

Your Best Friend

Discovery Report

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Key Findings

There is a need to de-normalise coercive and controlling behaviours in young people's relationships

Young people are frequently hearing about, or seeing worrying behaviours in their friend's intimate relationships. Young people told us coercive and controlling behaviours are so common in their social circles, they consider them normal. Further, young people hear these stories so often there is an element of compassion fatigue in their peer groups. Young people identified that controlling behaviours can be confused with socially accepted ideas of love, caring and protection, or misunderstandings of what love is meant to feel like – and this can prevent them seeing 'red flags'. Dating someone older also brings a status amongst young people. However, this can come with an increased risk of coercion especially in first relationships.

There is a need to dispel coercive and controlling behaviours as ordinary and typical. Young people need support to identify 'red flags' and understand the serious impacts these behaviours have on people's emotional and mental wellbeing. There needs to be an understanding between peers about the power an abuser has so young people regain a compassion in their friendship groups about why their peers do not recognise abusive behaviours or easily leave relationships.

Young people need advice and guidance to keep themselves safe when connecting with people, and starting relationships online

Young people described managing multiple connections and beginning relationships online. However, while doing this they are open to online pressures, coercion, manipulation and harassment. Young people described experiencing constant and/or inappropriate comments on their looks and/or bodies, being asked for photos, including nudes, and pushy, fast-fire messages. Some young people described their anxiety when having to dissuade friends from responding to online requests. These issues are happening on a wide level, and across all ages of young people. A concerning amount of young people under the age of consent are being exposed to these online demands.

Young people need support on how to keep themselves safe online, to feel confident to manage unwanted communication and to understand certain requests are inappropriate and identified as warning signs. Those in the older age groups noted how, at a younger age, they would worry about how to respond if approached online but on maturing, realised their safety and security is more important. They advocated 'ghosting' or 'blocking' any communication they find concerning.

Young people advocate taking a non-judgemental and non-pressurising approach with friends to help them identify toxic behaviours

Young people are often talking to their friends to try to help them with toxic relationships. Several young people described personal experiences of helping a friend. Predominantly, young people advocated raising awareness with friends in a non-judgemental and non-condescending way. They felt this would help friends come to

their own conclusion about the relationship without shutting the conversation down. Many young people also stressed the importance of continuing to support their friends and championing their self-esteem and confidence at this difficult time.

Young people need resources available to them that can help them when talking to their friends. In conversations, young people told us they felt seeing information from elsewhere would help their friends understand the situation in an impartial way, and not feel this was someone else's personal judgement on their relationship.

Damaging their friendships, self-doubt and fear are key barriers to young people talking to their friends

Young people explained the difficulties and fears they have about talking to friends about their relationships. They confirmed this is not an easy conversation to have and raised concerns about harming their friendships and/or making the situation worse. Self-doubt over whether they have understood the situation correctly is also a key obstacle. Those of a younger age seemed more nervous about intervening in these matters than those who were older. Another difficulty to maintaining conversation was the frustration caused if a friend refused to listen to, or take advice about their relationship.

Young people need support to have these difficult conversations with friends, and advice around dealing with challenging situations as well as self-care tools for themselves.

There is a need to place resources where young people are and to make them accessible to all

Young people said they would feel under pressure if faced with a friend in a toxic relationship that they felt was escalating. Some young people who had actually been in the situation said they did not have the knowledge of how to help or where to go. Many said they felt helpless. Some young people noted they did not think searching for information online would give them the answers to complex or multifaceted situations. Young people often talk to their friends about problems in relationships in face-to-face situations, including college, university and school. However, messaging apps and social media were also common channels for discussion.

There is a need to place resources where young people are so they have immediate access to help and advice. These also have to be available to all young people and consider cultural complexities, representativeness and accessibility.

