The British Journal of Criminology, 2025, **XX**, 1–19
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaf029
Original Manuscript

Rabbits in Headlights: Professional Responses to Children's Help-Seeking Practices When They Are Victims of Domestic abuse

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The Victim and Prisoners Act 2024 has legislated the responsibility of professionals to respond when they are aware children and young people (CYP) are experiencing domestic abuse. However, CYP are often concerned about what adult responses to their help-seeking may be, frequently encountering adults who freeze, like rabbits in headlights, unclear on how to respond appropriately. Thus, CYP may engage in help-seeking at different levels, at different times, for different purposes. By aiming to improve CYP's experiences of domestic abuse disclosures, this paper explores how creative resources can support and promote CYP's help-seeking practices at three different levels: (1) facilitating open dialogue, (2) through the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum, (3) holding space when disclosures occurred. We argue that policy and guidance contrast the experiences of CYP and professionals who highlight challenges during the pilot of these co-produced resources. Future work needs to explore how teachers and youth workers can engage in reflexive practice when exploring issues of harm with CYP.

KEY WORDS: domestic abuse, children as victims, professional responses, education

INTRODUCTION

In 2023–2024, domestic abuse was the leading cause of child safeguarding referrals in the United Kingdom (Department for Education 2024). Early intervention where there is domestic abuse is vital, as the length of time children are subjected to domestic abuse is more closely associated with long-term harm than the 'severity' of domestic abuse (Lloyd 2018). Thus, the earlier professionals can respond, the better the outcomes for children and young people (CYP), even at the pre-birth stage (NSPCC 2022). Despite the focus in research and practice on CYP's disclosures, disclosure is only one part of wider help-seeking process, which also includes different levels of awareness of their experiences as abusive (none, partial, or clear recognition),

and different forms of telling (remaining hidden, prompted, or purposeful telling) (Cossar *et al.* 2019).

Serious case reviews frequently highlight that frontline professionals who work with CYP often miss opportunities to identify and respond to the early indicators of harm (Lloyd 2018). This is despite the recognition that:

> *Schools see children daily and teachers, classroom assistants, dinner staff, playground staff are all in a good position to notice concerns, changes in children's behaviour and the response and attitude of parents/carers to any concerns raised.* (Wiffin 2017:48).

In many cases, this can be due to confusion around who is responsible for responding when CYP makes disclosures, or when there are observable indicators of harm, with the belief that sharing information is enough (Thompson 2016).

Contextual safeguarding is a social work-focused approach that looks at how relationships outside of the home can cause, or repair, child safeguarding concerns, and schools are viewed as central to understanding these relationships (McGovern and McGovern 2021). This shifts the focus from schools' duty to 'refer' concerns towards schools' role in creating safe educational settings (Firmin *et al.* 2019). However, evaluations of school-based programmes exploring relationships, violence, and abuse delivered by teachers show they often lack confidence and skills in this area and receive inadequate training (Hester and Westmarland 2005; Biddulph 2007). Furthermore, anxious or inexperienced teachers can become reliant on worksheet-based lessons (Condie *et al.* 2006; Fox *et al.* 2014). Such approaches have been found to be particularly ineffective with boys, who are considered a priority in current sex and relationships work (Hilton 2001; Biddulph 2007).

Some research has highlighted that when CYP are prepared to make a full or partial disclosure, they may require support, identifying that someone should have noticed and asked them rather than requiring them to engage with direct and full help-seeking (Allnock and Miller 2013; Cossar *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, in the first instance, CYP often confide in their friends before sharing with an adult (Lloyd 2018), so developing a school or community culture that promotes conversations around this topic may support CYP who receive such disclosures. When CYP *are* prepared to disclose to adults directly, they typically approach teachers with whom they have an established relationship, thus they are so-called 'trusted adults' who know the details of their lives (Jobe and Gorin 2013; Fox *et al.* 2014). However, work related to this project has established that CYP frequently encounter professionals who do not know how to respond. They freeze, like rabbits in headlights, unsure of how to navigate this issue directly with the CYP. Thus, professionals are frequently unable to hold space for disclosure, making young people feel that adults will not, or cannot, help them, so they should not disclose further (Hamilton 2021:np). This is in direct contradiction to the Victims and Prisoners Bill 2024, which emphasizes the importance of promoting disclosure and supporting child victims of domestic abuse. Thus, those who work directly with CYP must be vigilant of not only the different levels of help-seeking practices CYP engages in but also how they should respond to such practices in a way that does not prevent the child or young person from future help-seeking.

Further barriers to help-seeking include a lack of awareness of *'issues of intersectionality and the impact of multiple oppressions [which need] to be explored and understood'*. (Wiffin 2017; Doherty 2023:17). An example of this is that those living in poverty are more likely to have a family member with a disability (or have one themselves), and poverty increases vulnerability to domestic abuse which is often hidden. Those within LGBT + communities also have more barriers to support, and these barriers will increase due to compounding oppressions they may experience (Donovan and Hester, 2014). Chronic illness, disability, and challenges for parents

who are raising children with complex needs, all impact the way professionals engage with families and help-seeking opportunities (Myers 2022; Doherty 2023; Perry 2023). However, even when working with parents is consistent and collaborative, there is a lack of acknowledgement by professionals of the lived experiences of CYP experiencing harm within the home. Research on young people who have shared information with professionals has found that young people receive mixed responses and feel their disclosures have not been taken seriously enough (Allnock and Miller 2013; Jobe and Gorin 2013). How these issues intersect increases the vulnerability of a child, and it is important resources and discourse around domestic abuse include conversations around these different features of an individual's experience.

