

# EVOLVE

# **Evaluation Report**

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Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is widespread in the UK. Recent research shows numbers of reported sexual violence offences at their highest levels since records began (EVAW, 2022). Despite this, the conviction rate for sexual offences is extremely low meaning the criminal justice system provides little deterrent. Half of the female population feels unsafe walking alone in the dark (ONS, 2021c) and public street harassment is prevalent with two thirds of women reporting feeling uncomfortable due to the behaviour of men in public (ONS, 2021c). This is a particular issue in Cleveland, as a survey by the Police and Crime Commissioner identified 81% of female respondents here felt unsafe and a third of participants had experienced rape or sexual assault in Cleveland (Cleveland PCC, 2021). Nationally, young women also reported feeling unsafe online, with a dramatic rise in online harassment, cyber-bullying and unwanted attention (Girlguiding, 2021). While attention is often focused on teenagers, almost half of girls 7-10 years old reported harmful content online in the last year (Girlguiding, 2021) highlighting the need for early intervention to avoid such content becoming normalised.

In the wake of the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer, attention has turned to women's safety and tackling the root causes of gendered violence. The Government's recent Call for Evidence on VAWG garnered in excess of 180,000 responses (Home Office, 2022b). New policy designed to fund and implement early intervention and prevention measures highlights the Government's commitment to reducing levels of violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2021). End Violence Against Women (2022) support a 'whole school approach' to tackling VAWG, and advocate that this should be led by specialist VAWG service providers.

Yet, identifying the cause of VAWG is complex. Toxic masculinity is defined as a series of behaviours, pressures and stereotypes related to 'being a man' which are harmful and which perpetuate gendered inequality. These might include aggression, entitlement, dominant sexuality and misogyny. Toxic masculinity is often cited as a causal or contributory factor in VAWG. For example, one trait of toxic masculinity is the connection between heterosexual sex and manhood – that boys reach manhood by losing their virginity (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson, 1996) and they maintain their masculine status by engaging in promiscuous sex with women (Duckworth and Trautner, 2019). This can then lead to sexual harassment and objectification, pressure and coercion of young women to have sex or participate in certain sexual acts, the perpetuation of rape culture and in extreme cases, rape and sexual assault (Levy, 2005) as boys feel the pressure to conform to masculine ideals. Worryingly, research by EVAW (2018) revealed a large proportion of adults in the UK do not understand what rape is, including a third of male participants who think that a woman who flirts consents to sex and that a woman cannot change her mind about consent during sex. Such research offers little hope for young people to develop healthy and accurate understandings of harmful sexual behaviour without significant intervention.

There are concerns that young men are increasingly able to access pornography and then use this as a source of sex education (Limmer, 2010). This then gives young men unrealistic expectations of sexual relationships and can perpetuate harmful behaviour towards women. Recent attention on image-based sexual abuse (so-called 'revenge porn') cites factors such as toxic masculinity which encourage young men to share intimate images to shame and harass women (Hilly and Allmann, 2015). It has been argued that schools often focus on discouraging young women from sexual behaviour and producing explicit images, rather than addressing a culture which allows abusive male behaviour and blames the victim (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). Intimate image abuse is now so prevalent that there is a national helpline for victims.





Concern about young people involved in criminal activity is not new although the types of youth crime that dominate the headlines changes. Recently, national attention has turned to county lines drug transportation. This is defined as;

'County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.' (Home Office, 2020)

This often starts by persuading children and young people to commit minor crimes in exchange for gifts or favours. Once loyalty or debt to the gang has been built up, young people are then at risk of being induced to commit more serious offences. 91% of individuals recorded as associated with county lines offending nationally are men. County lines can pose a serious risk to young people and often coincides with other forms of physical, sexual or psychological harm (NSPCC, 2022), yet those involved are often viewed as criminals and instead of receiving support, protection and safeguarding, are punished in the criminal justice system.

