believed when they share their experiences.

As the harmful dynamics of IPV evolve with the expansion of young people’s worlds into online spaces, it’s important that practitioners have the information and tools to understand the unique risks young people face and feel confident to respond.

**This resource is a step in the right direction.”**

**– Dame Nicole Jacobs,**

Domestic Abuse Commissioner  
for England and Wales



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Young people deserve to be safe, believed and supported. This resource strengthens our sector’s ability to step in early, challenge harmful behaviours, and stand firmly alongside young people when it matters most.

**As youth workers, our values demand that we lead with clarity, courage and compassion, and this resource helps us do exactly that.”**

**– Abbee McLatchie,**  
Deputy CEO, NYA





"Young survivors are too often overlooked. Earlier this year, data from Refuge's support services revealed a concerning rise in domestic abuse affecting young women and girls aged 16 – 25, particularly involving psychological abuse, coercive control, and physical violence.

Refuge supports thousands of survivors every year, but prevention and early intervention are our most powerful tools.

**By empowering all young people with knowledge, confidence, and support, we can help stop abuse before it starts.**

**– Elaha Walizadeh**

Senior Programme Manager  
for Children and Young  
People at Refuge



All young people have the right to be empowered with the skills to form healthy relationships and prevent abuse.

By supporting young people in this way, we can help them build a future free from violence, **one based on equality, respect and compassion.**"

**– Susie McDonald**

CEO of Tender



# Introduction

Intimate partner abuse is sadly not an uncommon occurrence in the UK, with research showing that one-third of young people have experienced such abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Youth workers can provide essential support for those affected. This resource has been created for practitioners working with young people aged 16–25 who experience intimate partner abuse. Irrespective of role or setting, if you are supporting young people, you have a part to play in recognising abuse and offering safe, informed responses.

Intimate partner abuse among young people sits at the intersection of child protection, adult safeguarding, and the wider violence against women and girls (VAWG) agenda. However, this age group often falls through the gaps. At 17, a young person may no longer meet thresholds for children's services, but at 18 they may not be seen as eligible for adult support.

At the same time, they are negotiating major life changes such as leaving school, entering higher education or work, forming new relationships, and establishing independence. This combination of vulnerability and transition means the risks of harm are real, and it is critical to seize opportunities for early intervention.

Research and reports, such as the government's policy paper *Victims in Their Own Right*,<sup>2</sup> have underlined the urgency of recognising young people as victims in their own right, rather than having their experiences absorbed into wider family cases or adult-focused services where their needs may be missed.

Young survivors consistently tell us that their experiences of abuse are minimised or misunderstood – sometimes dismissed as “just teenage relationships” or “young love gone wrong”. This guidance aims to challenge these myths and give practitioners the confidence, knowledge and tools to respond appropriately.

We know that abuse in young people's relationships does not exist in isolation: it intersects with wider inequalities and identities, it is increasingly facilitated through digital platforms, and it requires coordinated responses across agencies. This resource therefore brings together legal frameworks, the varied realities about young people, the role of youth work, the importance of intersectionality, and the power of amplifying young survivors' voices to help practitioners better understand the dynamics of abuse in young people's lives, to recognise the unique challenges they face, and to strengthen a joined-up response that centres young people's safety, wellbeing and agency.

## Legislation & connection to VAWG Strategy

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021<sup>3</sup> was the first UK legislation to include all forms of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence in a single framework. According to this Act, domestic abuse is defined as abuse from one person towards another, if they are both aged 16 or over and personally connected to each other.

1. Herbert A., et al. (2022). “Categories of intimate partner violence and abuse among young women and men: Latent class analysis of psychological, physical, and sexual victimization and perpetration in a UK birth cohort.” National Library of Medicine. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221087708>

2. UK Government (2025). *Victims in their own right? Babies, children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse.* [www.gov.uk/government/publications/babies-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-domestic-abuse/victims-in-their-own-right-babies-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-domestic-abuse-accessible](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/babies-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-domestic-abuse/victims-in-their-own-right-babies-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-domestic-abuse-accessible)

3. UK Government (2021). *Domestic Abuse Act 2021.* <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17>

The categories of abuse represented in this Act include physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse, and psychological, emotional or other abuse. Although not explicitly listed in the Act, many organisations working with young people treat online/technology abuse and stalking or harassment as separate types of abuse. This is because these kinds of abuse are becoming more common, and it is important to be able to identify and understand them properly.



Most survivors we support now have experienced some form of technology-facilitated abuse and what has changed over recent years is the ease with which abusers are able to stalk, monitor and harm women and children by using technology – making many cases of abuse increasingly complex.

– Emma Pickering,

Head of Technology-Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment at Refuge.

Before the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, there had been no formal update to UK law around domestic abuse or intimate partner violence since the 1800s, when it became illegal for husbands to beat their wives. There were, however, a series of acts that criminalised specific behaviours or focused on specific groups:

## Children's Acts of 1989 and 2004

Children Act 1989 These defined the types of abuse that put a young person under 18 at risk and introduced multi-agency safeguarding to help deal with these risks.

## Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023

Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK. This introduced further child protection processes and clarified new types of abuse facing young people.

## Malicious Communications Act 1988 and 2003

Malicious Communications Act 1988 and 2003. Communications Act 2003 This made it illegal to send any form of “grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or menacing” print or electronic communication to someone with the intent to cause distress.