This paper aims to outline the findings of a participatory evaluation into the piloting of resources designed by, with, and for CYP to improve professional responses to the different levels of young people's disclosures of domestic abuse or neglect. We argue that, while policy and guidance encourage shared safeguarding responsibility, this contrasts with the current experiences of CYP and professionals who face challenges in implementation.

Policy and practice in England

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 legislation has encouraged all local authorities and local police forces to implement new processes and procedures after recognizing children (those aged under 18, under The Children Act 1989) as victims of domestic abuse in their own right when such harm occurs within their home. Whilst children's social workers have a clear responsibility for supporting children at risk of harm (Children Act 1989), the Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) and Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government 2023a, 2023b) guidance also ensures that the responsibility of safeguarding CYP applies to all staff and volunteers within education settings; from teaching staff to senior leaders, and Governors (HM Government 2023a). These legislated responsibilities refer to both harms within the school, and those disclosures or reports which refer to harms the child or young person is experiencing within their home or the community (Lloyd and Disney 2022). However, sharing information is not sufficient if professionals are not actively responding to these disclosures. Adults to whom a child discloses harm must respond to this information so that it can be investigated and the child can be referred for specialist support if required (Operation Encompass 2024). The Child Victims Code (Home Office 2024; MOJ 2024) highlights that CYPs have a right to have their voices heard, and a right to a day-to-day understanding of their lived experiences from the professionals in their lives. This shift in perspective has the potential to create a culture shift within environments such as schools to make conversations around domestic abuse and victimization more open and creative, which in turn supports the Operation Encompass (2024) continuum at the Universal Services level which 'involves whole organization approach, policies, ethos and culture'.

Operation Encompass (2019) is a collaboration between police forces and schools and is an approach designed to improve policing multi-agency relationships in responding to reports of domestic abuse. Since 2024, Operation Encompass has been enshrined in UK legislation through the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (Home Office 2024), meaning professionals must respond when they become aware that CYPs are victims of domestic abuse. Through this, information-sharing practices are improved when there has been a report of domestic abuse following which the police have attended a home where CYP are present, whether further action is taken or not. If a child is present then a referral is sent to child safeguarding services to determine whether social care or early help involvement is required; police will also contact schools via their 'key adult' who has taken additional training through the Operation Encompass pathway. This key adult is usually the school Designated or Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead who will take steps to share information with the relevant staff members (form tutors,

teachers, support staff), who can in turn offer appropriate support to the child or young person (Operation Encompass 2019).

The Operation Encompass pathway (Figure 1) ensures schools are aware of recorded incidents of domestic abuse and are expected to provide additional support to those CYP. It has been highlighted that, before Operation Encompass, 'children were going to school the next day, often exhausted, feeling like they had no one to speak to who would understand' (PSNI 2024: np). However, it is important to note that there are specific challenges facing teachers when they are required to respond to disclosures of abuse, not least concerns around whether they have the confidence and skills to respond appropriately, rather than like 'rabbits in headlights' (Fox *et al.* 2014; Holt 2014; Barter *et al.* 2015).

It is important that all CYP receive appropriate responses to their disclosures of abuse. In addition, '*schools also have an essential role in educating children about domestic abuse*' (Ofsted *et al.* 2017:28 in Lloyd 2018), thus supporting CYP to recognize and name their experiences. However, teachers may have internalized stigmatizing and harmful stereotypes around abuse that may affect their ability to give a supportive response; for instance, one survey found that 22 per cent of teachers who had delivered a programme thought that girls provoked violence because of how they behave and dress (Condie *et al.* 2006; Fox *et al.* 2014). Therefore, it is important that teachers receive support from external agencies:

> *Knowing when and how to seek advice from multi-agency professionals is an essential part of effective practice among school staff. Despite their vital role in identifying signs of abuse and signposting referral pathways, research indicates teachers often lack confidence and knowledge for such work.* (Lloyd 2018, p. 396402)

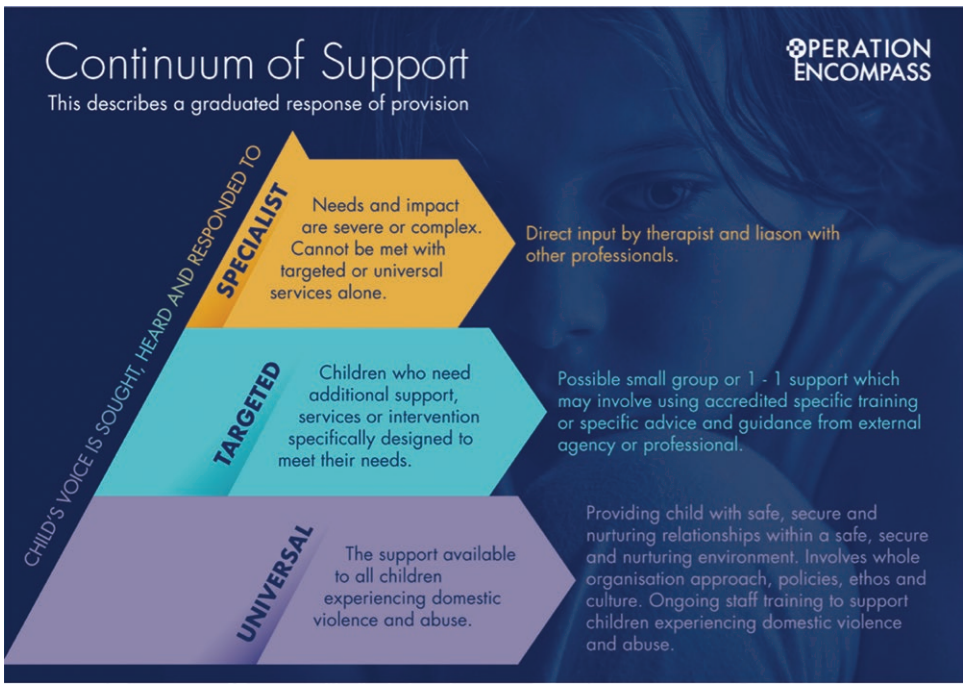

Fig. 1 —Operation encompass continuum of support.