Young people need a clear route to 'trusted adults' where they can raise concerns at the earliest opportunity and seek advice

The threat of, or actual physical harm would be the point where young people are most likely to seek professional help for a friend. However, in conversation, young people acknowledged that this is probably too late to stop a friend's suffering from nonphysical harms. It was also apparent in discussions that young people are extremely reluctant to involve adult professionals due to a lack of trust and lack of belief that adults improve situations. There was a sense that young people do not feel adults listen to, understand

or believe them. Crucially, young people are also unlikely to seek support without the knowledge and approval of their friend.

Young people need a clear route to 'trusted adults' where they can raise concerns about a friend and be assured they will be heard, believed and the issue taken seriously. Young people also need to know they can find help for situations they feel pressured to take on, or deal with continuing and excessive responsibility.

Supported by

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1. Introduction

The Your Best Friend project is a collaboration between eleven project partners with the aim of empowering 10,000+ girls, young women and non-binary young people with the knowledge and confidence to act before someone harms or is harmed, to keep themselves and their friends' safe.

The project involves three waves:

Wave 1 – To listen and learn from a diversity of girls, young women and non-binary young people so we can fully understand what they need to know and how they seek help.

Wave 2 – To co-create, test and refine engaging resources that are inclusive and accessible plus peer-to-peer and online techniques to share them through our partnership networks.

Wave 3 – To distribute resources where young people are, laying a trail for young people so they can easily find the advice and reassurance they need.

This report looks at Wave 1 of the project – the research phase – showing the findings from our investigation with young people and the evidence base for subsequent waves.



“I had a friend who...felt that they had to send nudes ...to people who they were dating online, and it was quite scary having to be on the end, having to persuade them not to do it, because it can be a really, really damaging thing. And I think it was also that everyone else around her was doing the same thing, so it was, sort of, normalised”

Young person (13-16)

2. Research design and methods

The research took an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, which is a 2-phase model characterised by an initial qualitative phase of data collection and analysis, followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis, with a final phase of linking the data to explore a phenomenon.

We aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do girls, young women and non-binary young people develop and experience dating and intimate relationships?
- What stops girls, young women and non-binary young people identifying toxic relationship behaviours?
- What would girls, young women and non-binary young people consider when seeking support for themselves and their friends?
- How do girls, young women and non-binary young people help their friends stay safe from dating and relationship harm?
- What are the limits to girls, young women and non-binary young people being able to help their friends with dating and relationship abuse?

The **qualitative** phase of the research involved a multi-method and multi-mode approach to data collection involving online focus groups and 1-2-1 interviews with data either recorded and transcribed or scripts downloaded from group text chat.

The **quantitative** phase of the research involved a survey to young people incorporating both closed and open-ended questions. The survey also gave young people an opportunity to share a story of helping a friend in a toxic relationship.

3. Qualitative research phase

The Your Best Friend partners conducted sixteen online focus groups and one online interview with young people between April and May 2021. The focus groups were organised by ages of young people to ensure, for ethical reasons, they would be discussing this topic with others of a similar age. We invited young people to join either a 13-16, 17-19 or 20-24 years age group. Each focus group included between three and eight young people and lasted approximately an hour.

Research tools included two vignettes¹ and a set of lyrics to generate discussion in the groups. The vignettes described a scenario of a young couple meeting and progressing to a relationship. Woven into this were real examples of toxic behaviours young people have experienced in relationships.² The names used within the vignettes were gender neutral and the story only used pronouns of one character so not to represent solely Cisgender or heterosexual relationships. The ages of the characters in the vignettes were adapted to suit the age range of young people in the focus group (See Appendix 1). An interview schedule guided the discussion, using questions and prompts, to investigate the research aims (See Appendix 2). Thematic analysis examined themes and patterns of meaning in the data.

