



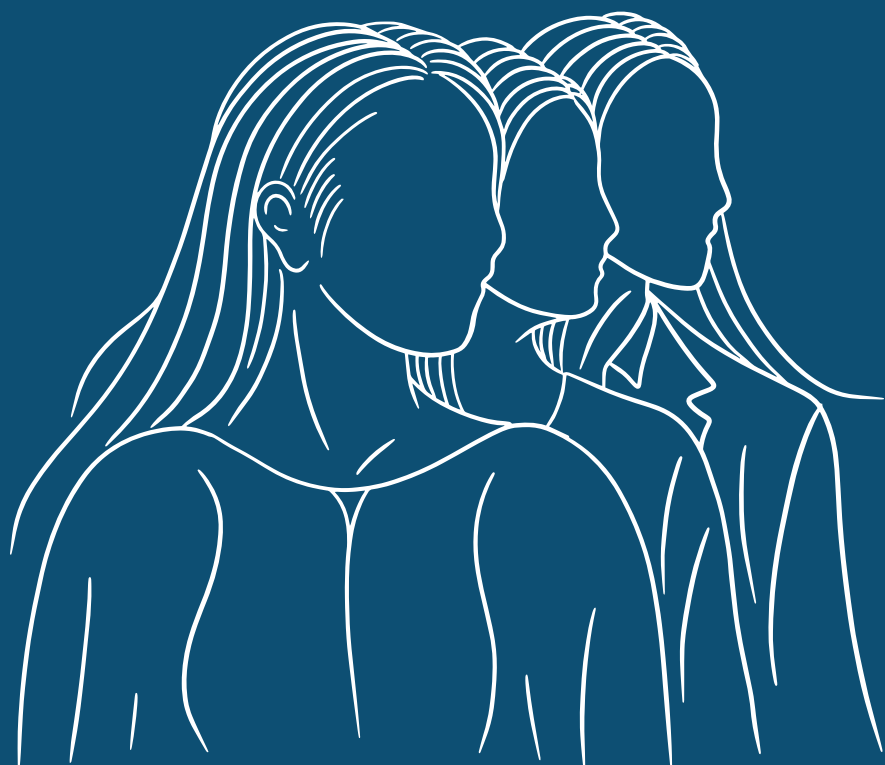
Let's Talk Healthy Relationships

Toolkit for parents and carers

advance 

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Introduction

Advance is a charity committed to raising awareness and providing support for young women and girls at risk of or experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence.

It is vital for young people to be able to recognise and know the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. We know that young women and girls are disproportionately affected by abuse and there is limited specialist support available.

1 in 4 women across England and Wales will be a victim of domestic abuse in their lifetime and 25% of women experience some form of abuse before the age of 16. [1]

With nowhere to turn for support, many young women and girls are left traumatised by their experiences and can experience further distress or harm, including being excluded from school or getting caught up in the criminal justice system.

It is therefore essential to spot the early signs and prevent negative behaviours and violence from escalating.



We have created this toolkit to deliver essential information on domestic abuse to parents and carers, as well as children, and young people themselves.

We hope the activities help children and young people aged 13-25 years to grow their expectations and aspirations, support their health and well-being, promote positive self-image, and empower them in their rights and decisions.

I ♥ my loud voice

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of **controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse** by someone who is or has been an intimate partner or family member.

This can include **psychological, physical, sexual, financial, or emotional abuse**, and incidents generally become more frequent and severe with time.

Controlling behaviours are acts designed to make a person subordinate or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting them, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.



It is different from other forms of violence because:

- it is a repetitive pattern of behaviour.
- it is the misuse of power and control.
- it is intimate by nature and often involves trust and betrayal.
- It occurs overwhelmingly behind closed doors.

How can domestic abuse affect children and young people?

Domestic abuse can be perpetrated within intimate partner relationships or within family relationships. Abuse can continue after a relationship comes to an end. It can be subtle in its various forms yet deeply damaging, leaving a long-term impact on emotional well-being and mental health.