## Serious Crime Act of 2015

Serious Crime Act 2015 This made coercive control illegal.

## Online Safety Act 2023

Online Safety Act 2023 This aimed to address the epidemic of online and tech abuse for young people.

## Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2021

Tackling violence against women and girls strategy - GOV.UK This focused on four key pillars: prevention, support for victim-survivors, pursuing perpetrators, and strengthening the system of training and reporting.

4. Refuge (2025). “Refuge calls for tech-facilitated abuse to be a priority in government VAWG strategy.” News. <https://refuge.org.uk/news/refuge-calls-for-tech-facilitated-abuse-to-be-a-priority-ingovernment-vawg-strategy-following-the-charitys-inaugural-tech-safety-summit/> (accessed 12 November 2025)

There is also a proposed Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, which would strengthen multi-agency safeguarding and introduce stricter measures to prevent harm.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the host of additional legislation aimed at preventing abuse between intimate partners, rates continue to rise with domestic abuse offences in the UK having more than doubled between 2016 and 2023.<sup>6</sup>

In 2024, the Office for National Statistics reported that one in five people aged 16 or above have experienced intimate partner abuse at some point since turning 16.<sup>7</sup>

## The complexity of young people's lives

16–25 is a transitional age. Young people are leaving the safety of secondary school to begin to make choices about their own futures. They will be deciding whether to pursue an academic pathway or a vocational one, and whether to go to university or enter the world of work. Unfortunately, many young people are left vulnerable before they even reach this next phase of their lives, with data showing that 12.8% of young people aged 16 and over were out of education and unemployed in August 2025.<sup>8</sup>

A large proportion of these young people have experienced school exclusion, persistent absence or referral to alternative provision, meaning they have often lacked consistent support during the crucial years leading up to these decisions.

As a result, only 66.5% of pupils in alternative provision go on to further education, training or work, compared to 93.2% of pupils who stay in mainstream settings,<sup>9</sup> highlighting the risk of young people disconnecting from support at a key point in their lives.

Even if young people successfully make it into education or work, this period of change is compounded by other intersecting vulnerabilities: 16–25 year-olds are at the highest risk for housing instability, and approximately 22% are facing mental health disorders.<sup>10</sup> This age group transitions from having close supervision and constant guidance to being left largely to their own devices. For those young people who may not have a stable and supportive home life, they leave the safety of their support system at secondary school and can easily fall through the cracks in the system.

Transitional and multi-agency safeguarding processes are consequently crucial for young people aged 16 and above. Practitioners need to recognise that the risks and vulnerabilities young people face do not disappear once they turn 18, and that the transition from child focused services to adult services often leaves gaps in protection.

Effective youth work involves being able to provide support for mental health, housing, relationships and education/employment, as well as protection from abuse or exploitation. It must also signpost young people to services that can provide that support.

With this age group being so vulnerable in so many ways, it comes as no<sup>11</sup> surprise that it is also the group most likely to experience abuse in their intimate relationships.<sup>12</sup> Many young people are entering into their first serious, long-term relationships and may not have a clear understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship or have positive relationship role models in their lives.

6. <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/domestic-abuse-commissioner-responds-to-latest-criminal-justice-statistics/>

7. [Office for National Statistics \(2024\)](#), Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2024.

8. UK Parliament (2025). [NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training](#).

9. UK Government (2025). [Key stage 4 destination measures](#).

10. NHS England (2023). [One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023](#).

11. Please see <https://nwgnetwork.org/> and <https://nya.org.uk/document/34569/> for further information.

12. Office for National Statistics (2024). [Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2024](#).

Exposure to harmful content online, such as misogynistic influencers promoting dominance in men and submissiveness in women, can influence expectations and behaviours within relationships. This is compounded by the impact of violent pornography, which often depicts acts of aggression, degradation towards women, harmful stereotypes of gender, race and identity, and a lack of visible consent. For many young people, pornography has become a primary source of relationship education, leading to these behaviours becoming normalised.

With 78% of 16 and 17 year-olds reporting having seen pornographic content “within the past week”,<sup>13</sup> it is unsurprising that nearly half of young people report believing that girls “expect” sex to involve physical aggression or violence.<sup>14</sup> Together, these influences create a dangerous environment for young people where unhealthy and abusive relationship dynamics can easily take root.

However, research indicates that many young people may not recognise abusive behaviours in their own relationships. Teenagers and young adults often do not understand what constitutes abusive behaviours that are not physically abusive, with over one-third of young people in a recent Women’s Aid study agreeing that behaviours like jealousy, dominance, love bombing, stalking, “making your partner happy even if you do not feel comfortable”, and “checking your partner’s outfits before they go to the gym to prevent unwanted attention” are all part of a healthy relationship.<sup>15</sup>

## Intersectionality

The identity and lived experiences of children and young people can influence how they engage with professionals and how any harm they are experiencing may manifest in behaviour, so it is important to try and identify barriers and make support as accessible as possible. Gender identity, sexuality, disability, neurodiversity, age and language spoken also need to be considered, as they can intersect to affect a young person’s experience of intimate partner abuse.

Intersectionality can therefore help professionals to identify multiple systems barriers, become more aware of discrimination and oppression, and provide specific, tailored support to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people they work with.