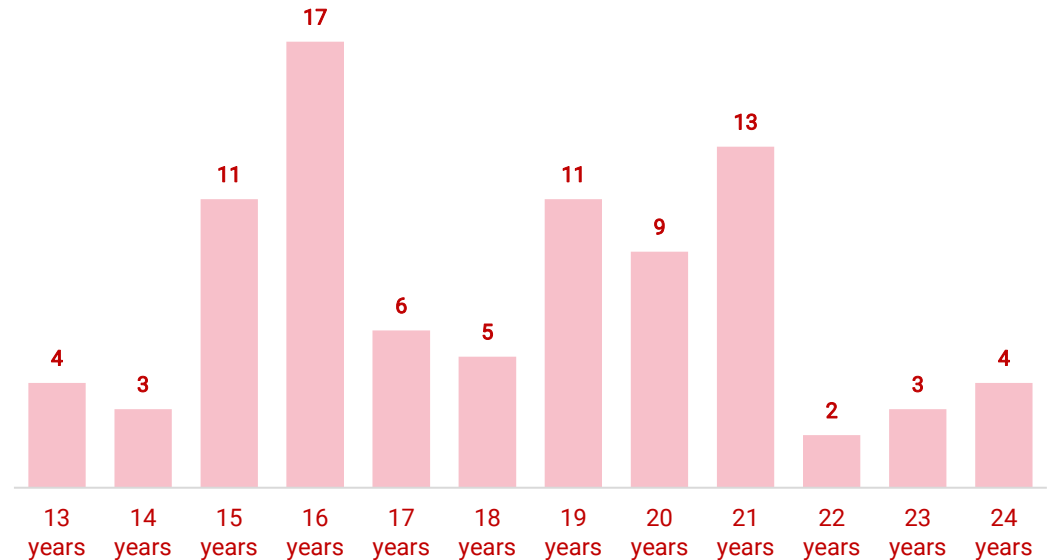
¹ Vignettes provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics. Vignettes also provide the opportunity for participants to have greater control over the interaction by enabling them to determine at what stage, if at all, they introduce their own experiences to illuminate their abstract responses.

² My Story Matters – young people's stories

3.1 Profiles of the focus group and interview participants

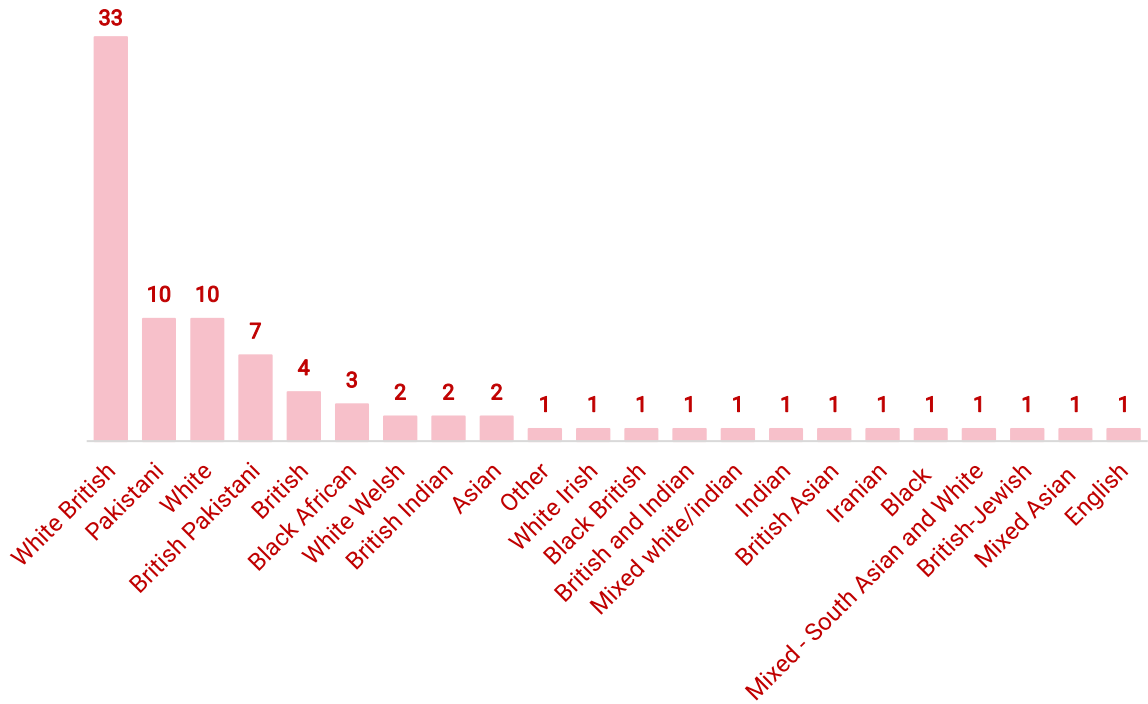
Eighty-eight young people took part in the focus groups and interview. Thirty-five young people were between 13 and 16 years old (40%), twenty-two were between 17 and 19 (25%) and thirty-one were between 20 and 24 years (35%) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ages of young people