Professional reflexivity

Due to power dynamics that permeate all forms of work with CYP, emancipatory practices involving reflexivity are essential (Coburn and Gormally 2017). '*Reflective practices and action taking have been cornerstones of teacher education and professional development for many decades*' (Feucht *et al.* 2017:234). Thus teachers, along with youth workers and social workers, should be practising reflexivity to deconstruct assumptions they may have about CYP and their life experiences. However, as reflexivity is used less in teacher training, this can result in teachers perpetuating and reinforcing existing harmful social beliefs, values or ideologies as they are not provided with opportunity to develop the skills to critique their own assumptions (Feucht *et al.* 2017). Despite the importance of reflection, within education, values are often seen as concrete, positivist phenomena, meaning they are static and unchanging. Values are taught to students as though they are 'correct' without much opportunity to critically reflect on where these values or morals came from (Veugelers and Vedder 2003).

This is different from social work education and training in which reflexivity is a core component (Chow *et al.* 2011; Watts 2019; Tang Yan *et al.* 2022). The emphasis on reflexive practices within social work enables professionals to engage in an anti-oppressive practice that challenges the potential to replicate, reproduce and internalized systemic and structural harms (Dominelli 2017; Tang Yan *et al.* 2022). However, social workers still need to engage in questioning their ethics and values, where these have come from, and what harms they could be perpetuating, and this is not always possible beyond their education and training.

Methodology

In 2021, Changing Relations, an arts-based education organization, published 'Sometimes it Hurts' (Hamilton 2021), a book containing six short stories about young people's experiences of poverty, neglect, divorce and domestic abuse, including within their own emerging relationships as well as that experienced in a range of forms within their childhood homes. Creative methods such as this have been identified as particularly useful in participatory research with CYP (Veale 2005). The stories developed in stage 1 of the project are based on the real-life experiences, observations and insights of young people. Responses from CYP indicated that all professionals who have direct contact with CYP should be aware of these resources, and thus the six stories were developed into educational resources across multiple phases (Table 1):

Phases two and three involved developing creative activities including mapping exercises, whereby CYP created maps of their communities to understand the way in which they conceptualized spaces as safe, or not safe (Veale 2005). Such maps were then embedded within the resources as an early activity for CYP to begin exploring their own communities (for a full list of resources, please see Sometimes It Hurts resources). For this paper, we are focusing on the participatory evaluation of phase three to seven. Prior to phase five, Nikki had been the principal investigator on the work, Josie had a consultancy role and from phase 5, Cait became involved in the participatory evaluation, immersing herself in the work as a youth work practitioner. When evaluations are undertaken they are often not utilized; involving 'stakeholders' in the process can provide motivation to value the evaluation (Cousins and Earl 1992). Thus, Cait had an existing interest and was able, as a participatory evaluator, to act as a coordinator of the process of reflection and dialogue, and support participants involved in defining evaluation needs (Feuerstein 1988), with Nikki supporting through the evaluation as a process of reflection.

Reflective practice was engaged in utilizing several different methods, such as:

- Reflective conversations with the team after training sessions;
- Interviews with team members to reflect on the processes behind the project;

- Interviews with teachers and social workers to reflect on processes behind co-design of resources,
- Training sessions and implementation of resources;
- Focus group with young people to reflect on their experiences of using the resources;
- Highlighting the 'work in progress' project for all stakeholders.

Whilst some of these methods appear more traditional than others, participatory evaluation should be ongoing and include multiple research methods (Cousins and Earl 1992). It can be a catalyst for change, but it is also important to recognize the multiple aspects that can be challenging to execute (Springett 2003). Thus, the team composition ensured that Cait, as the participatory evaluator, was supported by Nikki.

Table 1. Description of the project phases

Phase	Activity	Purpose	Participants	Method
1	Books	Development of Sometimes it hurts stories, co-produced with young people	Six adolescent girls	Focus group
2	Professional consultation	Planning activity for how workshops with CYP could be run in an ethical way which prioritised the safeguarding and wellbeing of CYP involved	Nikki Rutter (Author 2) Josie Phillips (Author 3) One youth worker One creative practitioner One voluntary sector leader	Workshop
3	Workshops with CYP	Young people introduced to the Sometimes it Hurts stories and work to develop and try out resources to explore the topics covered in the stories	Three secondary schools and two primary schools 46 CYP Supported by teachers and youth workers	Workshop
4	Reviewing resources	Creating and developing the resources based on feedback from CYP	Creative development team	Workshop
5	Training professionals	Introducing the resources and how they could be used	Teachers, youth workers, student social workers	Three workshops
6	Piloting resources	Utilising the resources in practice with CYP	Teachers, youth workers, student social workers (6)	Action
7	Evaluation of pilot resources	Speak with relevant stakeholders about their experience of using the resources	Teachers, youth workers, student social worker (1), young people (2)	Interviews Focus group
8	Launch event	Share resources with stakeholders and generate feedback		Interactive symposium

Analysis

As this was a participatory evaluation, Cait engaged in the evaluation as an experienced youth worker, thus analysis required space for reflexivity in an attempt to unpack their own assumptions and values relating to the work. The reflexive thematic analysis followed a prompt-and-probing process Nikki had previously utilized (Rutter *et al.* 2023), which had been cited as a high-quality analytical process (Nind *et al.* 2022) and met the guidance criteria for reviewers (Braun and Clarke 2021; 2023). This process took part over three sessions between Cait and Nikki, with Cait sharing the initial data coding and mapping the data onto themes, with Nikki probing as to why and how these were constructed to establish the underlying assumptions, values, and expectations. These three sessions were conducted over Microsoft Teams, recorded and transcribed, undergoing a further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023).