The prevalence of criminal gangs is increasing - in 2019/20, there were 14,700 referrals to children's services regarding concerns about gang activity, more than double the figure in 2016/17 (Henshaw, 2021). Research by the Children's Society estimates there are 46,000 children currently involved with gangs in England although this figure is likely to be higher. While any child can be vulnerable to harm from criminal gangs, this represents more of a risk for some than others – for example, living in poverty, having suffered previous abuse, social isolation, contact with the care system and being excluded from school are all key factors in vulnerability to grooming and exploitation by criminal gangs (Home Office, 2020; Children's Society, no date). Similarly, links between socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability are well-established. In the UK, economic inequality, poverty and austerity are set to get worse with the anticipated cost of living crisis (Barnard, 2022) and decimated budgets for children's services (Sanders-McDonagh, 2019).

The most up to date youth justice statistics for England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2022) record 3500 proven knife and other offensive weapon offences committed by children. While this figure represents a decrease in such offences from previous years, given that much of this time period was spent in lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this number is still worryingly high. Barnardo's suggest that rather than a reduction in knife crime, serious violence and the criminal exploitation of children, the pandemic has merely masked the scale of the problem (Barnardo's, 2020). Victims and perpetrators of knife crime are most likely to be young men. Recent figures show that knives or sharp objects were used in 70% of homicides where the victim was a teenager (ONS, 2021a) and 40% of individuals convicted of murder were aged 16-24 years (ONS, 2021a).

Counteracting the social problem of youth violence is difficult and criminal justice measures are often the focus – more police in high-risk areas, tougher sentencing, knife crime prevention orders (Home Office, 2022a) and increased stop-and-search powers (Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994) are among the strategies implemented recently. In 2019, the government announced an additional £100 million of funding for some police forces to increase available resources to specifically tackle knife crime (Home Office, 2019). As Phillip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer, stated, 'This money will be ringfenced to pay for increased police presence and patrolling to make our streets safer.'

Yet, this is only part of the solution. In some cases, increased policing may contribute to further vulnerabilities (Sanders-McDonagh, 2019) and the risk of prison is no deterrent to young people who carry knives because they are afraid or those who see no other way out of poverty (Barnardo's, 2019).





Alongside increased violence, there is a current mental health crisis affecting young people. Evidence from a National Youth Agency report (April 2020) details that there are over one million young people with known needs that have been amplified by the pandemic and an estimated two million young people with emerging needs triggered or caused by COVID-19. There may be many more with hidden or unforeseen consequences from the pandemic. In July 2021, it was estimated that one in six children aged between 5 and 16 had a probable mental health condition, yet only a third of these had access to NHS care (Young Minds, 2021). Suicide is the leading cause of death for boys aged 10-19 years, accounting for 19.3% of deaths (ONS, 2021b). Experiencing exploitation or trauma can lead to behaviours which are disruptive or aggressive, yet for many young men, this results in criminalisation, exclusion and being labelled as violent. Excluding a child from school must always be a last resort, but funding problems mean that schools in the most disadvantaged areas (and thus, those with pupils most at risk) struggle to find resources to support children with complex behavioural needs.

Much has been written about the barriers to help-seeking for young men in mental distress – these include 'traditional masculine ideals' and 'acceptance from peers' as key issues to be overcome (Lynch, Long and Moorehead, 2018). It has been argued that the integration of positive mental health education and early intervention in schools could be a solution (Sorgenfrei and Clarke, 2021). The inclusion of mental wellbeing in statutory government guidance for Relationship, Health and Sex Education (DfE, 2021) locates mental health awareness as a core element of healthy development.

### LOCAL CONTEXT

Reported domestic abuse crimes in the Northeast have increased dramatically over the past five years, accounting for a quarter of all reported crime in some constabularies.

Child poverty in the Northeast is higher than other regions of the country. These figures are particularly elevated across Teesside in comparison to the national figures. Around 40% of children in Stockton and Redcar and 50% of children in Middlesbrough live in poverty (End child poverty, 2021)

Middlesbrough has a higher number of children in care than the national average and in 2019, Ofsted identified 'serious and widespread failures' in children's services (Ofsted, 2020).

The Northeast of England has the highest rate of permanent exclusions and temporary suspensions from school in the country (DfE, 2022a). Schools in Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland have a significantly higher rate of school exclusions that both the national average and the rest of the Northeast (DfE, 2022a).