## Gender

Intimate partner abuse is a gendered harm, with the victims disproportionately women<sup>16</sup> and the perpetrators mostly men.<sup>17</sup> While this does not mean that men cannot be victims of intimate partner abuse, how the abuse manifests can be different depending on the gender of the victim, and so practitioners should be prepared to offer everyone tailored support that accounts for these differences. Abuse can take various forms, including physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and coercive or controlling behaviour, which is a pattern of behaviour that allows the alleged perpetrator to gain or maintain control of the victim.<sup>18</sup>

13. Thurman, N. and F. Obster (2021). “The regulation of internet pornography: What a survey of under-18s tells us about the necessity for and potential efficacy of emerging legislative approaches.” Policy & Internet. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.250>

14. Children’s Commissioner (2023). ‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’ - Young people and pornography. [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography/](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography/)

15. Women’s Aid (2023). Influencers and attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse? [www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CYP-Influencers-and-Attitudes-Report.pdf](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CYP-Influencers-and-Attitudes-Report.pdf)

16. Office for National Statistics (2024). Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2024. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024)

17. Office for National Statistics (2024). Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2024. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024)

18. Women’s Aid (2024). The Domestic Abuse Report 2024: The Annual Audit. <https://womensaid.org.uk/annual-audit-2024/>

Examples of coercive or controlling behaviour include consistently humiliating or insulting the victim, isolating them from friends and family, or threatening to hurt pets. When men are victims, they are more likely to report experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse than coercive or controlling behaviour, which is a pattern of behaviour that allows the alleged perpetrator to gain or maintain control of the victim. Men are also likely to dismiss the impact of the abuse<sup>19</sup> and may present as nonchalant and dismissive about “issues” in their relationship. Traditional societal expectations of masculinity may mean that young men do not feel able to express their emotions or admit that they’ve been hurt by a female partner. For boys and young men in same sex relationships, additional barriers such as fear of outing themselves, stigma around sexuality and limited representation of male victims in LGBTQ+ contexts may further inhibit disclosure. Therefore, to facilitate open and honest dialogue, it might be more effective to create a safe space for a private conversation.

When women are victims, they are more likely to be killed by their partner,<sup>20</sup> suggesting the severity of force likely to be used during incidents of physical abuse. They are also far more likely to experience coercive control than male victims<sup>21</sup> and tend to be fearful because of the abuse.<sup>22</sup>

When working with young people who may be entering their first romantic relationships, it can be helpful to create opportunities for non-judgemental discussion about safe and unsafe behaviours in relationships, as controlling behaviours can be harder to identify as abusive, especially as they leave no physical mark.

In these discussions, it can be useful to encourage young people to think about how they might feel in different situations, such as if a partner wanted them to share their location or stop spending time with a certain friend. Would they feel able to say “no”, or would they be worried about emotional manipulation, pressure, violence or other negative consequences? Exploring these scenarios can help young people identify warning signs and recognise the difference between caring and controlling behaviours.

## Sexuality and gender identity

Young people’s sexuality and gender identity can shape not only their experiences of domestic abuse but also the barriers they face in seeking help. LGBTQ+ young people may be harmed in ways that exploit or weaponise their sexuality or gender identity, which can add an additional layer of shame and guilt, leaving them feeling as if the abuse is their own fault. This can make them more vulnerable to abuse, more reluctant to disclose and more likely to feel that support services will not take them seriously.

*If you feel your identity isn't considered by others to be legitimate, then you also feel the abuses related to your identity aren't legitimate.*<sup>23</sup>

19. Hester, M., et al. Is it coercive controlling violence? A cross-sectional domestic violence and abuse survey of men attending general practice in England. *Psychology of Violence*, 7(3), 417-427. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000107>

20. Dobash, R.P. and Dobash, R.E. (2004). “Women’s violence to men in intimate relationships. Working on a Puzzle.” *British Journal of Criminology*, 44(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azh026>

21. Office for National Statistics (2024). Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2024. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2024](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2024)

22. Myhill, A. (2015) “Measuring coercive control: what can we learn from national population surveys?” *Violence Against Women*. 21(3), pp. 355-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214568032>

23. Bespoke training on LGBTQ+ experiences of abuse delivered online in 2025 by Galop. [www.galop.org.uk/training](http://www.galop.org.uk/training)

Examples of how intimate partner abuse may manifest when sexuality or gender identity is targeted include: <sup>24</sup>

- **Threatening to “out” someone before they are ready**
- **Restricting access to gender-affirming items such as specific items of clothing or binders**
- **Fetishising or invalidating their identity**
- **Engaging in so-called “corrective” sexual assault**
- **Deliberately using incorrect pronouns or their “dead-name”, especially around friends or family**
- **Controlling access to LGBTQ+ spaces and support groups.**

When working with LGBTQ+ young people who may be experiencing intimate partner abuse, best practice involves respecting and reflecting the labels young people use for themselves, challenging heteronormativity and cisnormativity in how relationships are discussed, and building safe spaces where young people feel able to share information about their pronouns and identities without fear of judgement.

Youth workers should also recognise that LGBTQ+ young people may be reluctant to access mainstream support services if those services are not obviously inclusive or respectful of their identity, and, where possible, they should refer them to specialist support services such as Galop.