Children under the age of 18 may experience domestic abuse within their intimate relationships. Although domestic abuse is not legally recognised until an individual reaches the age of 16, **child-on-child abuse** or **teenage relationship abuse** should be treated as any other child safeguarding issue and the correct procedures followed.

Abuse from an adult family member towards a child is child abuse. In these cases, there may also be recognisable elements of domestic abuse, especially if there are multiple victim/survivors involved, such as other adult family members.

Children who **witness domestic abuse** in their home are recognised in law as victim/survivors of abuse in their own right. Seeing, hearing, or experiencing the effects of domestic abuse at home can have a devastating impact on children.

What can you do?

By working together, recognising the signs, and fostering healthy relationships, domestic abuse can be addressed and prevented. Parents and carers can provide **information about healthy relationships, sexual consent, and respect** can help children and young people to feel safe and lead violence-free lives.

Schools and youth organisations support young people by educating about **consent and healthy relationships**.



If you are worried about your child and need further advice and support, there are national resources at the end of this toolkit.

If you reside in London you can contact angelou@advancecharity.org.uk or maia@advancecharity.org.uk if you have any concerns about someone who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

It is important to remain **open and non-judgemental** if your child tells you something worrying. Listen calmly to what is being said and give them time and space to explain, showing them they are being heard and that their views are important.



What are girls and young women experiencing?

It is estimated that around **5.1 million women** in the UK have experienced some form of abuse **before the age of 16 years**.^[2]

The transition from childhood to adulthood is inherently complex, meaning it is often difficult for young people to name and make sense of the abuses experienced.

They are also less likely to have the practical skills to remove themselves from the situation and openly communicate their concerns, and specialist support for this age group is limited.

According to the NSPCC, a survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter of girls reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner. Additionally one in three girls reported some form of sexual abuse within their relationships.^[3]



Early education is therefore pivotal to changing attitudes and aiding prevention. Since 2020, the Everyone's Invited website has had over 50,000 submissions from young people expressing their experiences of sexual violence and rape culture, mostly in schools and universities, including from children as young as 9 years.^[4]

[2] ONS, 2020

[3] NSPCC, 2009

[4] Everyone's Invited, 2023

A review by Ofsted has highlighted that young people's experience of sexual harassment and abuse is almost 'normalised' and unfiltered access to porn has made abuse increasingly acceptable.[5]

As young people also start exploring their sexuality at this age, access to online porn can **negatively influence** their sexual education and understanding. Viewing this material can have significant and harmful effects, **distorting what defines a healthy relationship**, creating unrealistic expectations and contributing to sexual violence.[6]

Technology and social media platforms have also increased problems around control, and can open the gateway for cyber-bullying, exploitation, online grooming, and other forms of emotional and online abuse.



There is the potential for further harm when abusive content is uploaded and shared online.

This form of online abuse can lead to anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, and even suicidal thoughts.

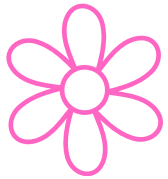
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[5] Ofsted, 2021

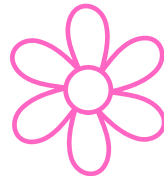
[6] Children's Commission, 2023

Advance's research shows girls 'wished they knew more about consent'

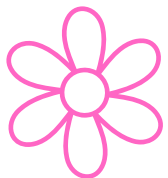
Our research with young women and girls experiencing abuse revealed that:



The average age of their first sexual experience was **12 years old.**



The average age of their partners was **16 years old.**



73% agreed that they wished they had **known more about consent** and how to say no when they started having sexual experiences. [7]

“I think if I would have known a bit more about it and a bit more about the feelings and emotions that come with it then... maybe I would have waited.”

- Advance service user

Both partner and peer pressure can influence decision-making and result in young women and girls having sexual relations before they are ready.