While numbers of 16-24 year olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEETS) have fallen nationally, the North East still has the highest NEET rate (DfE, 2022b)





### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The UK government has committed to using a public health perspective, including a multi-agency, partnership approach to supporting young people. It has been argued that school exclusion or persistent non-attendance can be a 'trigger' for exploitation, entry into gangs and county lines (Children's Commissioner, 2021). Supporting the mental health and inclusion of young men and boys is key to reducing the risk of harm from criminal gangs and the likelihood of perpetrating violence. Evidence from the APPG on Knife Crime suggests that all children and young people must have access to high-quality full-time education to give them the best chances in life, to stay away from harm and go on to achieve their potential (Barnardo's, 2019). The report details that schools have a vital role to play in the effort to prevent and tackle VAWG and serious youth violence.

Early research shows that taking a more holistic, multi-agency approach to early prevention, incorporating schools, social services, third sector organisations and healthcare could be instrumental in changing youth trajectories and decreasing all kinds of violence, although much more research is needed. Early intervention for at risk children and young people is key and future policy strategies must be based on prevention. A timely assessment of need and the provision of appropriate support can significantly reduce further risk. There is strong evidence to suggest that school-based interventions are successful in raising confidence and resilience, reducing anxiety and preventing violent or disruptive behaviour (Sorgenfrei and Clarke, 2021).

### RATIONALE FOR THIS PROJECT

There is a lack of gender specific support services available both nationally and locally that target boys and young men. This project uses a specially designed programme to provide additional support and resources for schools and to address this gap in support provision for young men and boys, particularly those at risk of violence, criminality or poor mental health outcomes. Using a participatory and community-based approach will encourage participation and engagement and allow young men to address the areas that are most meaningful to them.

A Way Out's Blossom Project supports young women aged between 13 – 24 (or 25 where a young woman has additional needs) by supporting them through difficult times experienced within their lives. Blossom allows girls and young women to be, to realise their potential and ultimately be empowered to be in control of their own lives. The support provided by Blossom is trauma informed and focusses upon working with girls and young women to strengthen capabilities from a person-centred perspective. Learning from the clients that Blossom supports is that the girls and young women often do not recognise what they have experienced as harassment or abuse which could be as a result of lack of awareness/education. The work that we are undertaking with the girls and young women in Blossom is directly helping shape our Youth Project that is delivered within the schools around healthy relationships. We recognise that there is still a way to go in terms of challenging misogyny and notions of toxic masculinity that is prevalent within society in general, but hopefully educating both boys and girls at an earlier age will help address this.

As awareness continues to be raised around gender inequality and VAWG, it is likely that other, similar programmes will be developed. Our programme benefits from our extensive knowledge of the realities of living in Teesside, the culturally specific norms and values inherent in the communities we serve and the work done by other local agencies. This makes us uniquely placed to offer this bespoke intervention.



### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 1. To effectively engage young people at risk of violence and criminal behaviours using a preventative approach to address pressures of 'being a man' and the social constructs around this.
- 2. To improve future outcomes for boys and young men using education and awareness delivered via engaging, interactive sessions.
- 3. To provide a consistent, meaningful awareness programme to ensure that boys and young men are given opportunities to explore their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment.





### WHAT DO YOUNG MEN THINK?

Practitioners engaged four young men in a focus group to gather their opinions on how to best support young men and boys. They identified key considerations for supporting young men aged 13-16 with their mental health and wellbeing. When asked what they thought adversely affected the mental wellbeing of young men they recognized many of the themes reflected in other research.

Living in a socially deprived area was indicated in comments such as;





Getting personalized and gender-specific support was also important as participants recognized that young people are diverse and need help with different problems;



not to be short term - I've had one where it's 6 weeks and then it's done, by the 6th week you're just getting used to then BOOM, it's done, back to square one!

Participants were clear on the best ways to engage boys in such programmes;



The results of the focus group indicate the ongoing challenges to engaging young men in mental health support, particularly masculine ideals and stigma, but they also illuminate what good support would look like to the people who matter. Using activities to appeal to young men and boys, having a named support contact that participants felt comfortable with and creating mechanisms for ongoing support provision would be helpful for the young men represented here.





A Way Out's Youth team have a strong local reputation and have previously delivered Evolve to both Primary and Secondary schools across Teesside. Evolve is a six week programme designed to promote healthy relationships. The participants for the programme were identified by teaching and pastoral school staff due to displaying a lack of positive relationships and appropriate boundaries with others, low confidence, isolation, use of inappropriate adult language and family challenges. Participants could engage with the project via face-to-face group sessions within a mainstream school setting.