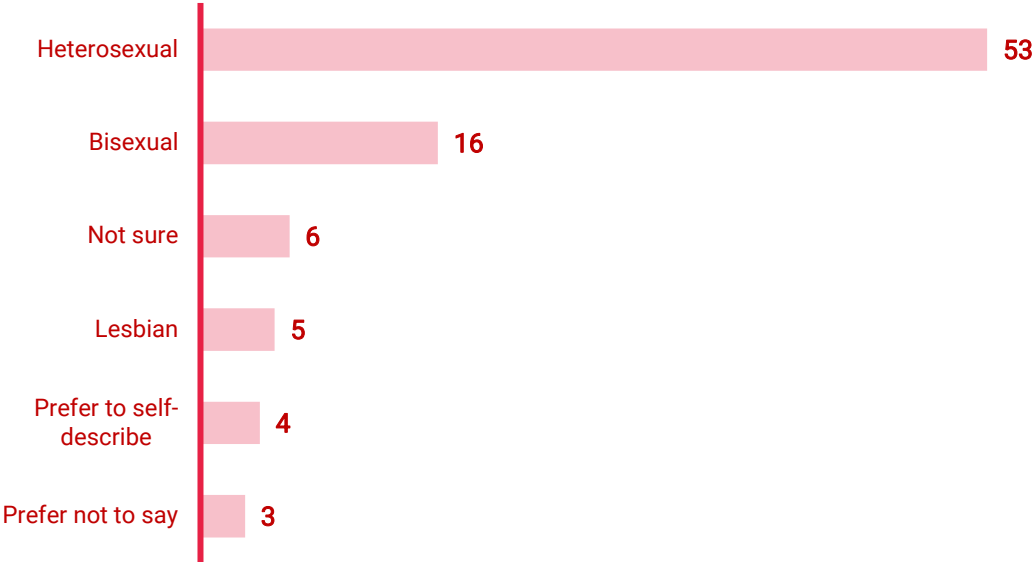
We asked young people to self-identify their ethnic group. The majority of young people identified as White British (38%) (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Ethnic group of young people



Eighty-two (93%) young people identified as Cisgender/Cis/Non-trans with three non-binary young people and one Transgender/Trans young person. The majority of young people identified as heterosexual (60%) (See Figure 3). Eight young people identified as disabled and two were parents.