Although consent can be a difficult issue to discuss, it is essential to broach the subject. School-age children and young girls are particularly vulnerable; school-related sexual violence, abuse and harassment has been recognised as a global problem.

It is important for children and young people to know that giving consent once doesn't mean the same every time and consent can be **withdrawn at any point.**

Recognising signs of abuse

Although unusual behaviours are not always indicative of abuse, it is important that if safeguarding concerns do arise, they are formally and properly dealt with.

Some signs which may indicate a problem may include:

- Unexplained absences from school or recurrent lateness.
- Dramatic changes in behaviour and/or personality.
- Displays of disruptive or violent behaviour for no apparent reason and exhibiting a distinct lack of empathy.
- Becoming withdrawn and unable to engage or interact with peers.
- Signs of lethargy, being constantly tired and distracted.

Although not exhaustive or necessarily related to abuse, it is worth considering anything that seems concerning or out of the ordinary.

Healthy and unhealthy relationships

When exploring the signs of healthy or unhealthy relationships with young people, it is beneficial to create spaces for them to openly **discuss any concerns** they may have about their relationships or personal situation in a safe and non-judgmental way.

Young people need to know what a healthy relationship looks and feels like and be able to distinguish when things are going wrong.

Having disagreements and periods of tension can be normal and don't necessarily mean that the relationship is abusive or needs to end.

However, young people sometimes struggle with knowing whether they are experiencing abuse and knowing what is normal and healthy. It can be particularly difficult if the abuse is emotional and psychological rather than physical.

The characteristics of a positive, healthy romantic relationship can include:

- Both people feeling safe and supported.
- Both people are treated with respect and kindness.
- Both people are an equal partnership.



It is also important they can reflect on how the relationship makes them feel and how they are behaving themselves within it.

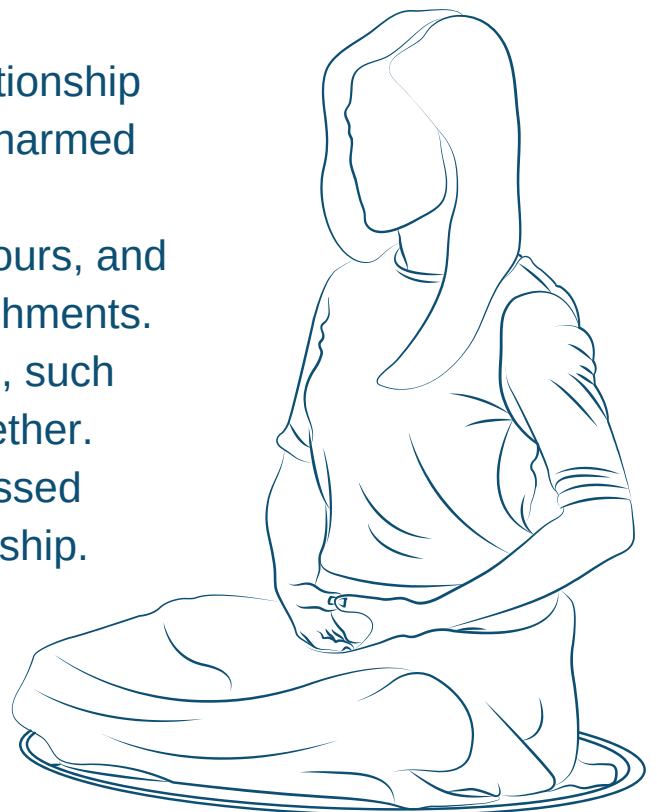
Young people can be subject to coercive control as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse both inside and outside the home. Bullying and exerting control through threats or fear is at the heart of domestic abuse.

Abusive behaviours can include **shaming, humiliating and gaslighting**, in private or in public, and controlling behaviours that **restrict personal freedoms and choices**.

It can also include **isolation from family and friends, restricting access** to finances, verbal **aggression**, or constant **criticism**, which over a period of time can make a young person feel worthless and unvalued, seriously affecting their self-esteem.

