



POLICY AND PRACTICE RESOURCE

# “It depends on what the definition of domestic violence is”:

How young Australians conceptualise domestic violence and abuse



## Context

The 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS) found that although young people have a good overall understanding of domestic violence, in particular its physical forms, there were also some “areas of concern” within young people’s understandings.<sup>1</sup> The NCAS raised concerns about young people’s understandings of:

- the non-physical forms of domestic violence, such as financial and technology-facilitated abuse
- the high prevalence of violence against women in the community<sup>2</sup>
- the gendered nature of domestic violence.

To elucidate these findings, the current study aimed to explore how young people define and make sense of domestic violence. In particular, the study examined how young people distinguish domestic violence from other unhealthy relationship behaviours, how common they perceive domestic violence to be and their understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence.

By centring young people’s voices and knowledge of domestic violence, this research informs strategies for domestic violence education and primary prevention.

## Methodology

To design education and prevention initiatives that are appropriate for young people, there is a need to actively set aside technical and adult-derived definitions to better understand how young people conceptualise domestic violence in their own terms. Thus, the study sought to centre young people’s viewpoints by exploring what behaviours they conceptualise as domestic violence and how they come to these understandings. The mixed-method study involved a short online survey and focus groups with young women (41) and men (39) aged 16 to 18 from across Australia, from a range of diverse backgrounds. Fourteen online focus groups, each with four to six participants, were conducted. Seven of the focus groups were with young women and seven were with young men.

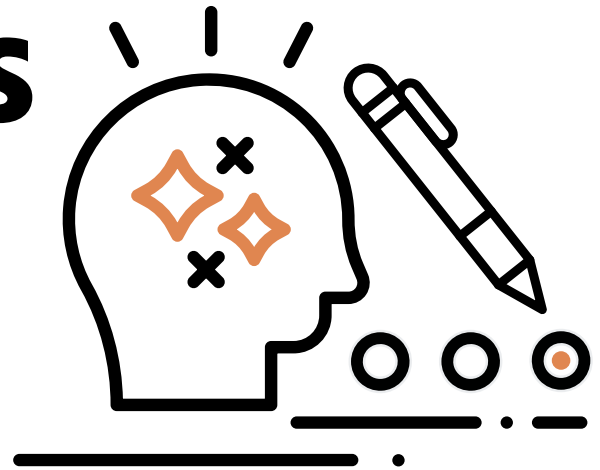
The survey and focus groups drew on fictional relationship scenarios which were developed to unpack young people’s perspectives on a range of relationship behaviours. The scenarios did not label the behaviours as healthy or abusive and used gender-neutral names, leaving the scenarios open to the young people’s interpretation.

The online survey responses provided an overview of the young people’s understandings of a broad range of relationship behaviours based on 30 scenarios. Ten of the scenarios were then discussed in more detail in the focus groups. The focus groups were also a space for the young people to have a more general conversation about domestic violence in Australia.

<sup>1</sup> Politoff, V., Crabbe, M., Honey, N., Mannix, S., Mickle, J., Morgan, J., Parkes, A., Powell, A., Stubbs, J., Ward, A., & Webster, K. (2019). *Young Australians’ attitudes to violence against women and gender equality: Findings from the 2017 National community attitudes towards violence against women survey* (NCAS)(Insights, 01/2019). ANROWS. <https://ncas.anrows.org.au/findings/youth-report-findings>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). Personal safety, Australia: Statistics for family, domestic, sexual violence, physical assault, partner emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual harassment, stalking and safety. Retrieved 30 March, 2021. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>

# Key findings



## Domestic violence is more complex and nuanced than sensationalised public representations suggest

- Young people conceptualised domestic violence as having both **“explicit” forms**, namely physical and sexual violence, and more **“subtle” forms**, such as financial abuse, emotional abuse and control. Participants described the subtle forms of violence and abuse as more hidden because they are less “talked about”, less represented in the media and less recognised by both the general public and victims and survivors.
- In addition, young people conceptualised domestic violence as a **“snowballing” process** or pattern of multiple abusive behaviours which escalate to entrap the victim. Physical violence was seen to be the extreme end of this continuum.
- Young people were critical of the sensationalised and extreme portrayals of domestic violence in the media and public discourse, arguing that these portrayals contribute to perceptions that domestic violence is primarily physical violence and is “far away” or disconnected from real life. The young people argued that there is more to domestic violence than these narrow representations.
- Young people felt that the term **“domestic violence and abuse”** more accurately reflects the multiple and distinct forms of violence and abuse that can co-occur as a snowballing pattern of behaviour within intimate relationships.

