If We Don’t Talk About It, It’s Not Happening!

Norah Sweetman, PhD candidate, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.


Background

This article explores the development of the active intervention, ‘up2talk’, for teenagers affected by domestic violence. A societal silence affected all stages of the initial community based inquiry into awareness of domestic violence levels, and supports available for teenagers. This inquiry was met with consistent denial of the issue and silence by individuals, schools and community services. The lack of dedicated supports for teenagers emerged. This was intensified by cutbacks in services for prevention education and support groups such as Cosc: The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic Sexual and Gender-based Violence (2016), and Guidance counselling in schools (Humphreys, 2014). This silence around domestic violence was an overarching theme, later emerging from the resulting intervention programme with five teenagers, called ‘up2talk’, which was concerned with the effects of domestic violence on adolescent social emotional learning (SEL).
'up2talk' was a SEL programme designed to meet some of the adolescent developmental needs negatively impacted by domestic violence identified in research, such as building trusting relationships and separating positively from family (Stanley, 2011; Geffner, 2016,). The timing of this intervention in early adolescence was relevant to the formation of identity, noted in the developmental stages of Erikson (1971). The significance of this stage of early dating relationships, and the influence of exposure to domestic violence in repeating violent partner behaviours among teenagers has been widely researched including the work of Jouriles, E. N., Mueller, V., Rosenfield, D., McDonald, R. & Dodson, C. M. (2012), Ehrensaft and Cohen (2012) and Alexander (2015). The increased tolerance levels towards violence, and a vulnerability to perpetration and victimisation shown by teenagers affected by domestic violence have been established.

Development of ‘up2talk’

The programme used a social constructivist framework to elicit the perspectives of the five (thirteen-year-old) participants regarding the impact domestic violence had on their lives. The choice of an action research method was informed by the dual purpose of action research. Bradbury (2015) viewed this purpose as learning directly from the participants to add to knowledge, and aiming for an improvement in services or circumstances for participants.

The use of an active intervention was guided by the professional experience of the researcher in designing social emotional learning (SEL) programmes for children and families in
disadvantaged communities such as in the ‘Youthreach’ alternative education system (Youthreach, 2018). This service had a high proportion of learners who had experienced multiple traumas, as identified in the extensive study undertaken for the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) by Gordon (2017). ‘up2talk’ was based on professional experience, studies of soft skills programmes (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), youth support workers, young people’s lived experiences of domestic violence (VAV: Voice Against Violence, 2011, Stanley et al., 2015), and the body of research literature on domestic violence interventions such as Bunston, W., Pavlidis, T. & Cartwright, P. (2016), Smith (2016).

Addressing the developmental damage to relationship building skills was key for adolescents’ recovery, according to van der Kolk (2007). He stated they needed to develop a safe place to engage in pleasurable pursuits, have fun, and learn to focus, play with others, and develop group activities so as to work towards processing complex issues. The value of group support in breaking the isolation and self-blame experienced by teenage victims has been noted by young people as a vital element in effective interventions; as in a specialised youth group in Scotland:

It definitely has helped ... I didn’t really know much about it because I was younger when everything happened between my mum and dad, but since I came here, I think it’s because there are other people who have went through it as well, and there is different things that have happened, so it has made me realise a lot more about it (Coburn and Gormally, 2014, p.657).

The importance of trusting relationships was highlighted in the work of Bunston et al. (2016), reviewing effective groups for domestic violence victims of all ages. The role of relationship building, and developing communication and social skills in advance of therapeutic
intervention for young people has been explored in the work of Kagan and Spinazzola (2013), and Pond and Spinazzola (2013). This research informed the use of a multimodal approach for young people affected by domestic violence, which facilitated sharing and allowed expression of complex emotions in a safe environment during ‘up2talk’. The value of participants’ drawings in research was explored by Theron, L. C., Mitchell, C., Stuart, J. & Smith, A. (eds.) (2011). Drawings were found useful in eliciting the feedback of marginalised children, while it was important to address ethical concerns about adult interpretation of children’s material, which reduced children’s agency.

The protracted search for a site and participants for ‘up2talk’ ended with the involvement of a Family Services Centre, and a family worker, Luke, who co-facilitated the interactive ten-week programme devised by the researcher.

The Process of ‘up2talk’

The ten-week programme had a dual aim which was clarified at week one with participants. The first was to enable their learning of SEL skills by means of an active programme, developed together with the participants, using a variety of craft, art games and drama-based methods. The research questions concerned the efficacy of this programme, ‘up2talk’, in achieving these SEL skills, and an increased awareness for the teenagers of how domestic violence had negatively impacted this development. The final research question concerned the possible use of the materials and themes emerging from this intervention to develop group supports for other teenagers affected by domestic violence. The focus on social emotional learning around
the issue of domestic violence and the use of multimodal expression allowed a safe space to discuss, share, and question. Debate and discussion through the third person maintained safety and left the choice of engagement levels with each participant. This was not a therapeutic intervention and this distinction was made clear, while a therapist was available to the group each week during the programme and access to the family service was ongoing. (Hogan and O’Reilly, 2007; Moylan, C., Herrenkohl, T., Sousa, C., Tajima, E., Herrenkohl, R. & Russo, M., 2010). The data was analysed using the methods of thematic analysis (Bassett, 2015), and the stages of the Saldaña coding model (Saldaña, 2013). Nvivo software was used to store the multimedia data, and to aid in identifying emerging themes.