It may be a concern if they are experiencing any of the following:

- Feeling scared or unsafe in the relationship and worried about being physically harmed or threatened with violence.
- Changing their appearance, behaviours, and friendships to avoid conflict or punishments.
- Feeling pressured into doing things, such as having sex or spending time together.
- Their friends and family have expressed repeated concern about the relationship.



I ♥ my loud voice

Advance has created 5 five-minute films telling young people's true stories. These can be watched together or individually to discuss the issues that teenagers and young adults may face.

The films and subsequent discussion activities can be used as an ideal starting point to open conversations and uncover underlying feelings.



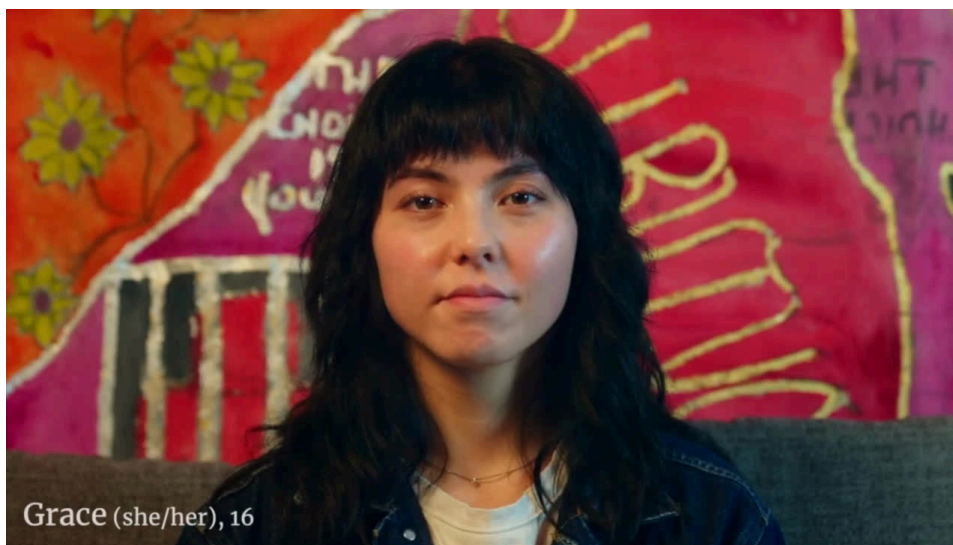
These films cover sensitive and potentially triggering topics, including consent, emotional abuse, coercive control, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

Signposts to resources are included at the end of this toolkit if you require support for yourself, your child, or anyone else. You should make children and young people aware of this content, and ensure they know where to go if they need help.

- We recommend previewing the stories ahead of the session.
- We recommend watching Grace, Mina and Ash's stories with years 8 and 9 (ages 12-14).
- We recommend watching Una and Issy's films with older age groups.