Ethical considerations

As this project utilizing participatory principles throughout, each stage of the research informed the next stage, and ethical considerations were considered in depth from the outset. The research team was made up of professionals (youth workers, social workers, creative professionals), and before any work with CYP, the social workers, both of whom were experienced in child safeguarding, worked with the design team to explore how CYP could explore the topics of interest (things that hurt), in a way which was ethical and transparent.

Co-design workshops were run with large numbers of facilitators, so if CYP wished to leave, or receive additional support, they could. Professionals using the resources were aware they could contact the design team for support and Durham University Department of Sociology Ethics committee approved the research at each stage [Ethical approval code: SOC-2024-02-15T14_41_19-fjtk59]. All participants at each stage gave informed consent, and CYP provided assent to participation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

These findings represent the results of a reflexive thematic analysis of the multi-modal data. First, an overview of the evaluation's key findings is presented. Following this, we expand on three further themes which emerged as a result of the reflexive thematic analysis: risks to reinforcing existing harms, values in practice, and participatory approaches.

The creative resources

Training

The training days aimed to provide teaching/social work/youth work professionals with skills to use the developed resources. One practitioner differentiates the training from previous experiences which have left them unprepared: '*often… you get all of these great resources and then that's the end of it*'. Instead, the training offered professionals '*time… to actually think about what responses they might say, in advance. Yeah… I have felt quite prepared for it*' (Secondary school staff). Professionals also indicated that preparation which included space to get to know the resources was vital:

> *I think knowledge of the stories, knowledge of the books helps... Well, it's not one of those lessons, where you think, I just go in and read the book, you need to kind of have that kind of mental preparation in your head to know what you're going to do and what you're going to say (Primary school staff)*

According to professionals, the training days also provided a *'chance to ask the questions'* (social work student) and get peer support from others such as the '*opportunity to talk to people about how you would use them and kind of the responses that we think we would do and us completing some of the activities*' (Primary school staff). A consistent finding was that the training sessions provided an essential resource, as there were multiple barriers to being able to support CYP in the three levels of help-seeking mentioned earlier and providing access to worksheets and resources was not enough to help them overcome the barriers. Furthermore, due to the amount of information needed to use the resources effectively in the future, professionals highlighted the need for ongoing support rather than a one-off training day: '*I think just... knowing… that there are people available. If you wanted to check in with someone... we know that there's a follow-up*' (Secondary school staff).

Implementation

The initial purpose of developing resources for frontline professionals was to help them hold space for CYP who were experiencing abuse. This was based on an increasing recognition in policy of the need for professionals to have the skills to respond appropriately to disclosures (Home Office 2024):

> *We have so many children who experience some sort of kind of either domestic abuse, domestic violence, anything like that, or even sort of some of the stories that were about like going to food banks and things like that... that was probably our main driver … [to] let our children know… they're not the only ones. (Primary school staff)*

However, throughout the interviews, it became clear that some professionals had other goals beyond just supporting those experiencing abuse, such as the above example which references food banks. Children who are hungry experience a raft of developmental problems including difficulty in concentration and challenges with organization which is required in the classroom environment (Lloyd 2018). Teachers and social workers supported the use of co-produced resources in facilitating broader discussions around harms within the home. For example, one teacher indicated *''I think it could also work well even just as an awareness" (Primary school staff)*. Another was to navigate the additional workload by implementing the resources into their personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum. For example, a primary teacher, who believed they '*don't have that cohort of young people*', suggested *'even if it's delivered in PSHE, even if it's once you know, every couple of weeks or going into a different session with them. I think that could work really well'*. Whilst not all teachers had used the resources in this way, the majority suggested they had plans to discuss incorporating the resources with the PSHE subject lead.

This finding demonstrates that using resources with CYP within a classroom environment needs to feel purposeful to those delivering them, by fitting into their pre-existing roles and responsibilities. The resources were purposeful in three ways: (1) facilitating dialogue, (2) meeting the PSHE curriculum, (3) holding space when disclosures occurred.

Facilitating dialogue: it became clear that professionals were not yet having conversations with CYP about issues around domestic abuse, and they had little knowledge of any CYP who actually had these experiences. Professionals were describing such topics as '*difficult*', which demonstrated not only that they were difficult to talk about, but also difficult to acknowledge. Therefore, a shift in classroom cultures of having these conversations openly was required before teachers were able to reflect on how to manage and navigate disclosures: '*I just thought it was a good starting point for a conversation about difficult topics..'*. (Secondary school staff). Thus, it is important to consider how the Operation Encompass continuum may be applied going forward

to explore how a whole school approach, policies, ethos and culture to open dialogues around domestic abuse can be implemented by individual professionals.

Meeting the PSHE curriculum: As teachers were primarily trained to deliver the curriculum, they frequently discussed how '*[the resources] might be able to be incorporated in some aspects of our PSHE, like, sessions*' (primary school staff). By incorporating the resources into lesson planning via the PSHE curriculum, we found teachers hoped to support children's emotional well-being in a way that matched their practical training, alongside the core business of what they referred to as 'healthy and unhealthy relationships'. However, what are, and are not, healthy and unhealthy relationships are complex and nuanced. How this can be integrated into the curriculum is contested, particularly when it relates to young boys who can often require different teaching strategies than girls (Biddulph 2007).