Figure 3: Sexuality of young people

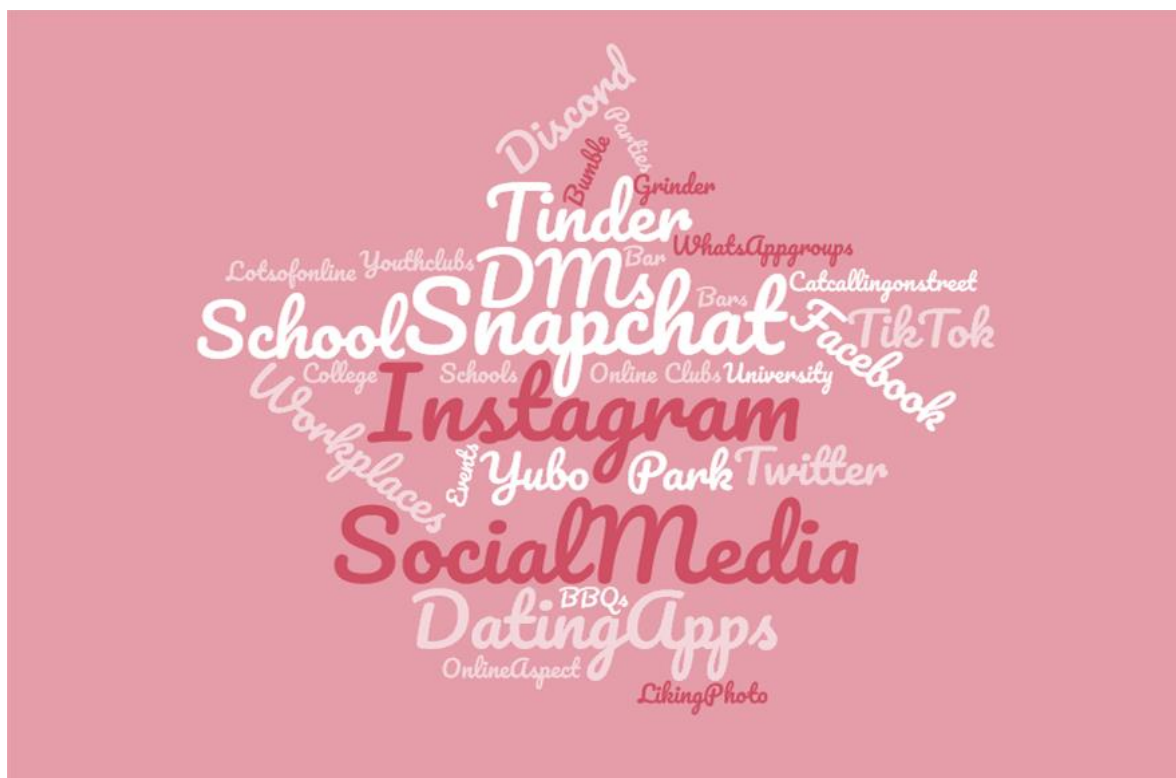


3.2 How do young people’s relationships start?

Initial, warm up discussions provided insight into how young people start relationships, the language they use around different types of relationship, depending on its timeline, and how relationships move from casual to more serious.

Young people described a heavy social media aspect to how they initially meet and start conversations, particularly since Covid. Young people described how conversations start by replying to a story, commenting on posts or via people ‘sliding into your DMs’. A few young people noted how lockdown has made the ‘talking stage’ become more serious, faster. Younger groups mentioned they often met in school while older groups noted college, university or work. However, even if initial meetings were face-to-face, young people said they quickly moved online (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Word cloud of where young people meet and connect



We asked young people, “What is the difference between dating and a relationship?” Most young people understood dating as what comes before a serious relationship but most said they would not use that word. Young people in the 13-16 year old group were less likely to understand or use the word dating. Young people mentioned a range of words they would use to describe pre-relationship connections, including – talking, chatting, linking, situationships, and seeing each other. They also mentioned casual sexual connections such as, one nightstands, friends with benefits and fuck buddies. What was apparent in these discussions is that young people are often managing multiple, and incessant connections. A few young people noted that dating can bring uncertainty and misunderstandings of what people want.

Young people’s words when they were talking about dating included: relaxed, casual, can see others, short-term, testing the waters and figuring one another out. In comparison, the key words young people used when they talked about relationships was commitment, exclusivity, trust and seriousness. Young people highlighted that they moved to a committed relationship by “having a conversation” to make sure both people are on the same page. Within discussions about relationships, some young people identified that even when people make agreements, people can have different intentions. In addition, a non-binary young person highlighted that monogamy does not have to be part of a committed relationship.

3.3 Thematic analysis

Eleven themes were produced from interaction with the data from the young people. These eleven themes are: “Immediate online pressures”; “The commonness of control”; “The power gap”; “Blinded by the butterflies”; “Opening their eyes”; “Treading a fine line”;

“The time to step in”; “Easier said than done”; “Feeling helpless”; “Seeking support”; and “It’s not normal...the real impact”.