Findings

The findings were triangulated from weekly observations, artefacts produced and interpreted by the young people, and semi-structured interviews with them, their mothers and the other facilitator. The changes in beliefs and behaviours they reported were demonstrated in the group programme and supported by parental observations.

There was an increased understanding of the issue of domestic violence and how it affected teenagers, and enhanced social emotional skills among the participants. This addressed the research questions concerning the effectiveness of such a programme. All participants reported a significant reduction in shame and self-blame, and demonstrated increased self-confidence.
The participants demonstrated a clear ability to manage the process, to engage at a level they were comfortable with and to reject activities, questions, or methods for various reasons. This ability to manage qualitative research has been shown by children in the work of Evang and Øverlien (2014), and the use of group work with four- to seven-year-olds affected by domestic violence, by Thompson (2011). Research with adolescents demonstrated more advanced abilities to assess risk and design instruments by Houghton and Youth Advisors (2017), who went on to submit to the Justice Committee on the Domestic Abuse bill in Scotland.

**Participatory Research**

The Lundy model requires that certain conditions exist for children’s voices to be heard, in accordance with the legal obligations of Article 12 (Lundy, 2007). The silence round domestic violence affects the process of participative research with children, and highlights the lack of these elements: space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, L., McEvoy, L. & Byrne, B, 2011). Societal secrecy restricts information on such topics according to Holt et al. (2008). This embedded silence means young people, due to isolation and coercive control by the abuser, may blame themselves for the violence (Buckley, H., Holt, S. & Whelan, S., 2006). This reduces the impact of public information campaigns, about domestic violence, aimed to support victims (Coburn and Gormally, 2014). Gatekeepers can block young people’s participation in research, denying them choice as to whether the issue concerns them (Lundy, 2012).

A further barrier is the concern that expressing traumatic experiences, such as domestic violence, can lead to re-traumatisation for research participants, particularly children.
Houghton (2015) explored the participatory ethics of young survivors of domestic violence being included in research and policy making. The current layers of adult-centric protection were questioned in her research, as denying the voice and agency of these young people. Their understanding of their own needs, and the positive impact of being part of the process were clarified by a participant in ‘Voice Against Violence’, an expert youth advisory group, who said, “We are the experts, we lived it, we know what worked and what didn’t”: Declan, quoted in Houghton (2015, p.240). Evaluation of such re-traumatisation risks to participants could be conducted with them, by researchers, according to Ybarra, M. L., Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J., Friend, J. & Diener-West, M. (2009) who explored the effects of a violence questionnaire on 1,588 children aged 10-15. The pre-testing of instruments, exploration of what is meant by the possible ‘upset’ caused by sensitive research, and the use of age appropriate materials were suggested in their review. Corbin and Morse (2003) researched evidence of harm to participants in sensitive issues research, and found that for most people the process was helpful, any upset caused was short-lived and was outweighed by the benefits of being heard. The group work of Thompson (2011) with children affected by domestic violence, aged four to seven, found the children fully capable of expressing feelings and concepts. She suggested it was the responsibility of adults to access the children’s meanings, in age appropriate ways. Katz (2015) questioned the view of young people as passive victims and explored their agency and resistance to domestic violence.

Research indicates that many teachers omit the sections of the Irish Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) programme around relationships, sexuality, addiction, sexual and domestic
violence (Mayock, P., Kitching, K. & Morgan, M., 2007, Roe, 2010). This is relevant as SPHE is the only broad based information set on relationships, violence, and other social emotional learning that pupils currently receive. Young people have consistently requested more interactive sessions on these issues (Roe, 2011).

**Ethics**

Ethical approval for research with children and young people affected by sensitive issues, including domestic violence, is central to developing the platforms for young people’s voices and experiences to be heard. Difficulties in gaining ethical approval for sensitive research may result in researchers avoiding such vital topics, which can influence the lifelong wellbeing of young people (Hogan and O'Reilly, 2007). Many of these concerns may stem from the belief that it is preferable not to upset the young person, however research in the Irish context finds a growing understanding of the capability of children, including those seen as vulnerable (Yorke and Swords, 2012). The study conducted by Evang and Øverlien (2014) demonstrated the ability of children, aged four to seven, to limit and regulate the course of an interview concerning domestic violence, suggesting that the capability of children to engage in research may be underestimated. Ethics and the issue of consent is part of an ongoing engagement of young people, and may need flexible methods to ensure their understanding according to age (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012). The work Of Graham, A., Powell, M. A. & Taylor, N. (2015) investigated the meaning of ethical research and consent with children, and concluded that issues around the vulnerability or competence of children should inform how their participation was structured, and not determine their inclusion or exclusion.
Ethical approval for this study was granted by the ethics committee of the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin in June 2014. The necessity for the researcher to understand ongoing consent and have an ability to understand the changing experience of the young participant in sensitive research was stated by Cater and Øverlien (2014). They went on to emphasise the importance of the participants’ welfare above any scientific or research needs.