## Disability

Evidence shows that individuals with a hidden or visible disability are more vulnerable to domestic abuse, experience it for longer periods of time, and are subjected to more severe and frequent forms than those without a disability. <sup>25</sup>

People with disabilities also experience differing and specific forms of harm, and control can relate to their condition, particularly if the alleged perpetrator is acting as the victim’s carer.

Examples of how intimate partner abuse may manifest when the victim has a disability include:

- **Withholding medication or access to it or administering medication incorrectly, e.g. forcing the victim to take the wrong dose**
- **Failing to support the individual with personal care or hygiene needs, where such support is essential**
- **Withholding, destroying or manipulating other specialist medical equipment that the person needs for their independence**
- **Taking control of the individual’s finances, which may include taking any disability-related benefits the victim may be receiving**
- **Exploiting an individual’s communication difficulties and societal misconceptions**
- **Manipulation of sensory sensitivities and emotional regulation**
- **Gaslighting - The abuser dismisses or denies events that clearly happened, saying things like “You’re imagining things” or “That never happened.” For disabled victims, this can be amplified by implying their disability affects their memory or perception:**
- **“You’re confused because of your condition.”**

24. Bespoke training on LGBT+ experiences of abuse delivered online in 2025 by Galop. [www.galop.org.uk/training](http://www.galop.org.uk/training)

25. Public Health England (2015). Disability and domestic abuse: Risk, impacts and response.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a806673ed915d74e622e3c8/Disability\\_and\\_domestic\\_abuse\\_topic\\_overview\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a806673ed915d74e622e3c8/Disability_and_domestic_abuse_topic_overview_FINAL.pdf)

When working with young people with disabilities, youth workers should consider the following questions:

- **Does the young person have the capacity to recognise abusive behaviour?**
- **Is there an opportunity to speak with them alone? It is difficult for individuals with disabilities to have the opportunity to disclose abuse if the alleged perpetrator is always present?**
- **Is additional support needed to facilitate communication? This might include a sign language interpreter, communication aids or specific medical equipment. Can these be accessed or arranged to ensure the young person can engage fully?**
- **How is the young person presenting? Are there concerns about their hygiene, appearance or clothing that might indicate neglect, abuse or lack of support?**
- **Be aware of individuals who regularly mask behaviour, shut down or become dysregulated – they may present the same as someone with symptoms of trauma, so if they are experiencing abuse, it may be harder to identify, and you should approach with professional curiosity.**

Professionals working with adults at risk, especially those with disabilities, should be aware of their local authority's safeguarding policies, referral pathways and safeguarding adults board as it is important to understand local procedures and thresholds. Advice can often be sought without a formal referral.

## Cultural and structural barriers

Practitioners should always consider how race, immigration status, faith and language levels may affect the dynamics of intimate partner abuse. Institutional and/or systemic racism can also lead to individuals of Black, Asian or other ethnically diverse heritage being deeply distrustful of agencies, such as the police, and feeling as though there are no accessible routes to support them when experiencing intimate partner abuse.

Young people who have or who are in an intimate relationship with someone who has insecure immigration status may be reluctant to disclose abuse to authorities for fear of being identified and the potential consequences. Similarly, insecure immigration status can be used by an alleged perpetrator to further control and manipulate a victim of abuse.

Practitioners should also recognise that deeply embedded cultural attitudes and norms can prevent behaviour from being labelled or recognised as abusive and make it more difficult for the victim to access support. For example, in instances of so-called "honour" based abuse – now referred to more broadly as harmful practices – protecting the reputation of the family and wider community might be at the forefront of the victim's mind, and the victim may deeply fear the repercussions of disclosing abuse from their community.

In some instances, individuals may attempt to justify controlling or harmful behaviour by referencing religious texts or teachings. These interpretations are often misconstrued and do not reflect the broader values of respect, compassion and equality that many faith traditions uphold.

It is important to recognise that religious teachings are diverse, and many faith leaders actively challenge such misuse by offering interpretations that reject abuse and promote healthy, respectful relationships.

Practitioners should be aware of how faith-based beliefs may influence disclosure and help-seeking, while also understanding the potential for stigma or fear rooted in misapplied religious norms.

Practitioners should be knowledgeable about cultural and faith-based nuances, stigma, and any risks that may be associated with disclosing domestic abuse.

When working with young people with ethnically diverse backgrounds, or heritages that differ from their own, youth workers should consider the following questions:

- **Is an interpreter needed? Is it possible to arrange this? If an interpreter is needed, they should be a professional. In cases of honour-based abuse especially, family members should never be used as interpreters**
- **Is it possible to speak to the young person alone?**
- **If faith is a consideration, can you speak to a local faith-based organisation that can help you work through interpretations of their faith with the young person?**

In addition, youth workers should:

- **Explore whether the young person would feel safer accessing support through a community-based or faith-sensitive service, rather than a statutory agency**
- **Provide information about specialist services that work with survivors from Black, Asian and global majority backgrounds, so the young person knows support is available that understands their context**
- **Be clear about confidentiality, safeguarding duties and what will happen if the young person discloses, so they can make informed decisions without fear of unexpected consequences**
- **Take extra time to build trust and rapport, understanding that fear of racism, stigma or immigration issues may mean disclosures take longer**
- **Where safe to do so, involve independent advocates who share or understand the young person's cultural or linguistic background.**