Film clip 1

Grace's story (she/her), aged 17



Link <https://youtu.be/0F8dDj8zBjw> 

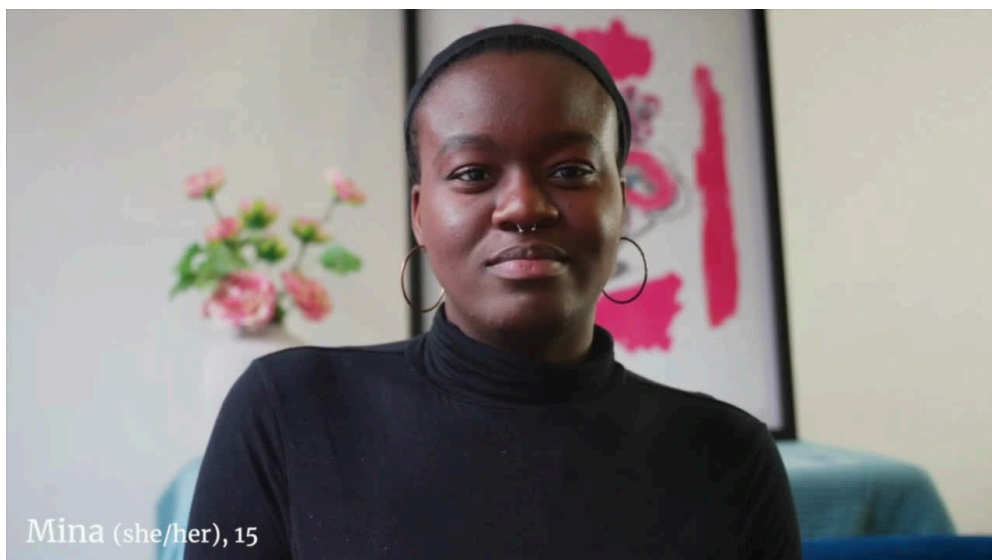
Grace's boyfriend seems a charmer but people at school think he's strange. He criticises Grace's friends and thinks all men including the male teachers want to sleep with her. To appease him, Grace stops seeing her friends. She also stops eating. She loves him and wants it to work. Then Advance did a talk in Grace's school and named the things she is experiencing; love-bombing, gaslighting, and coercive control.

Themes in Grace's story

- Identifying the signs of an unhealthy relationship
 - Mental health
 - Peer influences and pressures from society
 - Gaslighting and love-bombing
 - Controlling behaviours
 - Coping mechanisms
 - Dealing with shame
 - Finding and accepting support
 - Boundaries and self-care
-

Film clip 2

Mina's story (she/her), aged 15



Link <https://youtu.be/BIs04bfj7O8> 

Mina struggled to admit things with her dad weren't right. Mum said he was just difficult when he got angry. Mina's family weren't allowed to make noise. They all spoke in small voices, or not at all. As Mina got older, she realised how loud her voice was. One day she started shouting. Dad hated it, lashed out, and kept hitting her. He went too far, and Mina had to go hospital.

Social services and the police got involved. Then Lisa showed up from Advance. Lisa listened and told Mina her dad had assaulted her, and that it wasn't normal. Lisa helped Mina access therapy and a Women's Centre, where she could talk to other girls her age who understand her experience.

Themes in Mina's story

- Child abuse and familial abuse
 - Feeling under pressure to adhere to community and religious pressures
 - Fear and isolation
 - Anxiety and diminished self-esteem
 - Suicidal thoughts
 - Reacting to the abuser
 - Getting external support
-

Film clip 3

Ash's story (they/them) aged 19



Link <https://youtu.be/O8yK-MGzcAo> 

Ash never felt they were made of the same stuff as their friends – not a girl, not a boy. Their Mum kept saying they were unlovable. Ash tried hard to be a girl and threw themselves into awkward social situations, but their Mum loved it, because finally she had a daughter. Ash drank heavily to get themselves through and pushed themselves onto guys. They felt lonely and full of self-hatred.

Then one day Advance did a talk at Ash's university. The support worker explained that abuse does not have to be physical; it could be your Mum saying you don't deserve to be loved. Advance put Ash in touch with a counsellor, an LGBTQ+ group, and found them a non-binary Peer Mentor. Ash finally knew they were normal, liked, loved even.

Themes in Ash's story

- Belonging and finding acceptance
- LGBTQ+ and self-discovery
- Dealing with anxiety and diminished self-esteem
- Parental expectations
- Alcohol use
- Loneliness

Film clip 4

Una's story (she/her) aged 17



Link <https://youtu.be/MIY7qWi359U> 

Una's relationship with her mum broke down, and she moved in with Sharon. When Sharon came home, she brought friends who liked to party. Sharon became Una's first sexual partner and gave Una a roof over her head. Sharon's mates came round and said she was like a daughter, but they didn't treat her like a daughter – at all. They tried to make Una take hard drugs like them. Soon Una was in trouble with the law and her Probation Officer said she was a lay-about and criminal.