## Categorising behaviour as normal, “not okay” or domestic violence is not always black and white

- The young people perceived the fictional scenarios involving physical violence, and to a lesser extent sexual violence, as “100 per cent domestic violence”.
- Many fictional scenarios depicting non-physical unhealthy relationship behaviours were less often seen as constituting “domestic violence” by the young people. They were nonetheless seen as toxic and abusive and were identified by the young people as **“stepping stones”** that could escalate towards domestic violence and abuse.
- Toxic and unhealthy relationship behaviours were seen as those where there was **no consent** or where the partner harmed, **controlled** or treated as a **possession**, or **manipulated** the victim.
- Some concerning relationship behaviours were considered **normal or common by the young people**, particularly if the person was seen to be motivated by **care or concern** for their partner or had **suspicions their partner was cheating**, or if the partner **consented** to the behaviours.
- For example, financial abuse was sometimes rationalised as an expression of **care or concern** or an action taken “for their own good”, and behaviours that could be seen as technology-facilitated surveillance were widely seen as **normal** and expected in romantic relationships.
- Young men were more likely than young women to cite care or concern for welfare as a reason these non-physical behaviours might **sometimes be okay**.

## Consent “in all forms” is an important component in healthy relationships

- The young people’s discussions also revealed what they conceptualise as “really good” healthy relationship behaviours. These include communication, autonomy and trust and, to a lesser extent, mutual respect, affection and care.
- The young people also placed high importance on an idea of consent that was not limited only to sexual consent, but rather encompassed a person’s ability to make their own decisions in the relationship broadly. As one young person put it, “Consent comes in all forms.” (Felicity, YW1)

## Young people recognise their own gendered conditioning but resist seeing domestic violence as a gendered problem

- The young people strongly rejected gendered stereotypes of victims and perpetrators, and perceived men to be unfairly portrayed as the main perpetrators. They conceptualised domestic violence in gender-neutral terms, based on notions of what is “fair” rather than in terms of gender or other structural inequalities. At the same time, young people reflected that their ideas about domestic violence and abuse were shaped by **gendered “conditioning”** by their parents and broader society (including respectful relationships education; RRE). They argued that as a result of young girls being conditioned to be constantly vigilant about their own safety, they were potentially more attuned to problematic relationship behaviour and more aware of domestic violence compared to men.



# Implications for policy and practice

- To address sensationalised and narrow representations of domestic violence, media reporting should be victim-centred and trauma-informed, and prioritise voices of victims and survivors. Critical media analysis tasks should be incorporated into RRE initiatives.
- To address inconsistent ideas about what counts as relationship violence and abuse, policy and prevention work should consider adopting a comprehensive definition of domestic violence and abuse which incorporates patterns of multiple types of violent and abusive behaviour.
  - Technical policy and prevention language around coercive control should also be adapted for young people to align with their understanding of the “snowballing” patterns of abusive behaviour and the “stepping stones”.
  - Terminology that captures the phenomenon of domestic violence and abuse, including non-physical violence and toxic behaviour, would likely also resonate with the broader community.
  - Awareness campaigns should focus on the “subtle” forms of non-physical violence and abuse.
- Based on the young people’s conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse unpacked in this study, RRE curriculums and prevention initiatives should:
  - target the “snowballing” pattern of violence, abuse and control, including the “stepping stones” leading to more extreme violence. These “stepping stones” include toxic relationship behaviours and broader interpersonal behaviours such as bullying and harassment
  - address young people’s perceptions that forms of violence, abuse and control can be rationalised based on contextual factors such as a partner’s care or concern
  - challenge justifications for toxic and unhealthy relationship behaviours by focusing on upskilling young people about what healthy relationship behaviours look like. This upskilling should take a holistic approach to consent that is not limited to sexual consent, but emphasises the importance of autonomy and freedom to make one’s own decisions within relationships more broadly.
- To address young people’s rejection of the gendered nature of domestic violence, education, policy and prevention initiatives should emphasise the structural and gendered inequalities that create the conditions for violence, abuse and control. This could include:
  - considering new ways of teaching young people about the gendered and intersectional drivers of violence
  - continuing to highlight problematic and gendered stigmas around men’s expressions of emotion or vulnerability
  - acknowledging and addressing attitudes of backlash or resistance to understandings of the gendered and structural drivers of domestic violence.
- The unequal responsibility placed on women to be aware of the realities of domestic violence and abuse should be addressed by:
  - educating all genders and age groups in both public and private education sectors by using an approach that challenges and transforms gender norms, roles and inequalities
  - facilitating conversations about everyone’s stake in preventing gender-based violence and the need to challenge the gendered conditioning of women and gender-diverse young people.



# Key messages

1.

**Young people want to actively shape change rather than just be the targets of different programs and campaigns, and this research reaffirms the value of listening to, and centring, their voices.**

This new research demonstrates that young people have a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of domestic violence and abuse, which should be used and built upon to inform relevant, consistent and effective education, policy and primary prevention initiatives aimed at preventing and reducing violence against women.



4.

**Categorising behaviour as normal, “not okay” or domestic violence and abuse is not always black and white – real life and relationship dynamics can introduce “grey areas”.** Care or concern for a partner or suspicions a partner was cheating were raised as possible explanations for toxic or abusive behaviour. Upskilling young people should involve challenging these justifications as well as modelling what healthy relationships look like in practice.

