

# Not afraid, to take a stand

Project report from a desk-based review of programmes designed to improve responses to young people's experiences of abuse



# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b><u>1</u></b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b><u>5</u></b>
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b><u>6</u></b>
<b>Three programmes</b> .....	<b><u>7</u></b>
1. Community Now	7
2. Fort Alice	7
3. South Tyneside Young People’s Parliament	7
<b>Good practice themes</b> .....	<b><u>8</u></b>
Professional Confidence	8
Platform voice	9
Creative, Collaborative	10
Approach Intersectionality	11
<b>The Developing Programme</b> .....	<b><u>12</u></b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b><u>15</u></b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b><u>15</u></b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b><u>16</u></b>

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# Executive Summary

This report presents a comparative analysis of unique and innovative approaches to supporting children and young people disclosing domestic abuse in an effort to identify participatory, emancipatory, feminist tools which encourage a better professional understanding and reduce barriers in accessing support for those children and young people experiencing abuse. Such tools are necessary to facilitate prompt and more effective responses to children and young people's disclosure of abuse whilst they may be awaiting more specialist intervention.

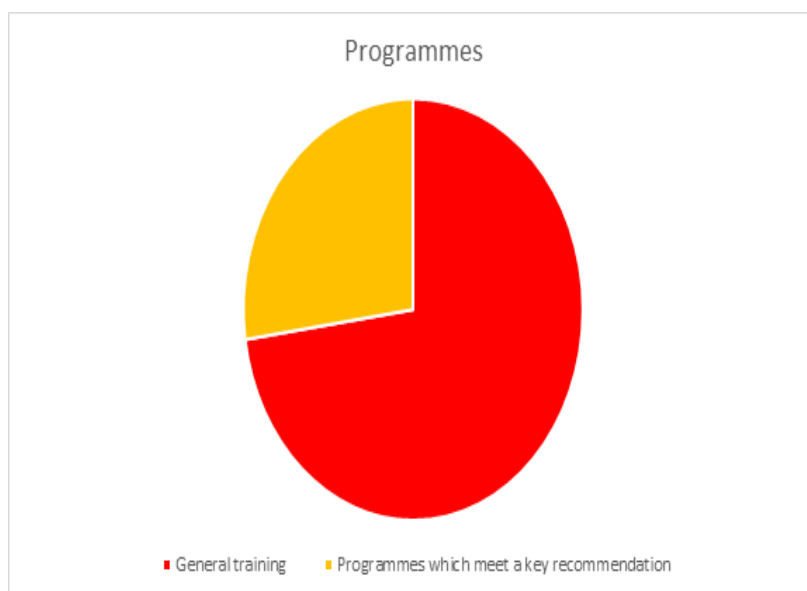
This review was conducted over a five-week period from March 20th 2023 to April 21st 2023. This executive summary reports the findings of a systematic, desk-based digital review of existing intervention practices, whereby critical searches of peer-reviewed and grey literature were conducted through databases and academic journals.

A total of 11 existing intervention programmes emerging from both the UK and the USA were identified as outlining, reviewing, or speaking to the experiences of non-specialists responding to children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse (Beetham, 2019; Binkley, 2013; Callaghan et al., 2018; CPPC, 2023; Fort Alice, 2019; Lloyd, 2018; Montserrat et al., 2022; Nelson, 2014; Øverlien and Holt, 2019; South Tyneside Young People's Parliament (STYPP), 2023; Stanley et al., 2015). From this, a secondary literature search was conducted to identify patterns, common themes, and repeated issues in the current approaches to intervention work with children experiencing domestic abuse. Finally the three specific, existing intervention programmes identified in stage one of the review were analysed through mapping onto the themes identified in stage two. This analysis provided evidence for the strengths and weaknesses of current practice, and recommendations for what future programmes should consider when being developed.

A thematic analysis of the 11 articles revealed there was a pattern in existing practice regarding homogeneity of intervention programs and the lack of resources for non-specialist professionals to empower them to offer accessible support for children and young people disclosing abuse.

- 50% required referral to external, specialist support programmes and did not recognise non-specialists role as first responders
- Only 16% of the resources were directly informed by data and opinions collected from children and young people and support workers to produce tools they felt they required

In this report we provide a detailed review of three existing intervention programs aimed at tackling the impact of experiences of abuse on children and young people (CPPC, 2023; Fort Alice, 2019; STYPP, 2023). These three intervention projects were identified as meeting 'good practice' features inclusive of participatory, child-led, and confidence building components.