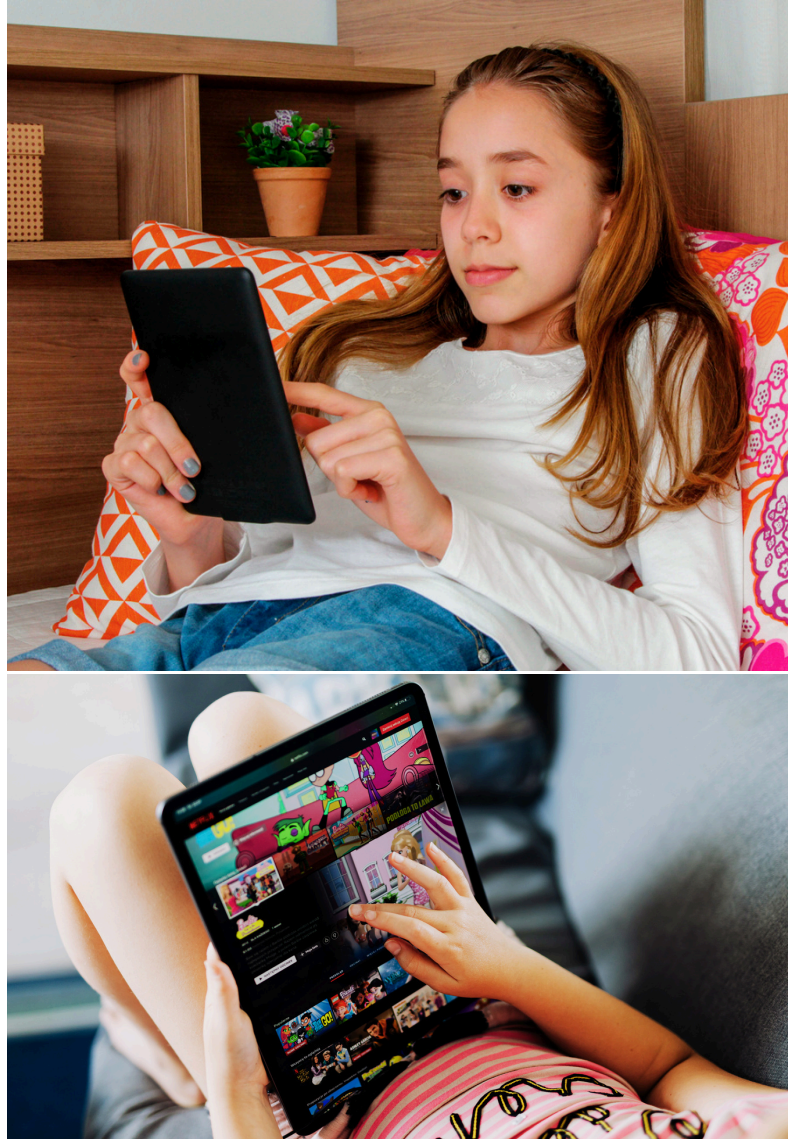
Finally, practitioners should endeavour to recognise their own biases and stereotypes and to prevent these from clouding their interpretation or impacting any support offered.

## Technology-facilitated abuse

In recent decades, technology has rapidly evolved from an occasional tool to an essential part of everyday life. It now shapes nearly every aspect of young people's lives, including communication, social connection, education, wellbeing and mental health. While technology has evolved to help us in our daily lives, it has opened new ways for domestic abuse to be perpetuated – this is called technology-facilitated abuse.

Under the [UK's Online Safety Act 2023](#), an intimate image is legally referred to as an image of a person in an intimate state, which covers a wide range of situations such:

- the person participating or engaging in sexual act or behaviour
- all or part of the person's exposed genitals, buttocks or breasts
- the person in an act of urination or defecation, or other personal care related to genital or anal discharge.



## There are six main types of intimate image abuse:

### **Sextortion**

The act of threatening to share private intimate images/videos unless a ransom is paid, this can often be sexual, financial favours or more images

### **Downblousing:**

The act of taking photographs or videos down a person's top, shirt or blouse without their consent, often with the intention of obtaining sexual gratification or causing humiliation and distress to the victim

### **Upskirting:**

The act of taking photographs or videos under a person's clothing without their consent, often with the intention of obtaining sexual gratification or causing humiliation and distress to the victim

### **Voyeurism:**

The practice of gaining sexual gratification from watching others when naked or engaged in sexual intercourse

### **Deepfakes:**

The digital creation of photographs or videos with malicious intent where the facial or bodily features of person A are mapped on to the face or body of person B, resulting in an image that is of person B but appears to be of person A.

### **Non-Consensual Intimate Image Sharing:**

Sharing, or threatening to share, sexual or intimate images or videos of a person without their permission. If under 18, this may be a form of peer-on-peer abuse

## How to support young people experiencing intimate image abuse

If a young person has disclosed that intimate content has been shared online without their consent, practitioners can provide support by helping them report the content to the platform involved and to the police.

Social networks do not allow intimate content of people under 18 and should immediately remove such material. Practitioners can also support the young person to gather evidence and create the timeline of abuse to report to the police.

It is important to note that over the age of 18, it is the decision of the young person if they want to go to the police. They should not feel pressured to do so and should feel supported in the decision they make.

For young people under the age of 18, organisational safeguarding policy and procedures should be followed, which would include making a safeguarding referral to children's social care and contacting the police.