These final themes are central to understanding what young people witness their friends experiencing in both casual and committed relationships, what stops young people recognising toxic behaviours, what assists and stops young people helping their best friends and what would make friends intervene and seek professional advice.

Theme 1: “Immediate online pressures”

This theme demonstrates the immediate demands and stresses young people are dealing with online when they start chatting, beginning relationships, or are generally engaging with the online spaces they navigate daily. Young people described experiencing constant and/or inappropriate comments on their looks and/or bodies, being asked for photos, including nudes, and pushy, fast-fire messages. Some young people noted the easiness of manipulation online, generating, a possible false, intimacy more rapidly. Those in the 13-16 year old group mentioned this issue more frequently than in the other age groups. Young people 20-24, confirmed dangers to those who are younger. A few gave accounts of unwanted people accessing girls and young women via direct messaging.

“I've experienced quite a lot of people being quite forward when they like slide into your DMs like, and it's happened quite a lot as well like with my partner's ten-year-old sister and it's quite scary when things like that happen”

Young person, 20-24 years

Several also noted, in former years, they worried about not being nice to someone but now realise that their safety and security is more important. Many described ‘ghosting’ or ‘blocking’ any communication or contacts they find troubling.

Theme 2: “The commonness of control”

The second theme reveals the ordinariness of toxic and controlling behaviours young people are experiencing, and seeing, around them in their friendship groups. Young people, across all age groups, identified and named a range of abusive behaviours such as emotional manipulation, gaslighting, coercive control, blackmailing, grooming and guilt tripping. Almost universally, young people said they saw the behaviours described in Vignette 1 frequently in their social and friendship groups. Behaviours mostly noticed were pressures around nudes, isolation from friendships, scrutinising what partners are wearing, checking partner’s phones and questions about where their time is spent and with whom.

“I think it's very common and very rarely spoken about! When someone asks for pictures of your outfit to ensure it's not too revealing”

Young person, 17-19 years

Many young people talked about these types of behaviours being “red flags” to further relationship problems. Although at a lesser extent, young people also recognised the escalating, and repeating pattern of controlling behaviours described in Vignette 2 from experiences around them. Several young people highlighted the psychological manipulation used to draw a person back into the relationship, including the use of

individuals threatening to harm themselves if a relationship ended. Discussions also revealed how manipulation is used in relationships to distance and isolate young people from their friendship groups. Within this theme, what became apparent is that young people were recognising and identifying with a range of non-physical abusive behaviours. In discussions, young people described a distorted narrative of commitment fuelled by the normalisation these behaviours in their peer groups and a need to fit in.

“I have friends who in the name of having a boyfriend, don't hang out with any other person...it's like they're in a cage...they love the cage for like two months...but after that they realise that, a cage is a cage no matter how designed and beautiful it is...and I think a lot of relationships with young people nowadays is like a cage. They're just trapping each other”

Young person, 13-16 years

Theme 3: “The Power Gap”

Theme 3 links to the previous two themes but highlights how a gap in age and maturity can allow a relationship to become manipulative very easily. Many young people, but especially the 13-16 age group, highlighted the age gap in the vignettes and picked up on the line, “treated her like an adult”. They felt this could be used to make somebody feel more mature when, in reality, they may be at an age where they are not fully emotionally developed.

“I've had friends in the past who like...oh, I've got a boyfriend who's older he treats me like I'm, I'm a real lady, and I'm, I'm mature. And, and then you look back, and you think that. Oh, my word, you were being groomed”

Young person, 13-16 years

Some young people in the 13-16 age group gave examples of how having a casual or serious relationship with someone who is older would be something to boast about, in people of a similar age. However, they also highlighted the opportunity for exploitation; and noted in the vignette (for younger age groups) the one character was under the age of consent.

Theme 4: “Blinded by the butterflies”

Discussions around the lyrics in the focus groups produced the fourth theme. It displays reasons why young people, who are in a relationship, may not be able to see the “red flags” or understand their friends concerns at certain behaviours. Some young people talked about ‘butterflies’ relating to feelings of love or nervousness/adrenaline. Others, especially in the 13-16 year old group, noted if someone is in their first relationship, they might confuse warning signs with the intensity of being in love. Similarly, some young people highlighted that compliments and attention received at the start of a relationship can create a feeling of excitement and intoxication whereby unhealthy behaviours are excused or ignored.