From the total 11 existing programmes researched and analysed, three were selected for comparative analysis to the RIH project in this report due to their similar goals and approaches, with all three intervention programmes utilizing similar creative and collaborative resources to encourage better understanding and communication about experiences of abuse between children and non-specialist professionals with the aim to creating more accessible support. The three programmes analysed were: Community Now, Fort Alice and South Tyneside Young People's Parliament (STYPP).

### **Community Now**

- A training programme developed by the American Humane Association
- Aimed at local, non-specialist friends and neighbours in communities to provide them with 'tools and confidence to help their neighbours' (CPPC, 2023DoeDff).
- The goal is to create systematic change by empowering concerned individuals, such as neighbours and friends, with the knowledge, tools and techniques necessary for them to feel confident in acting when they are concerned about struggling parents or families in which they may suspect child neglect or abuse.
- Successfully fosters a community-based, collaborative approach to intervention.
- Provides training and tools to empower non-specialist individuals to identify and report family violence, enabling more effective identification of child maltreatment and ensuring families are provided with the support they need.
- Moves the focus away from the families and towards the community.
- The lack of children's voice within this approach risks reproducing barriers experienced by children and young people when there is a need to disclose experiences of abuse.

### **Fort Alice**

- Aimed at children aged five-to-11 years old who have experienced domestic abuse.
- Aims to provide an accessible outlet for children to understand and discuss their feelings and the impact domestic abuse has had on them allowing them to receive support that is tailored to their individual experiences.
- Highlights the voice of children by providing the space for group collaborative conversations with discussions with other young people (moderated by specialists) as well as creative tools and games to facilitate difficult discussions.
- Allows children to share their similar experiences of domestic abuse with each other to and consequently overcome the barriers to disclosure and support rooted in isolation, guilt and shame to instead encourage confidence, recovery and build self-esteem.
- A specialist programme that requires children be referred for support which does not account for intersectional inequalities that make access to support and disclosure difficult for disadvantaged groups.
- Delayed intervention due to waiting list times, highlighting the need for more accessible resources aimed at empowering non-specialists to act as first response support for disclosures of abuse.

### **South Tyneside Young People's Parliament (STYPP)**

- Five lesson plans designed by young people aimed at secondary school students to address the gaps in young people's understanding of domestic abuse identified by teachers and students to use as part of domestic abuse awareness lessons.
- Helps to develop professional confidence and understanding by directly addressing the knowledge gaps identified by teachers and students in their own understandings of domestic abuse, aiding in better identification and increased knowledge about where to look for and how to offer support.
- However, the use of pre-set lesson plans reflects the problematic homogeneous approach of many existing 'buy-in', education-based intervention programmes as they fail to account for the diversity in experiences of and reactions to domestic abuse making it difficult for non-specialist professionals to offer tailored and sensitive support for children and young people to prevent re-traumatization and misunderstandings.
- Promotes collaborative and creative approaches to intervention programmes that allows both victims and supportive professionals to access and experience their emotions in a safe manner with creative tools providing abridge to opening these difficult conversations. This conversational, collaborative approach helps combats feelings of fear and anxiety that prevent disclosure, with more creative tools supporting children and young people in articulating experiences that might be difficult to voice.

The secondary analysis revealed four key, recurring themes in best practice for first-response programmes with children and young people disclosing abuse: professional confidence, platform voice, creative and collaborative approach, and intersectionality. Further thematic analysis based on these ideas served to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and are used throughout the report to highlight how the Rabbit in the Headlights' innovative approach utilises these themes to offer solutions to the weaknesses and gaps in current practice.

### **Professional confidence:**

Professional confidence refers to the ability of non-specialist professionals to understand their role and utilise their training in identifying abuse and effectively responding to disclosures of abuse to provide the necessary support for children and young people in need. The literature reveals that there is a lack of confidence and understanding among non-specialist professionals about their role in responding to disclosures of abuse which creates barriers to support, and enquiry as non-specialists lack the ability to identify signs of abuse and signpost referral pathways for children and young people (Lloyd, 2018:1). Non-specialists, such as teachers and social workers, are well-placed to play a pivotal role in identifying and responding to disclosures of domestic abuse due to their regular contact and relationship of trust with children (Ibid:2). Consequently, non-specialist professionals must be provided with accessible resources and training that empowers them with the knowledge and skills to bridge difficult conversations with children and young people and act as first responders to their disclosures of abuse ensuring the availability of quick and accessible support.