The group sessions allowed practitioners to engage with the young people to help foster a positive and trusted relationship. Activities were designed to help 'break the ice' and 'build a bond'. A range of interactive and participatory methods were incorporated. This environment allowed young people to voice any worries and concerns they may be experiencing within a safe space. Practitioners were mindful of the increase in young people reporting mental health worries during Covid-19 and sought to provide a confidential and comfortable space to share feelings and offload. Language was intentionally inclusive and appropriate while engagement at the drop in was facilitated by a culturally sensitive and flexible approach.

Within the sessions, young people have learnt about and explored; healthy relationships (not only with partners but with friends and family too) how to express their feelings in a healthy way, how to stay safe online, identifying good & bad secrets, safe sex (where appropriate) and gender stereotypes. The course has been delivered face to face within schools, in an engaging and interactive way and is a safe place for young people to ask any questions and be themselves. Every 6 weeks the Youth team delivered the programme to a new cohort of young people.

An activity that was delivered throughout the 6-week programme was the managing emotions activity. This involved each young person filling a cup with water, naming an emotion, and discussing a time they had experienced this emotion. The cup of water was then poured into a large jug, each young person took turns in doing this until the jug was overflowing. The jug was used as a visual representation of the human mind and the cups of water visually represented our emotions and what happens if we keep letting them build up inside of us. The young people then took turns taking a cup of water back out of the jug and we discussed how we could healthily manage each emotion, for example the emotion anger could be managed by exercise or talking to a trusted adult. This interactive and visual activity was well received by the young people.

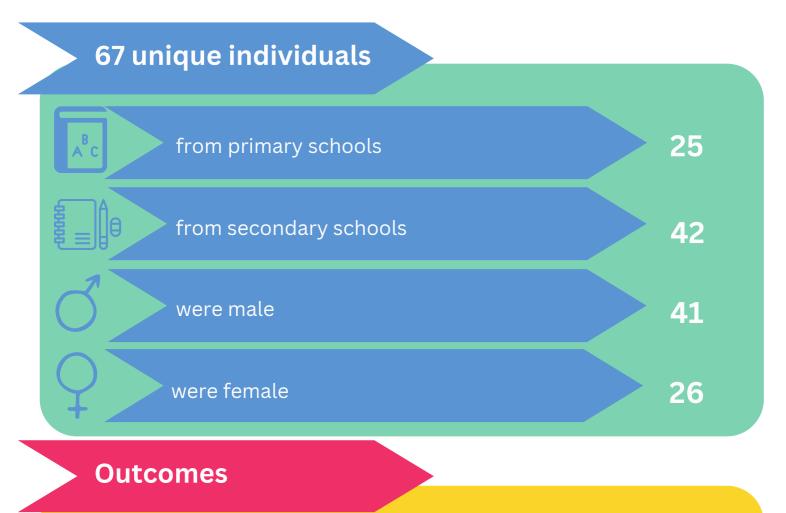
As a needs lead service, we are able to be flexible and adapt to suit the needs of the participants and respond to current trends, in addition to delivering bespoke sessions at schools' request. For example, one secondary school asked if we could deliver a session to their year 11 pupils around the difference between flirting and inappropriate behaviour. We where able to meet this request by creating a flirting vs hurting activity which explained to the young people the difference between the two and allowed them a safe place to ask any questions they had on the topic. The Youth team have worked diligently to ensure they deliver resources that are both age appropriate and inclusive of any additional needs the students may have.

The Youth team utilise a self-assessment quiz to collect outcome measure data and to understand distance travelled. The participants undertake this in week 1 and in week 6 which allows us to gather evidence as to how effective the programme has been in increasing education and awareness of healthy relationships.



PROGRAMME EVALUATION: EVOLVE









CASE STUDY: Brandon\*



### Issues on referral:

Brandon was referred to the young people's healthy relationships programme as he needed some support around online safety and on building and maintaining relationships. Brandon presented at school as very isolated. Brandon had currently moved in with a new foster family and was struggling with this period of transition. Brandon completed an initial quiz before starting the programme in which he scored 1 on the scale for general wellbeing. This meant that he felt 'sad a lot of the time'.