There are several ways practitioners can support under 18s who have experienced intimate image abuse:

- Consider making a report to the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre \(CEOP\)](#)
- Use the [Report Remove Tool by Childline](#), which has been created by Childline, IWF (Internet Watch Foundation) and Yoti for young people under 18 in the UK to confidentially report sexual images and videos of themselves and remove them from the internet. Young people are kept informed at every stage of the process.
- Use Google Reverse Image Search, which allows the young person to find other websites that contain the image they are looking for. If someone has shared or threatened to share their intimate images without consent and they want to find where, or if, it has been posted, this could be a useful tool
- Be aware of the platforms young people are using and how they can stay safe. [The Southwest Grid for Learning](#) provide guidance on social media, and [Be Internet Citizens](#) has been designed to teach teenagers about media literacy, critical thinking and digital citizenship

If the young person you are working with is over 18, tools include:

- Google Reverse Image Search, as above
- If the young person has access to the intimate images, they can use the free [Stop NCII Tool](#) to hash the image and prevent its spread
- [The Revenge Porn Helpline](#), which supports all adult survivors of intimate image abuse living in the UK
- [Refuge's Tech Safety website](#), which provides information and support on tech abuse. Intimate image abuse can be one of many ways perpetrators can inflict domestic abuse, and Refuge's Tech Safety website has been designed for survivors, supporters of survivors, professionals and practitioners to seek support.



## How youth workers can support young victims of intimate partner abuse

With one-third of young people in the UK reporting having experienced intimate partner abuse,<sup>26</sup> but 61% also reporting not knowing where to turn to for support if they were to experience such abuse,<sup>27</sup> there's a high chance that some of the young people you engage with will be experiencing intimate partner abuse without your knowledge.

Rates of disclosure and support-seeking are also much lower for those from minoritised backgrounds, including those from the LGBTQ+ community or the global majority, as noted by organisations such as Galop, Women's Aid and SafeLives.<sup>28</sup>

A young person who has experienced abuse, especially if it is yet undisclosed, may already be experiencing feelings of shame and guilt, may have suffered severe impacts on their self-esteem, and may be in a state of hyperawareness to danger.

In this situation, an innocent comment from a well-meaning professional could feel like a deeply personal attack. Consequently, when working with young people, it is always good practice to use a trauma-informed approach<sup>29</sup> to proactively create a safe and supportive environment for all young people.

For those who have experienced abuse, this may help them to feel more confident in initially disclosing and in beginning to regain their self-esteem and sense of agency. Psychologists also recommend using **The PACE Model** (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, empathy) when communicating with young people.<sup>30</sup>

26. Herbert A., et al. (2022). [“Categories of intimate partner violence and abuse among young women and men: Latent class analysis of psychological, physical, and sexual victimization and perpetration in a UK birth cohort.”](#) National Library of Medicine.

28. Women's Aid (2023). [Influencers and attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?](#)

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## Safeguarding

Safeguarding young people is everyone's responsibility, whether you are a seasoned professional or a temporary volunteer. As a practitioner, it is important to be aware of the signs that a young person may be experiencing abuse or harm.

These can include, but are not limited to:

- **Changes in behaviour, including anxiety, depression, anger, lowered self-esteem, or becoming passive or withdrawn**
- **Physical changes, such as appearing tired or changes to eating patterns**
- **Changes in socialisation, including withdrawing from others, changing friendship groups or spending all their time with their partner**
- **Showing signs of self-harm, substance misuse, eating disorders or suicidality**
- **Absence from school or regular extracurricular activities**

If you are concerned about any of the signs above, or receive a disclosure of abuse directly, you should proceed according to the safeguarding policy at your organisation.

This may be different for those over or under 18, so it is important that you always read and understand the policy before working with young people. Where possible, the policy should also be communicated to young people in advance, so that they can make an informed choice about whether to disclose.





While each organisation will have its own processes, your duty of care as a youth practitioner is always the same: to keep young people feeling safe and supported as you guide them to the services that can best help them, while helping them to maintain a sense of control over their situation.

## Listening to the voices of young survivors

Capturing the voices of young survivors when it comes to their experiences of intimate partner abuse is important as it allows young people to engage in and shape an organisation's processes, decisions and future work with service users.

Engaging young domestic abuse survivors in practice requires a trauma-informed, participatory approach that prioritises safety, empowerment and meaningful inclusion.

Practitioners should create spaces where young survivors feel heard and respected, using creative and age-appropriate methods such as storytelling, art, peer-led discussions or digital platforms to facilitate survivor engagement.

There are different levels to incorporating survivor voice into service delivery:

- **The first level** includes having a consistent feedback and complaint mechanism, and should be non-negotiable when supporting survivors of intimate partner abuse
- **The second level** involves co-producing with young survivors. This is explored more below
- **The third level** involves formal policies and procedures for survivor engagement. Some organisations appoint dedicated leads for survivor voice initiatives and establish youth advisory boards, ensuring survivors are actively involved throughout the development and design of interventions.



In a domestic abuse context, co-production means working alongside survivors to shape the services and support systems that affect them.

This means survivors are not just consulted but are actively involved in designing, delivering and evaluating interventions. For example, young survivors might co-create educational resources, advise on safeguarding policies or help design trauma-informed spaces.