### **Platform voice:**

To be ethical, intervention programmes must consider children's ideas about service delivery with children and young people being recognised as active and sentient social actors in their experiences and recovery (Øverlien and Holt, 2019:368). Many existing intervention programmes aim to respond to as many individuals as possible, within limited time-frames. This frequently produces homogenous approaches which cannot respond to the diversity of abuse and the variety of responses from young people. However, participatory approaches which promote the inclusion and empowerment of children and young people survivors in research and policy has the potential to overcome barriers to disclosure rooted in shame and guilt (Houghton, 2015:235). Thus, participatory approaches can produce resources that meet the unique and individual needs of young people. This raising of children's voices and the consequent sharing of experiences makes disclosure and communication considerably easier (Ibid:243), with children and young people being empowered through cooperative resources that validate their shared experiences promoting feelings of inclusion relief and community.

### **Creative, Collaborative Approach:**

It has been argued that young people have been silenced by the responses they have received from the specialist and non-specialist professionals to their disclosures of abuse (Houghton, 2015:243), with many young people feeling confused, isolated and guilty about their experiences of abuse as they struggle to identify their experiences and understand their emotions. A creative, collaborative approach refers to the use of innovative and accessible resources such as bibliotherapy, games and art that combat feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem by providing a gentle way for children and young people to describe their experiences and express their emotions in a safe, non-traumatizing manner (Binkley, 2013:307). Young children and non-specialist professionals face issues in identifying and discussing the topic of domestic abuse and its impacts due to lacking confidence and insufficient knowledge however, creative resources (such as Sometimes it Hurts illustrated stories; Lucas, 2021) act as a buffer to enhance communication and break down barriers to disclosure by providing resources that enable non-specialist professionals and young people to work collaboratively in understanding children and young people's unique experiences of abuse encouraging greater awareness and professional understanding, allowing for more effective and affective support.

### **Intersectionality:**

Intersectionality refers to the way multiple and converging systems of oppression and social identities compound each other to produce unique life experiences. Existing approaches to supportive intervention which take a homogenous approach focus upon demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity and class in isolation instead of considering their intersectional relations (Etherington and Baker, 2016:60). This results in inequalities in accessing support or different groups of children, who consequently require different kinds of support. To ensure that intervention practice accounts for the variety of responses from young people to their experiences of domestic violence, support resources must be informed by a range of experiences from diverse groups of children and young people to ensure children from different cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are able to identify and connect with the resources.

In response to the weaknesses identified in existing intervention resources and practice, Rabbits In the Headlights's creative, participatory and child-centred approach offers innovative solutions to improve existing practice and ensure that children and young people are empowered to identify and disclose their experiences of abuse, and non-specialist professionals are confident in their ability to quickly and effectively respond to disclosures and offer support to combat the delay in accessing specialist support systems.

RIH's unique approach, alongside the comparative analysis, provide several important recommendations and implications for improving first responses to disclosures of domestic abuse

- Intervention programmes and resources must take a participatory, child centred approach, ensuring resources for children young people are created based on their expressed needs and experiences, and gives voice to the needs of young people to understand what they require from support
- RIH does space by offering a creative, collaborative approach, whereby children and young people are directly involved with the creation of resources. This informs both the stories and their illustration. RIH are accessible tools that communicate children's shared experiences to demystify abuse and overcome feelings of shame and isolation which can create barriers to disclosure and support

Intervention practise must focus on

- empowering non specialist professionals to better identify and more confidently respond disclosures, by providing accessible resources that both enhance professional understanding, and provide tools to open difficult conversations with children young people about their experiences of abuse, so they may provide effective and timely support
- RIH provides creative and accessible resources in the form of illustrated stories, detailing children's experiences of domestic abuse, to increase professional understanding and identification of abuse from the point of view of the children young people who experience it.
- Illustrated stories also provide a gentle way for non specialist professionals to broach the difficult topic with children young people, and aid them in navigating young people's experiences and emotions

Supportive intervention programmes must account for

- the way intersecting identities function to create different experiences and impacts of domestic abuse
- produce more accessible resources that promote greater inclusivity for those affected by domestic abuse, but are disadvantage by intersecting inequalities
- To address intersectional inequalities, RIH office a blueprint for more representative approach to supportive interventions, by ensuring that the resources created are directly informed by the different experiences of a diverse group of children and young people that allows for the representation of different genders, disabilities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This representation ensures that those engaging with the content from diverse backgrounds feel they can identify and connect with the resources

## Introduction

Children's perspectives in the creation and delivery of domestic abuse intervention resources position children and young people as active participants in surviving and recovering from domestic abuse, facilitating an approach which promotes the inclusion and empowerment of children and young people, as resources account directly for their unique experiences and needs. Research suggests that two-thirds of children are unable to disclose abuse during childhood (McClellan et al, 2017:33), often due to fear and misunderstanding. Children not only struggle to identify themselves as victims of abuse, but they also face difficulty in understanding where to access support, perhaps due to a lack of support from non-specialist professionals in accessible institutions, such as schools, making support seem distant and unavailable (Lloyd, 2018:7). Furthermore, there is a lack of resources created for direct work with children which results in gaps in knowledge and understanding; reproducing barriers to disclosure and discussion when children are reading to share their experienced of domestic abuse. These barriers to disclosure can increase feelings of isolation, guilt and loneliness that prevent disclosure and thus there needs to be resources available to facilitate a bridge to broach difficult conversations about abuse with trusted, confident adults.