Then Una met Lucy from Advance who talked to her like she was human and didn't judge. Lucy made Una realise that things were being done to her that were non-consensual, and she could choose another path, like going to college and getting a job.

Themes in Una's story

- Family problems
 - Consent and peer pressure
 - Controlling behaviour
 - LGBTQ+ and self-knowledge
 - Substance misuse
 - Being in trouble with the police
 - Raising aspirations and expectations
-

Film clip 3

Issy's story (she/her) aged 21



Link <https://youtu.be/7HozVtyG3-U> 

Issy realised 'your body isn't your own' after a baby. At first it was nice to have an excuse not to have to give it to her boyfriend. Not just sex, but her attention. Issy thinks he's a good Dad. If she had a choice she would still live with her mum, but Mum got sick of Issy, so she moved in with her boyfriend. He thought it would help and it did - for a week. Then they started bickering and then she got pregnant.

One day, Issy tries to call her mum to beg her pick her up. But she doesn't answer, and Issy takes that as a sign to give up. Mum doesn't contact Issy anymore. Can Maggie her keyworker at Advance help her decide what to do?

Themes in Izzy's story

- Pregnancy and parenting
 - Controlling behaviour
 - Financial dependency
 - Family problems
-

Building connections and instilling resilience

Teenagers can be empowered in their relationships when they learn how to **identify the early warning signs** of abuse, understand the **choices** available to them, and know they **deserve to be treated with respect**.

The following activities can be used to inform and explore some of the **myths and facts around domestic violence and abuse** and the different forms it takes as well as what can be considered as **healthy or unhealthy relationships**.

Defining the **characteristics of a healthy relationship** is important to convey to your children so they can spot the signs when they are not in one.

By communicating with them openly, **without judgement**, they will know that they are being **listened to** and more likely to **open up** when something is wrong.

Young people deserve to experience relationships **positively without fear**. They should feel safe and respected and know that their opinions are listened to and valued.

By keeping **channels of communication open** and providing insights into what a healthy relationship is and feels like, you can support them on this journey.

Signs of domestic abuse

- Becoming withdrawn or isolated from family and friends.
- Having your internet or social media use monitored, or someone else reading your texts, emails, or letters.
- Tracking location – being asked where you are every minute of the day, having Find my Friends on, turning up at your place of work or when you're with friends/family unexpectedly, without telling them where you are.
- Being repeatedly belittled, put down or told you are worthless.
- Being pressured into sex or sexual contact.
- Being told that abuse is your fault or that you are overreacting.
- Being showered with gifts.

Where to get help

If someone is experiencing domestic abuse and feels frightened of, or controlled by a partner, ex-partner, or family member, it's important to remember it's not their fault and there is no shame in seeking help.

Free, confidential support and advice is available to victims and their concerned family members or friends 24 hours a day. Helplines are listed at the end of this resource.



Ways of providing support

You can provide support to a young person through open, non-judgemental conversations, helping them to explore their boundaries and know where they can get help if they need it.

- Talk openly and encourage them to ask anything that might be of concern – be prepared to discuss difficult subjects and guide them with empathy and understanding.
- Challenge the myths around domestic abuse and help them to recognise what is healthy behaviour and what is unacceptable.
- Reinforce healthy, non-violent relationships and the ways that they can keep themselves safe.
- Keep open-minded and try to see things from their perspective, let them express themselves openly without fear or judgement.
- Respect their privacy and give them time to open up at their own time.
- Let them know that you take them seriously and respect their views.
- Help them to manage conflict in a positive way.
- Discuss the importance of setting boundaries and recognising signs of unhealthy behaviour.
- Encourage self-respect, discuss consent, and peer pressure.
- Teach them to recognise early warning signs and unusual behaviours as well as and how to deal with them.
- Explain the support services available and the details for local domestic violence services.

Conversation starters

It's not always easy to broach serious subjects with our kids, especially ones they might feel uncomfortable with or embarrassed by. Here are a few questions that might help start a conversation with your child.