Holding space when disclosures occurred: The stories and resources were useful in talking through so-called 'difficult' topics and intended to be used when there had been a disclosure or when professionals had been aware of incidents of domestic abuse or neglect. The teachers and youth workers involved in piloting the resources, who did not report receiving disclosures, found they were able to consider the ways in which the resources could be useful in the more abstract sense:

> *Even if I've just got a young person that's struggling… I can go "Oh, actually, that relates to Chelsea's story" or whatever and even just do a little bit of one-to-one with them. Just as like a one-off (Primary school staff)*

However, one social work student used the resources with a mother who was experiencing domestic abuse to mediate discussion of her own experiences through one of the six stories which had some similarities to the mother's experiences:

> *She was really engaged, I think because it was... using it as a scenario, rather than talking about things that are happening in her relationship. So that made it easy for her to just sort of like, get her views... to see if she can understand, you know, that in her own relationship. (Social work student)*

This example, although not with CYP, highlights the potential of the resources to assist professionals in providing support to those experiencing abuse and other themes covered in the stories.

Barriers to use

Professionals acknowledged many challenges that delayed or hindered their or their colleagues' abilities to use and implement the resources with CYP, such as time, feeling overwhelmed, and the need for ongoing support. This supports other research which highlighted that teachers are often over-stretched and under-supported when providing support for those experiencing abuse (Lloyd 2018). Some professionals who took part in the training did not have the time to use the resources within the three months (one term) of the pilot study. Others, despite planning to use the resources, were often unable to: '*The difficulty for me, I had every intention of starting it before Christmas. It was just the time. I couldn't do it*' (Secondary school staff). This emphasizes the challenges schools have in meeting the legislative requirements of the Victim and Prisoners Bill 2024, as they do not have the capacity to engage in such pastoral activities.

The training was designed to support professionals in understanding how to use the resources available. Despite recognizing the importance of tailoring sessions to meet their cohorts of CYP, the large number of activities and stories meant that often they simply started with one story

and the first activity in the list. Professionals indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the volume and choices presented by the resources and activities:

> *Do you want my honest opinion? I haven't looked through it as much as what I have done since the training, to be honest with you, because all I've done really is cuz I've kind of gone through and thought, right, I'm going to try this session. (Secondary school staff)*

One of the largest barriers that emerged through the reflexive thematic analysis of interview data was that the expectation that all professionals would be able to engage with the resources, challenge problematic or harmful assumptions, and hold space for disclosure was too radical.

> *I know the year five teacher is quite apprehensive about using them... I think that would probably be kind of the only sort of area where I would have concerns about it is more the teachers than the pupils. (Primary school staff)*

Thus, the research team and school senior leaders had overestimated teachers' and youth workers' capacities and capabilities within the training. Knowledge and training around domestic abuse should have been pitched at a lower level. This is also evident in concerns around who has the skills to work with CYP around their experiences of domestic abuse, with teachers, social workers and youth workers not necessarily having specialist training to navigate these topics (Lloyd 2018); however, universal services are still expected to provide this service (Home Office 2024).

Creative methods

Participatory approaches, such as the ones in the project, often use creative methods to facilitate discussions and share those stories that often go untold. Before the authors joined the project, the stories had been co-produced by a writer with young people, all girls. For the professionals using the stories with other CYP, this made the stories more 'real'. As one primary teacher retold a conversation with the class: '*I said, these are from real young people. I said, this isn't something that's made up, this has happened*'. (Primary school staff). However, as demonstrated by our focus group, also all girls, it is unclear how boys engaged with the resources. This is particularly important as adolescent boys are less likely to engage with creative processes in the classroom, particularly in PSHE unless they are provided with some kind of leadership or mentoring role (Biddulph 2007).

Much of the feedback highlighted the importance of diversity and representation, not just regarding experiences of abuse but also intersectional identities such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation. The resources developed attempted to cover a diversity of experiences and backgrounds that account for these intersecting identities (for the variety of experiences, please see Sometimes It Hurts resources). The young people indicated that there are a *'variety of people to relate to*' (Secondary school pupils) and their teacher suggested this was a big part of their enjoyment of the resources:

> *They really liked the stories… I think there's something in there for everyone... Everybody knows someone who's used a food bank. Yeah. You know, everybody knows somebody who's LGBTQ+. (Secondary school staff)*

Overall, the combination of having the initial six stories alongside complementary creative activities was popular, with both receiving positive feedback from professionals and the CYP they used them with: '*once they've had a look at the books, they just, they love them, they want more*

of them'. (Primary school staff). The CYP who took part in the focus group stated the creative activities were their favourite, indicating '*mapping was the best*' as it felt different to classes where they mostly wrote. Instead, they felt the creative activities '*allowed you to express stuff*'. They liked that there was '*no pressure to discuss*' and that they could have '*conversations while drawing*' (Figure 2). The following sections expand on these key themes further.

Risks of reinforcing existing harm

An extra barrier to CYP seeking help is concerns about not being believed or taken seriously (Jobe and Gorin 2013). An example of this has been highlighted in the initial creative stories and feedback on this project; CYP should be supported to make disclosures, and enabling this support is an ongoing process: '*He looks like he might ask me if I'm alright, but his mouth just opens and closes like a fish in a big fish tank*' (Hamilton 2021:11). As such, the initial goal of this project was to support non-domestic abuse specialist professionals to hold space for young people to disclose harmful experiences and offer them supportive conversations whilst awaiting specialist referrals. This is particularly important as the continuum of support highlights that all CYP experiencing domestic abuse should receive support from universal services, with the option of targeted or specialist support for those CYP who require it (Operation Encompass 2024). This goal worked relatively well with social work students, who potentially due to the safety of their student status (whereby they are able to seek support advice and support from supervisors), or the reflective skills developed in their training, were more willing to use the stories and resources creatively: '*I just thought, you know, there is no harm in trying the resources and just seeing whether it's something that would bring up conversations*' (Social Work student). However, teachers were less inclined. Thus, it is unclear within the boundaries of this research whether qualified social workers would have been as inclined as their student counterparts.