Teachers have been identified as "instrumental" in supporting children's recovery when they have experienced traumatic events, such as domestic abuse (Alisic et al., 2012:98; Montserrat, 2022). Thus, they are frequently the first responders as trusted adults who are often the first people children and young people disclose their experience of abuse to. However, there have been reports that children have disclosed their abuse to adults who are unable to respond in a way which holds space for children and young people to feel that disclosing to trusted adults is a safe thing to do (Hamilton, 2021).

The Rabbit in the Headlights (RIH) project is a collaboration between Changing Relations C.I.C, Durham University, and community partners, and aims to produce accessible, creative resources based upon the 'Sometimes it Hurts' resources (Hamilton, 2021; Lucas, 2021). The expectation is that the project will inspire confidence among non-specialist professionals to broach much-needed conversations about children and young people's experience with domestic abuse, encouraging greater professional understanding and widening the pool of those available to provide support while young people await specialist referral. The necessity for the review comes from Changing Relations' success in achieving these goals, of increasing professional understanding and confidence consequently opening up more support for children and young people, through its earlier work. 'Sometimes it Hurts'(Hamilton, 2021) is an illustrated book of stories and an animation about children and young people's experience living with domestic abuse. This previous project delivery served to highlight the necessity of the RIH, with a Lancet Child and Adolescent Health review of the book cited one in seven young people as affected by domestic abuse but notes they 'rarely have opportunities to discuss their experiences' (Lucas, 2021:781). Furthermore, responses to previous project delivery emphasized the lack of accessible resources for non-specialists with teachers feeling 'nervous about broaching the topic with young people' and young people commenting that the book should '100% be delivered to teachers' as it aids teachers in 'understanding it from a young person's view which is essential to giving the right support'.

Consequently, the desk-based digital review this report is based on was commissioned by Changing Relations C.I.C and Durham University, with the aim of utilising a systematic review protocol to identify other tools available for the purposes of providing accessible, creative tools to empower and inspire confidence in non-specialist professionals and young people to overcome barriers to disclosure and support in order to inform and shape the innovative development of RIH materials. The commissioned review aims to evidence the necessity and innovative nature of RIH's goal to transform their illustrated book of stories 'Sometimes it Hurts' into six separate illustrated booklets alongside some creative activities that will serve as tools for navigating the stories in order to produce accessible tools for non-specialist professionals working with young people that will aid in opening necessary conversations about abuse with children and young people and work through the challenges associated with their experiences and aid recovery.

## Methods

This report presents the findings of the aforementioned desk-based, digital review of existing literature, detailing and analysing the approaches of current intervention practices. This was followed by secondary data analysis through which it was possible to identify the common 'gaps' and weaknesses in existing support resources.

The initial data was collected through critical searches and analysis of various peer-review and grey literature found in databases and academic journals (Google Scholar, Springer Link, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library and Taylor & Francis Online) using keyword search terms such as 'intervention programmes', 'child abuse', 'specialist support' etc. and utilising the other works cited to begin 'snowballing' a firm base of secondary data. This data was then used to identify key themes of professional confidence, intersectionality, children's voice, and creative and collaborative approaches. This allowed for a more thematic literature review utilizing tools such as research rabbit to carry out a systematic mapping exercise highlighting relevant literature.

Utilising the extant literature highlighted several existing intervention resources which shared similar goals of tackling the negative impact of abuse on children and young people. These programmes were critically and comparatively analysed to pick out their goals, approaches, strengths and weaknesses allowing for the identification of the three existing programmes discussed in this report that were used in comparison to RIH due to their similar unique creative approaches and shared goals of removing barriers to disclosure and inspiring confidence to encourage better support for children and young people.

The three programmes chosen to critically compare to RIH were analysed through the examining and scrutinising of secondary quantitative and qualitative data from studies investigating the success of these different programmes and approaches among non-specialist professionals and children and young people to highlight the gaps in existing intervention resources and evidence of the way in which RIH's is unique, as well as how their creative and participatory approach offers necessary solutions and underpins recommendations to overcome weaknesses in current practice.