Everything okay with you and your friends? They haven't been round here for a while. Do you want to invite them over?

You haven't seemed yourself lately, is there something on your mind?

Do you feel you can be yourself with him? Do you ever feel pressured to do things you don't want to do?

Your boyfriend seems a nice lad, is he popular? Does he get on with your friends?

How do you feel when you're with him? What is it you like about him?

Do you feel like you understand consent and boundaries?



How schools and colleges support children and young people

Schools and colleges are legally obliged to teach about healthy relationships. So it is not purely down to parents and young people to navigate this tricky and sensitive subject.

Schools often refer to Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSHE), or Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE). R/PSHE needs regular curriculum time like any other school subject.

'Drop down' or 'off timetable' days and assemblies can enhance a timetabled programme of regular, planned lessons but aren't an alternative to a planned and sequential R/PSHE curriculum.

Schools and college are also compelled to tailor their programme to the needs of pupils and local communities to be effective.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' or 'off the shelf' solution and R/PSHE programmes should always be tailored to the needs of a school's own pupils and community.

What the law says

The legal age of consent (legal age to have sex) is 16 in the UK.

By law, children under 13 cannot consent to any type of sexual activity.

Any sexual contact without consent is illegal, regardless of age.



Sending and receiving naked images and videos is illegal for anyone under the age of 18, even if a young person consents to them being sent.

Useful background reading and help for parents

[Government guidance for schools and colleges about teaching about relationships, sex and health.](#)

[Ofsted /Government Review 2021](#)

[Safer Online Dating: how to support your child](#)

[Childline Guidance about online safety and bullying](#)

[Childline Guidance on types of bullying and social media:](#)

[Teacher Briefing: Addressing Pornography through PSHE Education.](#)

[Teaching About Consent: teacher guidance.](#)

[What is the Impact of Pornography on Young People: a research briefing for educators.](#)

Where to go for help



If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call **999**. If you can't talk, you can respond by pressing **55**, which transfers straight to police.

Report non-emergency abusive or concerning incidents to the police. You can do this online or by dialling 101.

- **National Domestic Violence Helpline:** freephone 0808 2000 247 (available 24/7)
- **The Mix** – free information and support for under 25s: 0808 808 4994 (3pm–midnight every day)
- **The Men's Advice Line** - for male domestic abuse survivors: freephone 0808 801 0327 (10am-5pm, Monday to Friday)
- **Bright Sky app** - free mobile app available on Android and iPhones, offering information and advice.
- **Women's Aid** – contact via email: helpline@womensaid.org.uk
- **Victim Support:** freephone 0808 1689 111 (available 24/7)
- **National Stalking Helpline:** 0300 636 0300 (9:30 – 20:00, Monday and Wednesday, 09:30-16:00, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday)
- **National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK:** 0800 689 5652 (18:00 –12:00 every day).
- **Samaritans:** 116 123 (available 24/7).

As well as the helplines listed above, London residents can contact angelou@advancecharity.org.uk or maia@advancecharity.org.uk if you have any concerns about someone who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

About Advance

Advance is an innovative charity that supports women and girls to lead safe, just and equal lives. We help women and girls who have experienced trauma through domestic abuse and the criminal justice system to rebuild their lives. We do this by providing practical and emotional support in their communities, in our women's centres, and in collaboration with diverse specialist partners. We use our expertise from 25 years of frontline work to advocate for women and girls. Find out more at advancecharity.org.uk



About Maia & Lift services

Funded by the Violence Reduction Unit

Led by Advance and in partnership with three specialist organisations, Maia/LIFT provides vital support for young women and girls who have experienced or who are at risk of domestic abuse.

Woman's Trust

is a specialist mental health charity, providing free counselling and therapy for women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Working Chance

offers employability support to young women aged 18-25 who are interested in building employability skills and finding meaningful work.

Chance UK

delivers child-centred, early intervention and mentoring programmes, including a gender-specific girl's programme called LIFT for girls aged 9-13.

I  my loud voice