The findings of the research training sessions cause us to reevaluate the purpose of the books and resources beyond holding space for disclosures. Despite early disclosure mediating the long-term psychological impact of abuse and preventing later victimization and exploitation (McElvaney, Greene and Hogan 2014), activities to promote disclosure are of limited value, without a supportive response (Cossar *et al.* 2019). While it is true that responses of 'doing nothing' by ignoring or denying CYP's disclosures of abuse by adults are problematic, badly handled responses also have negative consequences (Allnock and Miller 2013). Thus, responses to disclosure should be seen as a process rather than an action. In this way, seeing disclosure as part of a dialogical interaction highlights the importance of focusing not just on the CYP's

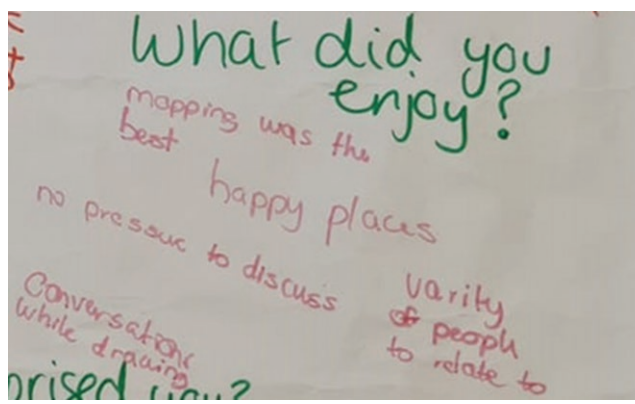

Fig. 2 Focus group notes

ability or reluctance to help-seek, but on adults' ability to listen (Flåm and Haugstvedt 2013). It is important to create whole environments for CYP where adults notice and ask them about potentially harmful experiences (Allnock and Miller 2013). Alternative positive responses from adults included:

> *Engaging with the young person, not just the parents; using age and developmentally appropriate words and communication styles; providing a safe place to talk; and informing the young person of the actions they were going to take (Allnock and Miller 2013:7).*

Our apprehensions about the barriers experienced by professionals have already been noted, such as whether individual professionals can adapt and respond to disclosures in a way most suitable for the CYP they work with. However, it is important not to focus wholly on individual factors, such as practitioner confidence, but also recognize structural factors which might affect responses, such as time and available resources. Furthermore, systemic and cultural factors may be exacerbated, replicated, and reinforced through inappropriate socialization of the professionals themselves. For instance, schools are often viewed as a place of safety for CYP, and ensuring good attendance is considered an important goal in child protection conferences, despite contextual safeguarding research highlighting schools can be the place many CYP are harmed (Lloyd and Disney 2022). The public story of domestic abuse has shaped societal understanding, policy and practice around the issue as a 'gendered' problem of 'strong' heterosexual men's physical violence to 'weak' heterosexual women as a result of the success of feminist activism highlighting the need for the 'private' problem to be brought into the public domain (Donovan and Hester 2014). In the context of domestic abuse experienced by LGB and/or T+ people, Donovan and Hester (2014) argue that the public story creates a barrier to recognizing abuse, both for LGB and/or T + people themselves and for help providers as the public story often centres experiences of 'white, able-bodied, heterosexual women as victims of white able-bodied heterosexual men' (Donovan and Barnes 2017). This construction of domestic abuse makes it difficult for other experiences of abuse that do not fit within the dominant public story to be told and heard.

The stories told in the evaluated project were diverse and included characters with diverse genders, sexualities and cultural backgrounds. However, having positive discussions with CYP about these issues relies on professionals thinking reflexively about their own understanding, awareness and practices which might inadvertently reinforce the public story or other harmful stereotypes. When talking to the young people in the focus group about their experiences of using the resources, it came to our attention that some of the young people may hold stereotypical views that were going unchallenged by the professionals they were working with. During an interview with one practitioner, they indicated how they left the young people they were working with to use the resources on their own: '*What I did was I came in and we talked about it a little bit. And then I left them on their own in this room, because I'm just next door'. (Secondary school staff)*

Through the reflexive thematic analysis, we reflected on how a teacher's assumptions regarding young people might impact their choices to leave young people on their own. Prior to meeting the focus group, Cait was told the CYP were *'good kids'* citing their parents' professions as social workers and teachers. Later, during an interview, the teacher recognized that this does not mean they will not be experiencing abuse:

> *Although, you know, to everyone, opinion, appearances, they come from stable homes and good homes. Yeah, we all know, and especially reading the stories that things go on behind closed doors. (Secondary school staff)*

Despite this acknowledgement, in practice, it seems the narrative that they are '*good kids*' led to the belief they would be ok to discuss issues surrounding domestic abuse without an adult being present. The young people she was working with took part in a focus group where it was clear that despite them being '*good kids*' they held victim-blaming views surrounding a character in one of the stories:

> *One of them was surprised that "Amy got into an abusive relationship after her father had been abusive". The other girl said "well it's her father figure so she doesn't know any better". So I facilitated this conversation between them, indicating that it is, of course, not Amy's fault for experiencing abuse and perhaps not having support to recognise it. However, it did make me think how this conversation might have gone if I was not there. As [the teacher] often left them to do the activities on their own who is there to pick apart any myths or stereotypes or misunderstandings if there is not an adult present (focus group fieldnotes)*

The need for raising awareness and promoting open dialogue regarding domestic abuse was evidenced when speaking with teachers: *'if you're getting young people engaged and discussing and raising awareness. That's good enough for me'* (Secondary school staff). However, as Fox *et al.* (2014) found, greater awareness does not mean greater understanding, with some students misinterpreting important messages or, in the case above, with professionals not unpicking underlying stereotypes in students' understandings. It is important to note that most professionals understood the importance of being present when using the resources to enable discussion and tackle misconceptions.