The process must be carefully facilitated to ensure emotional safety, with appropriate support structures, clear boundaries and recognition of the power dynamics at play.

Services must also be prepared to remunerate survivors for their time and expertise in forms of vouchers or through other means. Co-production in this context helps ensure services are more responsive, inclusive and effective, while also empowering survivors and validating their experiences.



## Multi-agency working

A multi-agency approach and coordinated community response is crucial in supporting young people affected by domestic abuse. This approach brings together professionals from different settings including social care, health, education and mental health, as well as independent advocates such as independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs) and/or youth workers to ensure young survivors are safeguarded and adequately supported.

The Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance is an important resource to consider when working with under 18s.

Risk assessment approaches vary for different age groups. For young people aged 13–17, a trained professional should complete a Young Person's Domestic Abuse Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk assessment.

For individuals 18 and over, an adult DASH should be used. These tools are designed to capture risk levels and inform the development of a safety plan based on risk. Untrained professionals should not attempt to complete a DASH and should refer survivors to specialist domestic abuse services for thorough assessment and safety planning.

# Summary of how youth workers can support young victims of intimate partner abuse

Youth workers can provide essential guidance and support for young people experiencing intimate partner abuse. To ensure that they know how to respond appropriately, practitioners should build their knowledge in four key areas.

## 1. Recognise how to identify abuse and enable communication:

- Young people may disclose abuse gradually. Consistent, non-judgemental support helps build trust over time
- Early signs such as withdrawal, fearfulness or sudden behaviour changes should prompt sensitive exploration
- Use trauma-informed communication be clear, calm and transparent when discussing safeguarding to reduce fear and build understanding

## 2. Support young people safely and effectively:

- Risk often increases during transitions to adulthood or independent living, and reduced oversight can heighten vulnerability
- Focus on empowerment over rescue: support young people to make informed choices rather than pressuring them to make certain decisions
- Support young people to decide how and when they share information, while being clear that if we believe they are at risk, we may need to make a referral to keep them safe

## 3. Work with other organisations and specialists that offer support:

- Coordinated work between youth practitioners, domestic abuse specialists and safeguarding teams ensures continuity and safety
- Knowing the local support network of third-sector services, housing and financial aid options is vital
- Ensure safety planning and risk assessments (e.g. DASH) are in place and regularly reviewed

## 4. Take the time for reflective practice and professional growth:

- Regular supervision and debriefing help practitioners process disclosures and avoid burnout
- Be mindful of cultural, gender and age biases that may shape your response
- Identify training needs around domestic abuse, forced marriage and harmful practices to strengthen your practice

# Conclusion

Practitioners play a vital role in safeguarding young people, not only by recognising abuse but also by creating safe, trauma-informed spaces where disclosure feels possible and support is accessible.

It is essential to have close collaboration with multi-agency teams across social care, health, education and domestic abuse services so that young people receive the specialist help they need.

To truly meet the needs of young survivors, practitioners must take a holistic and intersectional approach that acknowledges the diversity of experiences shaped by age, gender, culture, faith and context.

By combining empathy, professional awareness and strong partnerships, youth practitioners can be powerful advocates who help survivors reclaim safety, autonomy and hope for the future.



# Case studies

These case studies are based on real stories shared by youth workers.

## Case study 1: June

Professionals became concerned about June, an 18-year-old attending a young mothers' group, due to her withdrawn behaviour and signs of distress. She was disengaged during sessions, often checking her phone and leaving abruptly, appearing fearful. These behaviours raised concerns about possible abuse.

Following consultation with the designated safeguarding lead (DSL), a youth practitioner arranged a one-to-one conversation with June to explore these concerns. During this meeting, June disclosed that she had been forced into marriage after becoming pregnant and was experiencing domestic abuse. She expressed fear that her baby might be taken away if she spoke out.

The practitioner responded with trauma-informed communication, explaining safeguarding procedures clearly and reassuring June that the aim was to protect, not punish. June was given the choice to share the information with the DSL herself, helping her feel more in control of the situation.

A safeguarding referral was made, and June was kept informed throughout the process. When a social worker was assigned to her child, the practitioner and DSL worked together to ensure June understood the purpose of the child protection plan and offered support during initial meetings.

June continued to attend the young mothers' group, where the practitioner used trauma-informed approaches to build trust and confidence. June was given small leadership tasks and personal goals to support her wellbeing and self-esteem.

With support from the social worker and youth practitioner, June eventually left her husband. She was supported to access financial aid and report the forced marriage to the police. The practitioner also helped her connect with local services for ongoing support.

June remains engaged with the young mothers' group and continues to receive support. No further safeguarding concerns have been raised.

**This case demonstrates the importance of trauma-informed practice and clear safeguarding communication. It highlights the value of empowering young people through choice and agency, and the critical role youth practitioners play in supporting recovery and wellbeing. It also reinforces the need for professionals to be trained in recognising signs of abuse and aware of local support services to respond effectively to disclosures.**

# Case studies

These case studies are based on real stories shared by youth workers.

## Case study 2: Mary

Mary disclosed to her youth practitioner that she was experiencing physical abuse from her boyfriend, Peter. She was living in residential care, and staff had already witnessed Peter being verbally and physically aggressive towards her. Following a serious incident, the police became involved, and Peter was arrested. Mary was later confirmed to be pregnant.