## Three Programmes

### Community Now

- A training programme developed by the American Humane Association
- Aimed at local, non-specialist friends and neighbours in communities to provide them with tools and confidence (CPPC, 2023)
- Promotes the empowerment of concerned individuals, such as neighbours and friends, with the knowledge, tools and techniques necessary for them to feel confident in acting when they are concerned about struggling parents or families where they may suspect child neglect or abuse
- Provides training and tools to empower non-specialist individuals to identify and report family violence, enabling more effective identification of child maltreatment and ensuring families are provided with the support they need
- Does not forefront the voice of those with lived experience and so risks reproducing barriers to disclosure experienced by children and young people

### Fort Alice

- Aimed at children aged between five-11 who have lived with domestic abuse.
- Provides an outlet for children to share their feelings and the impact domestic abuse has had on them
- Allows for children to receive support tailored to their individual experiences.
- Highlights the voice of children by providing the space for group collaborative conversations with discussions with other young people (moderated by specialists) as well as creative tools and games to facilitate difficult discussions.
- Reduces barriers to disclosure and support when they are rooted in isolation, guilt and shame, to instead encourage confidence, recovery and build self-esteem.
- Requires referral which means children must be identified as victims which highlights the inaccessibility of intervention resources, as the homogeneous approach of many existing programmes does not account for intersectional inequalities that make access to support and disclosure difficult for disadvantaged groups.
- The requirement of referral creates delays in children receiving necessary support due to issues such as waiting list times which highlights the need for more accessible resources aimed at empowering non-specialists to act as first response support for disclosures of abuse.

### South Tyneside Young People's Parliament (STYPP)

- Young people produced five lesson plans and support materials for teachers in secondary schools to use as part of domestic abuse awareness lessons with the aim of increasing understanding of domestic abuse and raising awareness of the support available
- Aims to develop professional confidence and understanding by directly addressing the knowledge gaps identified by teachers and students themselves such as what to look for and how to offer support.
- The use of pre-set lesson plans reflects the homogeneous approach of many existing 'buy-in', education-based intervention programmes which do not account for the diversity in experiences of and reactions to domestic abuse making it difficult for non-specialist professionals to offer tailored and sensitive support for children and young people to prevent re-traumatization and misunderstandings.
- Promotes collaborative and creative approaches which allows both victims and supportive professionals to access and experience their emotions in a safe manner with creative tools providing a bridge to opening these difficult conversations.
- Conversational, collaborative approaches help combats feelings of fear and anxiety that prevent disclosure, with more creative tools supporting children and young people in articulating experiences that might be difficult to voice.

## Good Practice Themes

### Professional Confidence

Professional confidence refers to the faith non-specialist professionals have in their ability to utilise their knowledge and safeguarding skills to respond appropriately to children and young people's disclosures of abuse including, the ability to identify signs of abuse, signpost referral pathways and offer supportive conversations (Lloyd, 2018:1). Despite their opportunity to make a considerable difference to children and young people's recovery due to the relationship of accessibility and trust non-specialist professionals, such as teachers, have with young people, many are often unclear about their role in the child protection process and feel that they lack the training and resources necessary to offer effective support for children (Ibid:4) with this uncertainty and apprehension leading to inaction by creating barriers to enquiry and support. Therefore, the creation of accessible training and resources for non- specialist professionals is vital to increasing professional understanding of their role in safeguarding and inspiring confidence in their ability to respond to disclosures is necessary to empower non-specialist professionals to act as first responders and provide restorative accessible and immediate support for children and young people.

Many non-specialist support workers do not feel confident in their ability to identify or offer support for children disclosing traumatic experiences for example (Alisic et al,2012:100),

- 63% of teachers did not know when children and young people needed mental health support.
- Only 9% of teachers felt confident in the training they had received to deal with traumatic stress.

The data above highlights the issue of lacking confidence among non-specialist professionals in their ability to respond effectively to disclosures of abuse from children and young people. Non-specialist professionals, such as teachers, are well placed to play a pivotal role in identifying and responding to domestic violence however, the literature suggests that non- specialist professionals feel they lack the skills, knowledge and tools to offer effective support to children and young people (Lloyd, 2018:1), with many being unclear about their role in responding to disclosures and thus creating barriers to enquiry and support.

As so many existing programmes relating to children and young people's experiences of abuse focus on education and teacher training to encourage greater awareness of domestic abuse, the literature indicates that these programmes fail to provide long-term, accessible resources for non- specialists who lack confidence in their ability to provide support due to a 'lack of assurance and expertise' (Stanley et al, 2015:128). For example, many resources attempt to develop a better professional understanding of abuse through 'buy-in' teacher training. However, these programmes do not provide opportunities to empower support workers to utilise their training in responding to and providing support for disclosures of domestic abuse (Peckover, 2014:403), as opposed to only identifying indicators of abuse and encouraging specialist referrals. Whilst various forms of training do improve professional confidence overall (Baginsky,2003), this indicates the need for more accessible tools that build confidence whilst educating non-specialist professionals to bridge difficult conversations about domestic abuse and offer retroactive support to children and young people while they wait for specialist referral. These arguments highlight the benefit of increased resources and training in inspiring confidence among non-specialists and encouraging better support.

