



Hear HER Voice

Healthy relationships education

Introduction

The Hear Her Voice research project was created to provide opportunities for young women and girls to have their voices heard on the issues that matter most to them. Too often, their experiences and opinions are overlooked, yet they are the ones most affected by decisions made within their schools, communities, and local services. This project was designed to change that.

Our aim is twofold:

- To encourage young women and girls to use their voices confidently and see the value in their lived experiences as a force for positive social change– both locally and beyond.
- To ensure that decision-makers, professionals, and organisations have a clear reference point of girls' views, so their opinions, needs, and aspirations can directly influence policy, practice, and provision.

This report is being shared with schools, professionals, and community organisations as a resource and a reminder: the voices of young women matter. We hope that the findings will not only be heard but also acted upon, helping to create safer, more inclusive, and more empowering spaces where every girl has the opportunity to thrive.



Why Healthy Relationships?

Healthy relationships education is increasingly important as young people navigate friendships, dating, online interactions, and early intimate relationships, often without clear understanding of boundaries, consent, and respectful behaviour. National education guidance, including Relationship and Sex Education (RSE), now places greater emphasis on teaching both boys and girls about healthy relationships, mutual respect, and challenging harmful attitudes. This reflects growing recognition that early, age-appropriate education is a vital preventative approach in reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG), helping young people recognise unhealthy behaviours, set boundaries, and contribute to safer, more respectful relationships.

Key National statistics:

- According to a summary on Reducing the Risk, research involving the University of Bristol and the NSPCC found that 25% of girls aged 13–17 and 17% of boys in the same age group reported experiencing physical force (such as pushing, slapping, hitting or being held down) within a relationship
- According to research summarised by the Sex Education Forum, only 47% of children in Key Stage 2 were able to correctly identify the definition of an 'unsafe relationship'
- A survey from Youth Endowment Fund of nearly 11,000 young people aged 13–17 across England and Wales found that among teens who had been in a relationship in the past year, 27% said they had been made to feel afraid to disagree with their partner
- According to Refuge.org 41% of UK girls aged 14 to 17 who were in an intimate relationship reported experiencing some form of sexual violence from a partner.

Focus group methods

The focus group was conducted with a small group of Key Stage 4 girls using an open, conversational format to encourage honest and reflective discussion. Particular care was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable and safe throughout the session. The group had previously engaged in activities with the facilitator, helping to establish trust and rapport, and a trusted member of school staff was present to provide additional reassurance, safeguarding, and support.

At the start of the session, young people were introduced to the White Ribbon campaign and its focus on promoting healthy relationships and reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG). They were informed that the purpose of the discussion was to help shape the development of future educational sessions on this topic.

Participants shared that they had previously covered aspects of healthy relationships within Relationship and Sex Education (RSE), but felt that additional time, depth, and practical discussion would support a fuller understanding. Students were then invited to respond to a series of guided questions, drawing on their own experiences and observations of relationships among their peers.

Useful topics

Participants were asked which White Ribbon-related topics they felt would be most useful and relevant if sessions were specifically designed for young people of their age. They were also asked to identify issues they felt needed to be discussed more in school.

These were the responses:

"Consent"

Participants shared that while consent had been covered within education, they felt there was limited focus on what a lack of consent looks like in practice. They expressed that clearer education around non-consent, including legal rights and boundaries, would help them feel more informed and empowered to make safe decisions.

"Mental health"

The group reported that mental health had been discussed in educational settings, but felt it required greater emphasis, particularly in relation to how healthy and unhealthy relationships can impact emotional wellbeing.

"Knowing where your support is"

Participants highlighted the importance of knowing how and where to access support related to healthy relationships and violence against women and girls (VAWG). They felt that clearer signposting and practical guidance would be a valuable part of future sessions.

"Online safety"

Participants highlighted the importance of online safety education, particularly in relation to sharing images. The group identified image-sharing as a significant issue for young people and felt that clearer guidance on consent, risks, and responsible online behaviour would be beneficial.

"Relationships"

The group expressed a desire for broader relationship education that extends beyond romantic or intimate relationships to include friendships. They noted that consent, boundaries, and communication are relevant across all types of relationships and felt that learning through real-life examples of healthy and unhealthy dynamics would be more effective than theoretical explanations alone.

"Abuse"

Participants felt that increased education around abuse would support young people to better recognise different forms of abusive behaviour. They shared that clearer understanding of what constitutes abuse would help raise awareness and encourage earlier recognition and response.

"Law"

The group identified a lack of understanding around legal rights relating to consent, age-gap relationships, self-defence, and abuse. They agreed that improved knowledge of the law would help young people feel more confident in seeking support and reporting concerns when needed.