### Interventions:

Education around online safety, the signs and dangers of online grooming, how to keep yourself safe online and the laws surrounding online safety was needed. Relationship education on building and maintaining relationships with family and friends would be beneficial. It was important to Brandon to be able to recognise the signs of a healthy relationship and the signs of an unhealthy relationship. Brandon needed help to be able to say no and keep himself safe.

### How this was done:

- Activities to build a sense of teamwork were incorporated at the start and end of each session. This was helpful in fostering relationships with peers, encouraging interaction and building confidence.
- Designated 'safe space' time was incorporated at the end of each session. This gave Brandon time to share any issues or ask any questions he may have.
- Brandon worked with staff on safety planning. This enabled him to form a clear plan of how to avoid danger and what to do if he found himself in a dangerous or uncomfortable situation. He was able to take this away with him.
- Specific activities were incorporated into the sessions to help Brandon learn how to express his feelings in a healthy way.

### Outcomes:

At the end of the course Brandon was able to correctly identify how to keep himself safe online and the steps to take if he ever felt unsafe. His confidence had grown and he had started to build relationships with the other young people in the group. He was able to offer his own ideas during team building tasks. Brandon was able to clearly discuss what he would do if he ever felt he was struggling with his emotions. When returning to the initial assessment quiz at the end of the course, Brandon's general wellbeing score had increased to 4 'I feel happy most of the time'.

\* name changed





Feedback on the programme was overwhelmingly positive. Although some students were not particularly enthusiastic in the beginning, once the programme started, they were interested and keen to continue. School staff were pleased to be able to host the programme and reported students who were excited, engaged and looking forward to subsequent sessions.

Thank you so much for last night. The children love it. Thank you so much, they can't wait till the next one. The work you do is brilliant. Have a great half-term. *Primary School Headteacher*  Students themselves were happy to take part in the programme and sessions became a favourite part of school *School Teacher* 

I don't want the programme to end, thanks for looking after us *Primary School Studen<mark>t</mark>*  The students are all enjoying the programme and are excited to return next week *Secondary School Inclusion* Officer

I would like to thank you so much for what you do. Parent

The programme is the best part of school. Thursdays are my favourite day now *Primary School Student*  Although the students were reluctant to come, they have all said they enjoyed it and are happy to return next week - great job all round! Secondary School Inclusion Officer



### CONCLUDING REMARKS



The vulnerability of young men to poor mental health, criminal exploitation and violence is ongoing and represents a serious risk to their wellbeing. Evidence suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to identify those at risk and to access support. Resources are stretched and escalating levels of austerity, poverty and exclusion are expected to exacerbate the problem. The VAWG agenda and government focus following the death of Sarah Everard has seen an increase in support for young women via funding and provision of women's services (Home Office, 2021). While support services are crucial for those who have already been victimised, a focus on early intervention and prevention is key to reducing levels of violence. Schools are a key site for violence prevention strategies (Lloyd, 2018) – It has been argued that schools 'have an essential role' in domestic violence education (Ofsted et al, 2017:28). However, many focus on raising the awareness of young women, to allow them to recognize signs of abuse and seek help. Yet, there must also be a focus on education for young men, who are often subject to pressure, stereotypes and the influence of harmful online content and who may not understand their behaviour as abusive. Unless we educate our young men by addressing and challenging the harmful narrative around versions of masculinity, we are unlikely to see any real change in violence towards women and girls.

Young men themselves are clear about the challenges they face and the barriers to accessing support, particularly stigma and perceived ideals of masculinity. Having access to a single point of contact in school was highlighted as a way to mediate these barriers and supporting mental health and inclusion using activities was emphasized as a key strategy to engage young men. Longer term support is needed to ensure continued engagement and positive outcomes.

The Evolve Healthy Relationships programme received overwhelmingly positive feedback and participants showed increased knowledge and understanding of healthy relationships, red and green flags and how to stay safe online. Schools were receptive to the programme and helped to identify pupils who could potentially benefit. Participants enjoyed the sessions and found them helpful.

Thus, there is scope to build on this project and offer a further pilot programme tailored to support young men in the local area. This would support ongoing governmental goals to reduce youth violence and criminal exploitation, violence against women and girls and address poor mental health for young men. Working with forensic and clinical psychologists and in conjunction with Sunderland University A Way Out are seeking partners and funding to develop this approach.



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