



# Teacher feedback on strategies and issues for implementation of the Relationships without Fear programme in schools

## Introduction

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 2012 Arch hosted a domestic abuse prevention education workshop attended by 41 local teachers and practitioners including those working for social services and the youth offending service. The workshop aimed to: promote the work being done by Arch and in particular the *Relationships without Fear* programme; disseminate the work being done in the REaDAPt project, in particular to showcase the Educational Toolkit; and discuss the issues of implementing preventative education in school curriculums, with specific focus on who is best suited to deliver this type of programme – a teacher, or a specialist facilitator from an external organisation like Arch.

During this workshop Kate Howard discussed the work that is done by Arch, and also outlined the *Relationships without Fear* programme. Becky Hale presented the REaDAPt project, specifically the aims of the project, the focus groups findings, and the content of the Educational Toolkit.

After the presentations, the workshop delegates participated in a discussion session, where they were asked to consider the following questions:

1. How would the programme benefit school age children?
2. Do you think specialist agencies or school staff should continue to deliver DV education? Why?

In this report we provide a summary of these discussions.

## **How would the programme benefit school age children?**

Several themes emerged in response in this question. Firstly, the delegates said that the programme helps to develop young people's understanding about domestic violence, as well as aggression within relationships more broadly (for example friendships). Secondly, they said that the project provides an opportunity for young people who have experienced domestic violence (as a witness, victim or perpetrator) to apply the things they learn to their own situations. Thirdly, the programme is something that the young people would be interested in. Finally, the delegates suggested that children would benefit from this programme because it is delivered in a sensitive way.

### *Develops young people's understanding*

There was recognition that the primary school programme will have different content to the secondary school programme, and thus the primary school programme should have a particular focus on children's friendships. The delegates suggested that the programme would help primary school children to understand positive and negative feelings, and this could be related to how they manage their own friendships. With both primary school and secondary school pupils, the delegates said the programme benefitted them by teaching about how to recognise their own, and other people's personal boundaries. They also thought that it was important that the programme should not simply focus on the prevention of domestic abuse, but on the reverse of this – also teach young people about what it means to be in a respectful and healthy relationship. There was also unanimous agreement that the message that domestic abuse is not normal / not acceptable should be repeatedly reinforced to young people. It was agreed that this type of programme raises awareness of what constitutes domestic violence, that domestic violence is unacceptable, and that young people should seek help when in this situation.

### *Programme can be applied to children's own experiences*

As mentioned, the delegates thought that the programme was important for helping children to understand positive and negative emotions within their friendships. In terms of domestic violence, the delegates thought that *Relationships without Fear* would be beneficial for young people in this situation because they would see that other people go through this experience and that it is something they can seek help for. Thus, the delegates thought this type of programme encourages disclosure from children. Subsequently, pupils who have experienced domestic violence (as witness, victim or perpetrator) would be identified to the relevant staff within a school setting and get support from teachers. The delegates argued this would reduce the child's isolation. They also hoped that the programme would help children experiencing domestic abuse, to recognise that this situation was not their fault. However, they also noted that these messages need to be reinforced, and that intermittent interventions would be of less benefit to children compared to recurrent interventions where the programme content was revisited.

### *Programme is taught sensitively*

The delegates thought that the children would benefit from the programme because it is aimed at whole classes, and not just individual children – this means that individuals are not singled out. They thought that early intervention was vital and that it was important that children learned that any domestic abuse they had experienced was not their fault, and that they were encouraged to talk to someone. Taken together, the delegates thought that the programme helped to facilitate referrals and ensure the correct support was put in place for students.

### *The programme is interesting for students*

The delegates were very positive about *Relationships without Fear*, and also the Educational Toolkit which was presented to them during the workshop. They thought that students would find the Educational Toolkit interesting and would enjoy participating in the intervention. They thought it was particularly important that the activities were interactive and age appropriate. They liked the activities that encouraged children to discuss opinions, work in groups, and the use of artwork to express their feelings. The delegates were especially responsive to the Toolkit as a collection of tools that could be adapted to the needs of specific children, and thought this would help to make the programme more interesting and relevant to the children. They also thought that a series of one hour sessions provided the best structure for the delivery of the Educational Toolkit.

### **Do you think specialist agencies or school staff should continue to deliver DV education? Why?**

#### *Specialist agencies*

In response to this question, the delegates discussed the advantages and disadvantages associated with each party delivering domestic abuse prevention education. In terms of specialist agencies, three themes emerged: specialist agencies have expertise in this topic, students enjoy lessons delivered by external speakers, and specialist agencies should always deliver in the first instance, with teachers then delivering future interventions.

Some of delegates highlighted the high workload that teachers have and that many will not have sufficient knowledge or confidence to deliver domestic abuse prevention education. Subsequently, teachers would struggle to find the time to prepare for delivering this programme to a high standard. Under these circumstances a facilitator from a specialist agency would be better suited to delivering this type of programme. Moreover, external facilitators have particular interest and experience in issues pertaining to domestic violence which would enhance their teaching (for example, they can draw on real life examples). Subsequently, the programme delivered would be more interesting for students, and that young people often enjoy the novelty of being taught by someone who is not their usual teacher.

The theme of collaboration emerged here, with delegates suggesting that in the first instance a programme should always be delivered by a specialist agency. Teachers can then observe how the programme is taught – facilitating their own ability to deliver the programme. Specialist agencies can provide training for teachers, and also monitor and observe programmes delivered by teachers - ensuring the programme is being taught effectively, and that support is provided to teachers where necessary. The delegates felt that once teachers had observed the programme, received training, and had feedback on lessons they delivered –they would feel more empowered to deliver the programme themselves, and be able to continue the intervention on a rolling basis.

Finally, delegates also highlighted that some teachers may not want to deliver domestic abuse prevention education programmes because they may have direct experience of domestic abuse (as a victim, perpetrator or witness) and therefore not feel comfortable teaching the programme. The issue of teachers feeling uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues with students was also identified, and that training would be needed to address this. The delegates also pointed out that teachers could face a conflict of interest – whereby parents or parent governors have concerns about the programme (or what children may discuss during the programme) – and so these

parents could oppose the programme. The teacher may then be reluctant to deliver a programme that has resistance from these groups.

### *Teaching professionals*

The delegates thought that a key benefit of teachers delivering a domestic abuse prevention education programme was that teachers would be able to offer continued support to pupils in school. Crucially, this would mean that young people could speak to the teacher rather than waiting for an outside agency to come and deliver the programme. However, the theme of collaboration emerged again. The delegates felt that teachers could not, and should not deliver the programme in isolation from external agencies. They agreed that teachers should be in contact with an external agency to provide the teacher with support and guidance should a child make a disclosure to them. Furthermore, some children would be reluctant to confide in their teacher and would prefer to speak to an adult who is not linked to the school.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the delegates who attended the domestic abuse prevention education workshop hosted by Arch, were very receptive to the importance of this type of education in schools. They felt that the *Relationships without Fear* programme helped children to develop understanding about the issues pertaining to domestic abuse, for example to recognise that domestic violence is never acceptable. They felt the programme was important as an early intervention that did not single out a particular child but instead targeted whole year groups. Thus, as well as helping young people currently experiencing domestic violence, the programme could also help to equip children with skills to cope with situations of domestic abuse encountered in the future. The delegates agreed that the Educational Toolkit provided an ideal means for teachers to deliver this type of programme, and were responsive to the activities it contained, and particularly recognised the merit of activities being adaptable by teachers to suit the needs of their students. However, they also identified that teachers could struggle to deliver this programme without the support of an external agency, especially in situations where a student may make a disclosure to their teacher.