“Like your instincts are telling you that there's something wrong but...maybe you've never experienced love before and you're, no, this is what people have been talking about, this is what love is meant to feel like”

Young person 20-24

Key, throughout this theme, was how young people can confuse controlling behaviours with socially accepted ideas of love caring and protection. Many young people emphasised how initially controlling behaviours, such as intense jealousy or monitoring, can be as seen as complimentary.

Theme 5: "Opening their eyes"

Theme 5 illuminates how young people would go about helping a friend who they had concerns for in a relationship. Some young people noted they would tell their friends in a straightforward way about their partners worrying behaviours and suggest they should end the relationship. Others felt they would advise their friend to "be on guard" and keep a close watch on them.

However, predominantly, young people felt the best approach (some through actual experience) was to try to make their friend aware to what was happening but in a non-judgemental and non-condescending way. They felt this would help them recognise behaviours, and come to their own conclusions without shutting the conversation down.

"We had, like, a pros and cons list, so we went through all the pros and we went through all the cons and it, sort of, made her realise how, how, like, tipped the scales were, if that makes sense and we gave her advice and we, we tried to tell her that it wasn't, it wasn't, like, a normal relationship, like, the dynamic wasn't normal and it helped her understand"

Young person 13-16

Many young people stressed the importance of continuing to support their friend, whatever decisions they made, by championing their self-esteem and confidence. Several young people felt that a friend seeing or listening to advice from other sources could help 'open their eyes' as it would be seen as impartial and not a friend's personal judgement.

"The best thing that I did was to be there for her. Not try and pressure her into breaking up with him, because that's, kind of, being just as bad as him, but, like, to just be emotionally there for her and make sure you're there to comfort her whenever she's down"

Young person 13-16

Some young people believed that maintaining a relationship with the person causing harm would be helpful. They felt that this would prevent their friend being isolated and they could call out any unhealthy behaviours in front of their friend.

Theme 6: "Treading a fine line"

Following on from Theme 5, this theme describes the difficulties for young people if they have to approach a friend about their relationship. Many confirmed this is not an easy conversation to have and raised concerns about harming their friendship or making the situation worse.

"I think in theory we would all like to think that we would feel brave and talk to our friend, but in practice it can be so much harder!"

Young person 20-24

Several young people noted they had tried to advise a friend and it had not gone well. Young people in the 13-16 old groups seemed more nervous about intervening in these matters than those in older groups.

“I also would be uncertain about intervening in someone else's personal business even if they are at risk”

Young person 13-16

Young people noted one of the main problems is that friends can become defensive if they feel their relationship and/or their partner are being criticised. Subsequently, the person harming could use this against them and isolate their friend further. Some young people talked about their frustration at trying to help a friend if they do not listen to advice and felt there is nothing you can do unless that person is ready to leave. Several highlighted, what they saw as stubbornness, could lead to friendships breaking down. A few young people noted that a friend might genuinely feel there is nothing wrong with their relationship due to the normalisation of some behaviours and/or not understanding what constitutes a healthy versus unhealthy relationship.

“I have a friend which I think is in an abusive relationship but they don't think they are and that's, I think that's the worst situation possible because they just- they just think that this is normal and good for them...you can't really do anything about it. They'll just get offended if you tell them that this is domestic abuse that you are under”

Young person 13-16

Several young people implied that these situations are now so common there is, to some extent, compassion fatigue among young people around the subject.

Theme 7: “The time to step in”

Theme 7 reveals the point in a friend's relationship that would prompt young people to intervene. After reading the second vignette, many young people felt the story was worrying. Several young people highlighted the multiple forms of abuse described but for most young people, the trigger was the threat of physical violence. Some young people mentioned if they witnessed obviously harmful behaviours e.g., name-calling, offensive comments this would also be a sign of their friend needing help.