The RIH programme provides necessary solutions to the barriers to the enquiry which prevent non-specialists from identifying abuse and acting on disclosure to provide support by providing tools that empower non-specialist professionals to utilize their training and act as first responders while children and young people await specialist referral.

It does this through the production of accessible resources that empower non-specialists to feel more confident in opening much-needed conversations with children and young people, with the use of illustrated stories and creative resources providing a tool to aid in broaching the topic of abuse and facilitate collaborative conversations that allow non-specialists to better understand the experiences of children and young people, and provide tailored support to help them cope and recover from their experiences.

RIH serves to demystify the diverse experiences of domestic abuse allowing both support workers and children and young people to feel more confident in identifying, discussing and navigating harm to support the recovery of children and young people who have experience of domestic abuse

### **Platform voice**

Research suggests that in order to produce effective intervention programmes, children must be recognised as sentient, social actors with their voices being considered in decisions about resource creation and service delivery (Øverlien and Holt, 2019:368). However, the literature also indicates that existing resources focus on increasing awareness among parents, professionals and specialists in isolation from the children they are attempting to support, thus indicating a need for a more participatory ethical approach in the development of resources which promotes the inclusion and empowerment of children and young people survivors (Houghton, 2015:235).

For example, the Community Now programme offers a similar community-based collaborative approach to RIH though giving people the 'tools and confidence to help their neighbours' (Anderson, 2001 in Van Dijken et al, 2016:155), empowering local communities to identify and report suspected child maltreatment. However, the programme does not account for the young voices of potential child victims and doesn't extend these resources and support to children and young people in need.

Thus, whilst the Community Now programme empowers communities, it is not able to empower young people in identifying and disclosing their own abuse, nor does it assist children and young people to seek the help they require; although it does improve responses to disclosures from trusted adults hearing such disclosures.

The approach utilised by the RIH's work is one which is considered child-centred at every stage, therefore offering resources ensuring that content for children and young people is created for them, including those with lived experience so that the resources are engaging and accessible. The illustrated stories are shaped by the direct experiences of children and young people who have lived through family violence, with other people's stories providing a source of identification and understanding for young people enabling them to better communicate their own experiences as these stories help children and young people to *'feel like you're not the only one going through it'*, overcoming barriers to disclosure rooted in guilt, fear and shame.

This approach serves to provide a resource for young people to understand and seek support for their experiences which empowers them to understand the problems they are experienced at home, and enables them to explain their situations and seek help (Gorin, 2004 in Monstratt et al., 2012:2). Furthermore, the reflection of children's voices and experiences in the illustrated stories aids in tackling feelings of guilt and isolation as children young people are able to identify with the stories to better understand their own experiences and emotions. It also aids professionals in identifying and understanding children and young people's unique and diverse experiences of abuse empowering non specialists to offer better support, by aiding them in making sense of how these children understand and cope with violence (Beetham et al., 2019:565). The illustrated resources allow children and young people to identify with the similar experience of others and intern, enables children young people and their support workers to bridge conversations and give voice to children young people's experiences and feelings.

### *Creative, Collaborative Approach*

Young children and non-specialist professionals face issues in identifying and discussing the topic of domestic abuse and its impacts due to lacking confidence and insufficient knowledge however, creative, collaborative resources can combat feelings of confusion, isolation and guilt experienced by young survivors with creative resources acting as a buffer to enhance communication and break down barriers to disclosure. Many existing resources focus on bringing specialists into institutions such as schools and youth centres to provide 'buy-in' education and support with few resources available for non-specialists to use in providing 'first response' support for children and young people while they await specialist referral (Fox et al, 2013) .

The illustrated stories provided by RIH ease communication through the stories providing a tool to bridge difficult conversations and aid children and young people in identifying, voicing and exploring their challenges. These accessible stories then help to facilitate dialogue between children and young people and a trusted professional, allowing them to collaboratively discuss children and young people's experiences using the stories of other children's experiences as a buffer to enhance communication (Nelson, 2014:10) and tackle feelings of isolation, guilt or embarrassment about children's own experiences. Thus, the stories help to demystify the diverse manifestations and impacts of domestic abuse (which can be difficult to understand and identify for both the children and young people experiencing them and the non-specialists attempting to provide support), with the communication of other children's experiences will encourage greater awareness and professional understanding that will help young people and their support network they provide the help needed.