“It’s still not okay, but there could be reasons behind it. (Maisy, YW5)

It’s sometimes okay because she hasn’t given him any orders not to do it. But he could be doing it because he’s worried about her or just wants to know what she’s doing. (Iman, YM4)

I always think, a relationship without trust is like a phone with no Wi-Fi. What do you do? You just play games. (Adelle, YW7)



2.

**Media representations formed a key reference point for perceptions of domestic violence. However, the young people argued that there is more to the story than the sensationalised representations of physical domestic violence that pervade the public discourse.**

The media needs to correct the norm of reporting disproportionately on sensational incidents of violence and incorporate the voices and stories of victims and survivors in line with existing guidelines. A public conversation about the patterns and prevalence of domestic violence and abuse will ensure that young people and the broader community can understand and talk about the problem in all its complexity.

“You don’t hear people talking about their domestic violence, um, situations, but you only hear about the bad ones on the news and how badly it’s gone and just what *can* happen instead of what *actually* happens ... I guess, people don’t really talk about it so you don’t really hear about it, but then you see it on the news and then it makes you think, like, is it that bad or is it happening around me everywhere? (Rahul, YW3, emphasis in interview)



5.

**The idea of consent for the young people went beyond just sexual consent.**

Having independence, autonomy and the capacity to make your own decisions was seen as integral to a healthy relationship and most behaviours that encroach on a person’s freedom were seen as abusive and wrong. Education, policy and primary prevention initiatives should recognise and reflect the way young people value consent and autonomy in all aspects of a relationship, and as the deciding factor between what is and is not okay.

“Consent comes in all forms. (Felicity, YW1)

It really just depends on where each of their boundaries are and the discussion that they have about that together. (Florence, YW7)

As long as someone hasn’t said ... “No, it’s not okay, and I don’t want to do this anymore”, then I guess that’s where the line is, for me at least. (Campbell, YM5)

6.

**The young people rejected the idea that gender was a driver of domestic violence based on notions of “fairness” and treating all individuals the same.**

Young people strongly rejected gendered stereotypes of victims and perpetrators and perceived men to be unfairly portrayed as the main perpetrators. Education, policy and primary prevention initiatives need to address this “gender ignoring” lens by providing young people with the language, tools and opportunities to better identify and understand the structural, intersectional and gendered inequalities that drive domestic violence.

“It doesn’t really matter what gender they are – it’s not really good to think of stereotypes. It should be just a “Person A” and “Person B” situation. (Stefan, YM2)

It doesn’t matter whatever gender you are, it’s still wrong to your partner. (Maya, YW3)

3.

**The young people understood that “domestic violence and abuse” is a pattern of behaviour that can begin with toxic and unhealthy relationship behaviours that are controlling or manipulative, non-consensual and cause harm to the other person’s self-worth and mental health.**

They saw that these behaviours were “stepping stones” that escalate to non-physical abuse and eventually “snowball” into more extreme domestic violence and abuse, entrapping the person experiencing it. Education, policy and primary prevention initiatives should adopt a broader conception of “violence, abuse and control” within intimate relationships. This would better capture the complexity of the phenomenon and would allow young people and the broader community to recognise and label the problem when they see it.

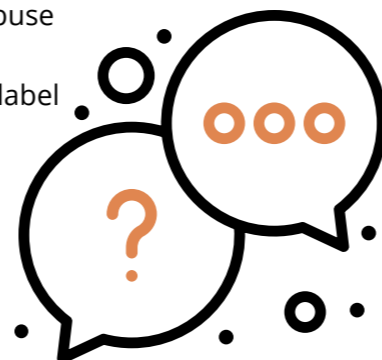
“To me, domestic violence is when there is like physical violence, or the threat or like genuine fear of physical violence. But domestic abuse is any kind of abuse, including like blackmail, emotional abuse, like coercing someone into doing something, like, guilt-tripping them, just, like, all that sort of thing ... it starts with domestic abuse and escalates. (Faye, YW4)

7.

**Although the young people felt gender was irrelevant to understanding domestic violence, they nonetheless reflected on the way gendered “conditioning” by their parents, education and broader society shaped their own understandings and experiences.**

They expected that women – as a result of their gendered conditioning to be constantly vigilant about their safety – were potentially more attuned to problematic relationship behaviour and more aware of domestic violence and abuse compared to men. Education, policy and primary prevention initiatives must address the unequal burden of awareness placed on women and reinforce everyone’s stake in preventing violence and abuse from happening in the first place.

“And I think as a girl we’ve been a little bit more conditioned to be wary of these red flags and whatnot, because it is so prevalent. Like you’ve been told from a young age “Watch out for this and this and this”, and I don’t know if guys get the same thing ... And I don’t think guys can always understand how scary it is for us ... (Lena, YW4)



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