**Summary**

Social emotional learning (SEL) programmes have been effective in increasing skills such as self-confidence, empathy, decision making and communications for pupils in schools internationally (Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B., 2011, Morgan, 2014). SEL programmes have been used in supporting survivors of domestic abuse (Pepler, D. J., Catallo, R. & Moore, T. E. 2000), recovery programmes for mothers and children affected by domestic violence (Mcmanus, E., Belton, E., Barnard, M., Cotmore, R. & Taylor, J., 2013), and to develop social skills for young people with autism or mild social impairments (Aarons and Gittens, 2003). The reluctance shown by many stakeholders towards direct research or support programmes with young people may relate to a lack of understanding of the different levels of interventions. There are distinct differences between mainstream SEL programmes such as SPHE in schools, social skills training in groups (Gordon, 2013), and therapy groups offering clinical interventions (Yalom, 1995). ‘up2talk’ was designated as a skills development programme, not a therapeutic intervention. This distinction was clarified with participants at the initial meeting and as part of ongoing consent.
The purpose of ‘up2talk’, was to address some negative effects of the violence for teenagers, including isolation, shame and self-blame. Thus, this intervention, which formed the research study of effects of domestic violence on teenagers SEL development, had a dual function which was explicit to participants from the first meeting. The enhancement of social emotional skills by an active communications, assertiveness training model was the process which the five thirteen-year-old participants engaged with over ten weeks. The generation of data, concerning their increased skills and awareness of the effects of the violence, came from the materials produced by this group process and individual interviews. The further aim was to use these insights to inform programme development for other young survivors of domestic violence.

The choices around engagement levels, the type of media employed and the level of personal exposure formed the central process of ongoing consent for the individuals in the group. Young people in this study, ‘up2talk’, demonstrated awareness of their choices and engagement throughout the programme. Some of the strategies used to preserve distance and personal privacy, were in the programme design, such as use of third party debate: ‘a young person might feel...’ and artefacts to express emotion or experience. Review and member checking of their own work, facilitated their choices around the process. Other choice methods they used included ignoring some activities, saying they didn’t remember events, or not participating in certain activities.
The young people demonstrated their ability to articulate and evaluate their SEL development, this exemplified their enhanced social emotional skills. These changes were validated by their individual and group actions, and their parents’ feedback.

The direct expression of participants in this study, resonates with the literature in highlighting the isolation, self-blame and shame experienced by young people in violent family homes. The impact of the deep level of silence in society, and in their family, on their understanding of the event remains a central issue.

The use of a SEL programme, with a stated focus on domestic violence, offered the young people communication skills to approach a difficult topic safely. The debate around protection and participation of young people, and the necessary elements to enable young people’s voice, highlights the necessity of developing skills to form and express opinions, and having a safe environment to be heard (Lundy et al., 2011). The need for relevant communication skills development, for adults and young people, is evident in the research literature (Cater and Øverlien, 2014). This training would benefit both the design and conduct of such sensitive research, to maximise benefit and minimise harm according to Houghton (2015).

The efficacy of SEL groups with a specialist focus on domestic violence, in offering improved SEL skills and emotional well-being to participants, and in developing the empirical knowledge of young people’s experience merits further research.
References


Coburn, A. & Gormally, S. 2014. ‘They know what you are going through’: A service response to young people who have experienced the impact of domestic abuse. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17, 642-663.


Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012. Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children. Dublin: DCYA.


Humphreys, J. 2014. Calls for ‘inequitable’ guidance counselling cuts to be reversed: Report showing working class students depend on in-school advice ‘strengthens argument’. *The Irish Times*.


challenges to full implementation of the programme in post-primary schools, Dublin, Crisis Pregnancy Agency, Department of Education and Science.


VAV: Voice Against Violence 2011. Shaping the Future: One voice at a time: Tackling domestic abuse through the voice of the young. Scotland: VAV.


Author

Norah Sweetman’s initial training as a Montessori teacher shaped her literacy, and social emotional learning (SEL) programmes for young people in alternative education, clubs, and schools. Her professional career working in marginalised communities with education and development projects, led her to research the effects of domestic violence on teenagers by means of an active SEL programme.

The increased self-efficacy and reduced self-blame demonstrated by participants in the programme provides her inspiration. Her aim is to develop creative SEL programmes for young people. Methods using drama, art, digital media and group support bring laughter and hope into recovery.