The South Tyneside Young People's Parliament (STYPP) utilised survey feedback from teachers and students to create lesson plans that would address the gaps in teachers' and students' knowledge about domestic violence and its impacts (STYPP, 2023). While this programme does highlight the voices and needs of those it aims to support, it fails to provide accessible resources outside of lesson plans to empower teachers and students to utilise the knowledge they learn to actively respond to disclosures and offer support post-identification. The use of pre-set lesson plans also fails to account for the diversity in experiences of and reactions to domestic abuse making it difficult for support workers to offer tailored and sensitive support to prevent re-traumatisation and misunderstandings.

The 'one size fits all' approach of such pre-packaged programmes fails to account for the diversity of abuse, which generates a multitude of responses and needs. Consequently, pre-packaged support programmes fail to provide various tools that allow children and young people to identify and express the emotional impact of their unique experiences which makes identification and disclosure difficult. It is essential that intervention programmes consider the range of responses to domestic violence among children (Lloyd, 2018:3), with support being more effective when promoted through collaborative practices with trusted adults rather than single- component programmes by external specialists (Harne and Radford, 2008).

The collaborative and creative nature of the RIH programme provides a much-needed resource to tackle barriers to disclosure and promote more open discussion of experiences of abuse by providing children and young people and non-specialist support workers with story-based tools to open sensitive conversations. Through the recruitment of a diverse group of young people, RIH is producing individual booklets of illustrated stories about children's experiences of domestic abuse and accompanying creative resources that will provide a tool to children and young people and support workers to gently encourage disclosure and aid both victims and supportive professionals access and experience their emotions in a safe, non-traumatizing manner (Binkley, 2013:307).

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality refers to the way multiple and converging systems of oppression and social identities compound each other to produce unique life experiences. However, the literature reveals that there is a tendency for existing resources to assume that children exposed to violence are a relatively homogenous group (Etherington and Baker, 2016:66). The 'one size fits all' approach of existing programmes fails to account for the diversity of experiences of and responses to abuse instead treating demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity and class in isolation instead of considering their intersectional relations (Etherington and Baker, 2016:60) which produce inequalities, such as poverty and cultural serotyping, that increase risk and reduce access to support for different groups of children.

For example, many existing programmes such as '*Fort Alice*' requires children to be identified as victims and referred to the specialist programme to receive support (Fort Alice, 2019). This programme's focus on specialist intervention fails to account for the equality gap in the ability of certain groups to access specialist support, with ethnic minority children being the most likely to be victims but least likely to disclose and receive support (NSPCC, 2022). These specialist support programmes also ignore the barriers to disclosure and identification which prevent children and young people and their support network from recognising their experience of abuse and referring them for specialist support. These weaknesses indicate that it is essential for intervention resources to be shaped by the experiences of diverse participants as, recognising the diverse needs of children and young people exposed to domestic violence can strengthen prevention and intervention response strategies (Etherington and Baker, 2016:62).

## The developing programme

In light of the gaps in existing practice and intervention resources revealed by the literature, RIH offers a unique, collaborative approach that provides necessary solutions to overcome the barriers to enquiry and disclosure peddled by issues in lacking professional confidence, homogenous intervention approaches, the silencing of children's voices and intersectional inequality concerns. Thus, RIH provides intervention resources that make support more readily available for young people.

RIH offers a uniquely creative and collaborative approach that allows children and young people and non-specialist professionals to collaborate in their identification and understanding of the child's experience of abuse through the illustrated stories of others' experience of abuse serving to demystify abuse and overcome barriers to disclosure rooted in shame and fear through shared stories which resonate with them. The use of illustrated stories detailing other children's experiences of abuse enables children and young people are able to identify shared experiences and emotions enabling them to share more freely and feel less isolated in their experience (Callaghan et al, 2019:528), encouraging fuller disclosure and understanding for both the young people and the professionals supporting them. This collaborative approach is necessary for improving understanding and combating the homogenous approach of existing intervention practice as engaging in shared experiences empowers children and young people to overcome feelings of guilt and shame as they feel less 'different to others'(Ibid:528). This consequently encourages fuller disclosure and discussion making them more visible to non-specialist professionals who can then offer them the support they need.

RIH offers a solution to the omission of children's voices from the development of intervention resources through its participatory approach that places young people, their experiences and their needs at the centre of resource creation and delivery. This ensures that resources for children and young people are created by them thus ensuring that they are engaging and accessible. Children's perspectives of their experiences reposition children and young people as active participants in identifying and recovering from their own abuse (Houghton, 2015) with many existing programmes, especially those that rely on specialist support and 'buy in' education, failing to recognise young people's agency and empower them as agents in their own healing enhancing children's feelings of isolation and shame that prevent the recognition and disclosure of their abuse. It is therefore vital for intervention programmes to embrace RIH's participatory approach by sharing and validating young people's experiences providing a stimulus, for RIH this takes the form of illustrated stories, that act as a buffer for young people to open conversations about their abuse with adults in supporting roles empowering children and young people to access support.