These issues highlight a tension between giving CYP space for free expression to share their opinions and being there to challenge sexism and other prejudices (Fox *et al.* 2014). By recognizing that CYP and professionals are influenced by societal norms, we argue that some responses to disclosures of abuse may not in themselves cause harm but may reinforce existing harms. This impacts CYP's ability to disclose and get support when experiencing abuse.

Values in practice

> *Practitioners are concerned about triggering children and unknown disclosures from young people that have experiences with this that they don't expect… [others noted that] this is the objective of using the resources - to get disclosures (Training day 1 fieldnote)*

These worries are not uncommon among professionals, but the focus on adult concerns around the vulnerability of young people can lead to the silencing of CYP's voices and experiences (Callaghan *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, it is unclear whether it is a concern around the discomfort of the CYP or the discomfort experienced by professionals which is the real reason for lack of response, or inappropriate response. Unlike the enthusiasm in using the books and resources demonstrated by social work students, teachers may be overly concerned with the potential for re-traumatizing CYP when they are disclosing experiences of violence and abuse (Jennings 2018). Participants cited the well-known fear of '*opening a can of worms*' (Hester and Westmarland 2005:40) during the training days. Nevertheless, teachers and youth workers are not viewed by parents with suspicion in the same way social workers are, and so teachers and youth workers may also have a role when communicating with the family about their harmful experiences beyond the initial child disclosure (Lloyd 2018).

These issues exemplify challenges facing professionals when they are not sure whose role or responsibility it is to respond to disclosures. Similarly, whilst youth workers were aware that

they had a responsibility to respond to disclosure, they were not sure what this would look like or what would happen next:

> *"[Youth worker] straight away had concerns about opening a can of worms - who do we turn to? What happens next after disclosure? [Youth worker] talked about not wanting to let YP down but being dubious about the system being able to support them." (Training day 2 fieldnote)*

Furthermore, the same worker highlighted that the specialist services designed to support CYP were not able to access specialist support pathways post-disclosure: *'I don't think it's too heavy' but… support services aren't there, police falls through all the time…"* (Youth Worker). However, as outlined in policy and legislation, safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone, and Universal Services have a responsibility to support CYP experiencing domestic abuse (HM Government 2023b; Home Office 2024). Thus, if a child or young person is seeking support either through disclosure or help-seeking behaviours, the adults around them must respond accordingly whether or not specialist services are appropriately funded, have long waiting lists, or high thresholds. As demonstrated, adults need to 'hold space' for CYP when they make those initial disclosures, rather than simply putting in a referral and expecting someone else to manage the intervention. Thus, there is a disconnect between organizational responsibility and individual professional capabilities.

Cossar *et al.* (2019) assert how CYP's willingness to disclose and professionals' ability to respond effectively is impacted by macro factors. As such, wider decisions about public spending influence the ability of public services to support non-domestic abuse professionals when they are hearing disclosures. For domestic abuse prevention and support to be effective, professionals need to feel supported by processes and management, be prepared with knowledge and information about services, be able to signpost to them and know what to do following disclosure to ensure CYP's safety (Lloyd 2018). As part of the training days, a domestic abuse organization shared what services they provide and how professionals can support CYP and their families to access them. The following excerpt from the field notes highlights how little prior knowledge professionals had of the local domestic abuse organization:

> *[Primary school teacher] described how she has families that have been referred by the police but didn't realise that anyone could refer. She provided an example of [young people] from her school who experienced abuse when younger and didn't get support, just the adults did… She asked "is there any info I can display at the school?" (It felt quite shocking to me how little teachers already knew about this service and that they weren't already displaying this kind of information) … Nikki also found it shocking that teachers weren't aware of referrals. (Training day 2 fieldnote)*

Doubts about the ability of the system to support professionals and professionals' limited knowledge about support services are not the only structural barriers to CYP disclosing abuse and gaining support. Many CYPs delay help-seeking due to their own limited knowledge about abuse, particularly when CYP's experiences are not in line with prevailing stereotypes, or, what Donovan and Hester (2014) call the public story, and go unrecognised (Augusti and Myhre 2021). Although individual professionals may wish to respond in a particular way, the boundaries of their practice and professional expectations provide overwhelming barriers. Furthermore, existing literature identifies the many challenges of multi-agency working (Carter *et al.* 2007; Frost and Robinson 2007; Moran *et al.* 2006; Rose 2009; Webb and Vulliamy 2005). These include the varying approaches, priorities, and interventions that professionals from different organizations bring to their work; these are informed by different knowledge frameworks,

available resources, protocols, and guidelines (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 2002; Peckover and Golding 2017).

The challenge for all involved in child welfare must be to recognize our 'lack of completeness'. Our openness to each other's motives and 'rationalities' would lead to a greater understanding of how professional identities are constructed and managed in everyday work and how this shapes professional work with families (Peckover and Golding 2017). Through this process, we must subject our own and others' stories to ongoing reflection and scrutiny. Learning to listen, communicate and understand has to be a lifelong process, not a one-off training event, thus utilizing the books and resources requires ongoing development processes. This may involve people doing extended stints of observation in other settings as part of ongoing professional development or finding ways to encourage professionals to be reflexive about their own identities (White and Featherstone 2005).