What young people wish adults knew

When developing youth-focused sessions, it is important to understand young people's perspectives on the adults who design and deliver them. Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences of discussing healthy relationships with trusted adults, including parents and teachers, and to share what they felt adults could better understand about young people and their experiences.

Their responses were:

"Consider feelings"

Participants felt that young people's concerns are not always taken seriously and can sometimes be met with responses that feel dismissive or unsupportive. This can make it harder for them to feel confident discussing sensitive topics in the future.

"What it's like to be a teenager in this generation"

The group highlighted that young people's experiences are sometimes minimised due to their age. They expressed a desire for adults involved in education and support to better understand the pressures of being a teenager in the current generation, including social expectations, peer influence, and the significant role of online spaces.

"Sexual relationships have become younger"

Participants felt that adults may not always be aware of how early some young people begin intimate relationships or engage in sexual activity. This lack of awareness can create barriers to open conversations and make it more difficult for young people to seek advice or support.

Negative behaviours

Participants were asked to reflect on behaviours from boys or peers that they felt could be more effectively addressed by schools, organisations, and trusted adults within the context of healthy relationships and the White Ribbon campaign.

The categories identified were:

Verbal harassment and inappropriate comments:

"Name calling" "Cat calling and wolf whistling" "Expecting rude comments"
"Commenting on appearance"

Unwanted attention and boundary violations:

"Unwanted attention" "Being made to feel uncomfortable" "Unpleasant interactions"

Objectification and gendered expectations:

"Only being valued for looks" "Made to feel used" "Expectations being too high for girls"

Power imbalances and relationship dynamics

"Age-gap relationships" "Physical behaviour"

Lack of awareness and understanding

"Lack of awareness of impact and behaviour"

Together, these behaviours highlight ongoing issues around harassment, boundary violations, objectification, and unequal power dynamics, reinforcing the need for consistent education and intervention that promotes respect, awareness, and accountability within young people's relationships.

White Ribbon messages

Participants were asked to identify the key messages they felt were most important to communicate to young people through sessions focused on healthy relationships and the White Ribbon campaign.

Key Messages Identified:

Access to support and reassurance

"There is actually support" "This can happen to a lot of people" "Don't be scared to leave or get help" "You can get out of an unhealthy relationship"

Consent, boundaries, and respect

"Consent is important" "Healthy boundaries are good" "Equality, respect, dignity"

Self-worth and empowerment

"Self-respect is important" "Put yourself first"

Awareness and learning over time

"Identify what you think is wrong" "Learning about relationships takes time"

Collectively, these messages emphasise reassurance, empowerment, and education, reinforcing the importance of accessible support, clear understanding of consent and boundaries, and validating young people's experiences.

Summary

This focus group explored what healthy relationships and White Ribbon education should look like for Key Stage 4. While participants had some prior exposure to healthy relationships through RSE, they consistently identified a need for greater depth, practical discussion, and clearer guidance.

Young people highlighted gaps in understanding around, mental health, online safety, abuse, and legal rights. They also described experiencing or witnessing behaviours such as harassment, unwanted attention, objectification, and power imbalances among peers. Across all discussions, participants emphasised the importance of being taken seriously, having access to support, and learning through real-life examples.

Recommendations for Sessions:

- Provide greater depth and practical discussion, using real-life scenarios rather than theoretical content.
- Strengthen education on consent and non-consent, including legal rights and recognising pressure or coercion.
- Embed mental health within relationships education, highlighting emotional wellbeing and early warning signs.
- Address online safety, particularly image sharing and digital consent.
- Improve understanding of abuse and legal protections, including age-gap relationships and routes to reporting.
- Clearly signpost support, both within schools and externally.
- Deliver sessions in a respectful, youth-centred way, ensuring young people feel listened to and taken seriously.

Sources

Reducing the Risk (Abuse in Teenage Relationships, Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse) Available at:

<https://reducingtherisk.org.uk/abuse-in-teenage-relationships/>

Sex Education Forum (Why it's so important to start teaching about consent and privacy with key stage 1 children) Available at:

<https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/news/news/why-it-so-important-start-teaching-about-consent-and-privacy-key-stage-1-children>

Youth Endowment Fund, (Half of teens in relationships suffer violence or controlling behaviour, reveals new report) Available at:

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/news/half-of-teens-in-relationships-suffer-violence-or-controlling-behaviour-reveals-new-report/>

Refuge (The facts about domestic abuse) Available at:

<https://refuge.org.uk/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-facts/>



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