RIH recognises the variety of responses from children and young people to their unique experiences of abuse and so, in order to ensure support resources are representative and resonate with a wide range of young people their creation is informed directly by a diverse group of young people who represent the experiences of those with different genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities cultures and disabilities. Rabbits in the Headlights provides a necessary solution to the lack of inclusivity reflected in existing intervention programmes which tend to treat aspects of children's identities as discrete categories rather than interconnected. These one-size-fits-all resources fail to recognise the diverse experiences and needs of children exposed to abuse as, when resources and services are written in a language that only recognises certain individual groups of people, the victimisation of those in the 'intersection between inequalities' is ignored (Etherington and Baker, 2016:62). By ensuring that the resourced created are informed by the diverse

experiences of a range of young people RIH purposefully promotes greater inclusivity for those affected by domestic abuse who are disadvantaged by intersectional inequalities that produce outcomes such as a higher likelihood of mental health difficulties and the increased risk of repeat victimisation in adulthood. Recognising and responding to the diverse needs of different groups of children and young people exposed to abuse works to strengthen effective prevention and response strategies (Etherington and Baker, 2016) with RIH interrupting these inequality-based risks by producing work that is representative of many different experiences ensuring that those engaging from diverse backgrounds feel they can connect to and receive support from the resources.

The RIH programme offers an important solution to the delay in accessing support for children and young people, as a consequence of the referral and waiting list process for specialist support programmes, by providing accessible resources to inspire confidence and better understanding among non-specialist professionals so they feel equipped and empowered to provide support in response to children and young people's disclosures of abuse. Many existing intervention programmes rely on the involvement of specialist services to provide therapy-based support for children and young people however, due to waiting times and the need for referral access to this support is often limited. Non-specialist professionals such as teachers are well placed to identify and respond to disclosures of domestic abuse from young people (Lloyd, 2018) however, many professionals report lacking confidence in their ability to provide recovery support (Lloyd, 2018) due to inadequate knowledge about abuse, misunderstandings about their role in responding to disclosures and the absence of resources to aid non-specialists in opening up and guiding conversations about abuse and its impacts with children and young people. RIH aims to expand the pool of those able to reach out and provide supportive conversations with young people by providing accessible resources that empower non-specialist professionals to feel more confident opening much-needed, difficult conversations with young people as they are able to use the illustrated stories to stimulate conversation and explore the challenges of the children and young people in their care.

RIH, therefore, has the potential to be a necessary resource that focuses on promoting greater inclusivity for those affected by domestic abuse but are disadvantaged by intersectional inequalities that produce a higher likelihood of mental health difficulties, risk of repeat victimisation in adulthood, and a lack of access to support for different groups of children and young people. To interrupt these risks for minority groups of children and young people, RIH produces accessible, visual tools through illustrated stories of diverse accounts of abuse from other victimised children to promote better identification and understanding through shared experiences. This serves to combat feelings of shame and isolation by dispelling the myth that it is 'just them' who have these experiences and thus encouraging disclosure.

When recruiting young people to aid in the production of resources, Changing Relations focuses on identifying a diverse group of children and young people in terms of gender, disability, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to ensure that the resources produced are shaped by diverse participants to ensure intersectional representation that allows those engaging from diverse backgrounds can connect and identify themselves with the content.

## Recommendations

The comparative analysis of existing intervention programmes and the consequent revelation of gaps in practice surrounding a lack of professional confidence and the exclusion of young people and their diverse experience and responses to domestic abuse, all contribute to creating barriers to disclosure and support, this report makes several recommendations for future practice, underpinned by RIH innovative, creative and participatory approach, to encourage more accessible and successful support for children and young people experiencing abuse.

- Intervention practice must focus on empowering non-specialist professionals to better identify and more confidently respond to disclosures by providing accessible resources that both enhance professional understanding and provide tools to open difficult conversations with children and young people about their experiences of abuse so that they may provide effective and quick support.
- Intervention programmes and resources must take a participatory, child-centred approach which ensures that resources for children and young people are created based on their expressed needs and experiences and gives voice to the needs of young people to understand what they require from support.
- Supportive intervention programmes must account for the way intersecting social identities function to create different experiences and impacts of domestic abuse on different groups of children in order to produce more accessible resources that promote greater inclusivity for those affected by domestic abuse but are disadvantaged by intersecting inequalities.

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