The youth practitioner supported Mary emotionally and, with her consent, referred her to a specialist domestic abuse service. Counselling options were also explored to help Mary process her experiences.

Mary chose to remain in the relationship, which made safeguarding more complex. The youth practitioner continued to work closely with Mary's domestic abuse specialist worker, offering non-judgemental support and helping her develop a safety plan. As Mary turned 18 and moved into her own home, professionals recognised the increased risk due to reduced oversight.

Regular contact was maintained between the youth practitioner and the domestic abuse support worker. A DASH risk assessment was completed, and a safety plan was put in place for Mary and her baby. Through ongoing support sessions, Mary became more confident and informed about her options. She expressed a strong commitment to protecting her child and stated she would leave the relationship if the abuse continued.

Mary continues to engage with support services and has not required further crisis intervention.

**This case highlights the importance of early intervention, and the role youth practitioners play in receiving disclosures and building trust. It demonstrates the need for ongoing, non-judgemental support and the value of multi-agency working to manage risk and empower young people to make informed decisions about their safety and wellbeing.**

# Signposting

The table below lists some key organisations that youth workers may wish to recommend to young people.

Organisation	Purpose	Contact details
<b>Galop</b>	Specialist support for LGBT+ people who have experienced abuse and violence.	<a href="http://www.galop.org.uk">www.galop.org.uk</a> Tel: 0800 999 5428
<b>Your Best Friend</b>	Support for young people aged 13 to 24 to help them stay safe in relationships.	<a href="https://yourbestfriend.org.uk/">https://yourbestfriend.org.uk/</a>
<b>Childline</b>	<p>Childline is the free and confidential 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK. You can also contact them online via a free 1-2-1 chat function.</p> <p>You can recommend Childline to young people that you are concerned about, but who have not disclosed.</p>	<a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">www.childline.org.uk</a> Tel: 0800 1111
<b>The Mix</b>	<p>The Mix is the UK's leading support service for young people under 25 years old. They support young people with a broad range of issues via an online community, on social media and through their free, confidential helpline or counselling service.</p> <p>It may be useful for young people who may feel that Childline is too "young".</p>	<a href="http://www.themix.org.uk">www.themix.org.uk</a> Tel: 0808 808 4994 Available Monday to Friday, 4pm to 11pm.

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Contact details</b>
<b>Imkaan</b>	<p>Imkaan is the only UK-based, second tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls.</p> <p>For those aged 18 and over.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.imkaan.org.uk">www.imkaan.org.uk</a> Tel: 0207 842 8525</p>
<b>Men's Advice Line</b>	<p>A confidential helpline for male victims of domestic abuse and those supporting them.</p> <p>For those aged 18 and over.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.mensadvice.org.uk">www.mensadvice.org.uk</a> Tel: 0808 801 0327</p>
<b>Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline</b>	<p>24-hour helpline to support women experiencing domestic abuse.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk">www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk</a> Tel: 0808 2000 247</p>
<b>Tender</b>	<p>Tender is a nationwide charity harnessing the power of drama and the arts to educate young people about healthy relationships.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.tender.org.uk/find-support/">www.tender.org.uk/find-support/</a></p>
<b>Chayn</b>	<p>Chayn is a global nonprofit, run by survivors and allies from around the world, creating resources to support the healing of survivors of gender-based violence.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.chayn.co/resources">www.chayn.co/resources</a></p>

# Glossary

## Transitional age:

Young people aged 18–25.

## Intersectionality:

The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

## Disability:

A physical or mental impairment that has a “substantial” and “long-term” negative effect on a person’s ability to do normal daily activities (Equality Act 2010).

## Hidden disability:

Conditions that are not immediately apparent, including chronic pain, diabetes, epilepsy, Autism, ADHD and anxiety disorders.

## Visible disability:

Disabilities that are easily seen by others, such as mobility impairments requiring the use of a wheelchair, prosthetic limbs or other physical aids.

## Adults at risk:

Adults aged 18 or over with care and support needs who cannot protect themselves from abuse or neglect.

## Immigration status:

A person’s legal rights in the UK, such as the duration of stay permitted, work eligibility, access to public services or study permissions.

## Institutional and/or systemic racism:

A form of discrimination based on race or ethnic group which can include policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organisation that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others.

## Technology-facilitated abuse:

Everyday abuse i.e. physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial, but facilitated by technology.

## Intimate image abuse:

The act of producing and/or sharing intimate images or videos of another person without their consent, and with the aim of causing them distress or harm.

## Trauma-informed practice:

Involves both recognising the signs and impacts of trauma and using ways of working that avoid re-traumatising young people. This can include embedding reflection time and emotional regulation activities into sessions, having clear and fair rules, offering creative activities, giving young people small choices to make wherever possible, and balancing supportive activities with those that gently challenge a young person to reach out of their comfort zone.

## Co-production:

Where young people are involved in shaping the services they use. It can be particularly powerful, provided they are supported with appropriate safeguarding, emotional support and opportunities for skill-building.

This resource was developed in collaboration with Tender and Refuge, funded by DCMS



Department  
for Culture,  
Media & Sport



## **National Youth Agency**

9 Newarke Street, Leicester LE1 5SN

[nya.org.uk](http://nya.org.uk)

Company registration no. 2912597

Register charity in England and Wales no. 1035804

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