Participatory approaches

A foundational aspect of this research is its engagement with participatory approaches from the outset. Participatory approaches focus on recognizing people's own understanding of their lives through processes of co-production, active learning and working towards creating change—be that on an individual, institutional or a wider societal level. While participatory approaches can use many different methods, creative methods are often used to bring people together through meaningful activities and collective discussions (Westall and Rutter 2023). Using varied and creative activities with CYP can provide valuable and more active ways to engagement in domestic abuse prevention education (Fox *et al.* 2014).

Fox *et al.* (2014) indicated the importance of listening to the views of CYP to ensure that this type of education is tailored to their needs. One teacher described how his reflexive practice, as discussed above, enabled him to listen to the children's responses, reflect and then adapt the session either during the session or for the next session.

> *It was kind of trial and error… what [the other teacher] thought could be done… a little bit better… [was] when the kids are mentioning, like poverty and neglect, and certain things really expand on those… So might be that you don't get to the whole session. And you just touch on that one thing (Primary school staff)*

Other teachers encouraged the CYP to lead the sessions by reading the story summaries and asking them to vote on which story they would focus on for that session. However, some teachers did little to reflect on the decisions made by the young people. When the interviewer asked why the teacher thought the CYP chose the stories they worked with, she replied: '*They just voted? Yeah. I'm not certain. I didn't actually make a note of that. That's a good question for future reference actually*'. The teacher also indicated how she chose which activities they would use in the session:

> *There's so much…we just have to do a pick and mix… and use what's gonna work best with the people we're working with… I want it to be led by what they're getting out of it, rather than me telling them what to look for or what to get out of it (Secondary school staff)*

Whilst, in principle, the above quote aligns perfectly with participatory approaches, in practice, the teacher had worked their way through the first three sessions in the resource list. The CYP had only done three sessions at the time of the interview which suggests that, at this stage, the teacher did not know the young people well enough to choose activities based on their needs:

> *I chose them because I didn't know any of them. I hadn't worked with any of them… I wasn't going into it knowing that this child came from this background or that background. Yeah. So I purposely chose students that had no contact with support (Secondary school staff)*

While using the activities to get to know the needs of CYP not known by professionals is important, building relationships with CYP might increase the effectiveness of implementing the resources. In previous research, Cossar *et al.* (2019) reported that the length of the relationship between a young person and a practitioner was a critical factor in building trust that enabled them to disclose experiences of abuse and gain a more supportive response. This was often teachers and youth workers as they had relationships of a long-term nature. One primary teacher, who had brought some of her pupils to be part of the co-production stages in creating the activities and illustrations and was now implementing the resources with her full class, highlighted the impact of having co-production at different points of the project's life span. Some CYPs had been involved in the co-production and some had not. The teacher describes the impact this had on the engagement of the class:

> *The ones that came with me, sort of, led each group and, sort of, discussed why they put the pictures in there and it created quite a nice discussion… the other children will say… we would have put these pictures and… it started a lot of discussion about why things have been included and why they hadn't. (Primary school staff)*

This provides a clear example of the positive outcomes of co-produced and participatory approaches to engaging CYP in educational activities about abuse and would support Biddulph's (2007) requirement that some boys need a leadership role to engage with creative PSHE activities. The success of educational activities for preventing domestic abuse has also previously been found to be based on the ability of the practitioner to deliver the sessions in ways that effectively engage and communicate with students (Fox *et al.* 2014). However, the active level of participation by teachers in activities around domestic abuse prevention has been found to vary (Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011), with some teachers using the time to catch up on other tasks (Fox *et al.* 2014) or simply being reliant on worksheet-based activities (Hilton 2001; Fox *et al.* 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper provides the findings of a short-term participatory evaluation into the pilot of a series of books and resources to support non-specialist frontline professionals in supporting CYP's help-seeking practices. This is in line with the recent Operation Encompass (2024) continuum and Victims and Prisoners Bill 2024 which highlights how organizations should work to support CYP who are experiencing domestic abuse. Whilst the initial expectation of this work was to support professionals to hold space in ways that deconstructed and challenged stereotypes and assumptions when responding to help-seeking CYP, this was too radical a practice. Some teachers and youth workers were perpetuating and reinforcing the problematic public story of domestic abuse and required additional training and reflexive practice to assist them in the deconstruction of these harmful narratives. Furthermore, this work highlights that CYP's concerns around adult responses to their disclosures (i.e. rabbits in headlights), and lack of professional confidence in holding space compound one another and reduce the impact of provisions. All professionals require additional guidance and support, beyond what would be provided in a one-day training activity, if they are to implement the requirements of Operation Encompass and the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

Operation Encompass' Universal Services response sits contrary to the 'rabbits in headlights' experienced by CYP of individual professionals, using the evaluation to demonstrate several challenges even when professionals are provided with specific training and resources to support CYP around disclosures. Whilst professionals who attended the training days highlighted how they had many CYPs for whom the work would be relevant, once invited to interview, all teachers and youth workers stated they had not received any information about the CYP's experience which would make them believe the resources would be required during the piloting period. Instead, they were looking at how to use the stories and resources to create an open dialogue about the issues facing some CYP, which helps create a culture of openness within schools and promotes help-seeking more generally.

As professionals utilizing the stories and resources are at risk of reinforcing and perpetuating harmful stereotypes around domestic abuse, how participatory principles and reflexive practice are used in classroom environments, what training professionals receive to understand domestic abuse and its impact on CYP requires further investigation. This will be different depending on the cultural context in which resources are implemented and this should be considered in contexts outside of England and Wales. Whilst it is important not to reproduce such harmful narratives, there are groups of CYP who are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Disabilities, chronic health conditions, and other intersectional and compounding features amongst CYP increase vulnerabilities and sit outside of the dominant public story of domestic abuse. There was no scope of opportunity within this pilot study to examine the experience of using the stories and resources with these groups. A longer-term evaluation is recommended.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Research England Participatory Research Fund.

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