Some young people showed awareness of intervening safely to help or, mindfully getting their friend help if their phone or social media was being monitored. In other discussions, some young people highlighted that some young people might not fully understand the relationship, as they are still quite immature. Others noted young people of their generation might not seek help as they minimise these types of problems.

One young person noted that they wouldn't go to the trouble of stepping in if the person was experiencing gas lighting as, *“it's so strong they don't even realise it”*. This highlights the need for awareness of the psychological impact to young people of non-physical abuses and advice needed to support friends. As one young person commented:

“I feel like the things that would probably make us all probably step in it's probably too late by then. Like if she was hit or... it's probably a bit late by then because she's already had all of this going on. All the trauma to begin with”

Young person, 20-24

Theme 8: “Easier said than done”

This theme illustrates the complexities of getting out of a toxic relationship and shows young people recognising the importance of supporting a friend and being empathetic to why a person may stay in a relationship. Some young people highlighted that an insensitive response to a friend may isolate them at a time when they might be emotionally low. Several young people highlighted the influence an abuser has over their partner and the complications involved with the emotions and feelings you have developed for a person.

“It's not that easy. I don't think people get the power that an abuser has over the victim...it doesn't really understand that there's a whole, he's done so much work to manipulate her, he's done so much work to wear her down, to isolate her, she can't just leave like it's not that easy”

Young person 20-24

Theme 9: “Feeling helpless”

Theme 9 highlights the struggles for young people in helping a friend that is in a toxic relationship. Many young people noted if their friend was in the same position as described in part two of the vignette they would feel under pressure, not know where to go or what to do. Many used the word ‘helpless’. Several young people felt there is not enough education on how to help and other young people, who had actually been in that situation, confirmed they did not have the knowledge on how to help or where to go.

“I, I didn't have any knowledge, I didn't have any education on how to, on where to go if someone's going through a really unhealthy relationship and that. So, it's you just feel really helpless when you see your best friend in like a terrible relationship”

Young person 17-19

Some young people disclosed they would be fearful of getting involved and giving the wrong advice. One young person of 15 years revealed that she had tried to help a friend but, as a child, didn't have the skills and didn't feel it should be a minor's responsibility to manage another person's abusive relationship.

“I don't think, as a fifteen-year-old, I should have to govern the relationship of my friends...And as much as I want to help her, as a child myself, I don't have the skills to do that. I can't govern a seventeen-year-old that's manipulating and emotionally abusing someone else...I know that, it's just it was damaging for me; it's damaging for them”

Young person 13-16

There was a sense from several young people that even if a friend was at risk of physical harm, they would want to seek professional help e.g., from police as they would not feel able to deal with the situation. However, young people noted they would not do this if a friend refused or without their consent intensifying their powerlessness.

Theme 10: "Seeking support"

This theme concentrates on where young people would go to seek support to help a friend. There were various conversations around what young people would do and where they would go for help. Many, especially the younger age groups, said they would go to a trusted adult. Mainly noted were parents, siblings, or an adult family member. Some mentioned schoolteachers although there were mixed opinions over this due to concerns around confidentiality. Yet, although young people were mentioning trusted adults as contacts for support, some were uncertain where they would access them.

"That's the thing....trusted adults, but I'm not sure where they are"

Young person 13-16

As previous research has shown, some young people noted they would prefer to talk to their friends before a professional although discussions emerged where a few young people highlighted the possibility of gossip between networks.

When discussing professional support, young people listed a number of options including domestic abuse helplines, therapists, police, mental health websites and support from college or University. However, young people who were aware of professionals did seem to have personal or work related experience and/or parents who had knowledge of the subject through their own occupations. Within the discussions, there were also suggestions that although the young people were listing possible suggestions, in actuality, they would not use these options themselves.

Several young people highlighted benefits of talking to a professional, such as, as you would be hearing an independent point of view or you would have a formal record of complaint. However, again there were differing opinions on seeking professional help amongst the young people. Several noted issues about trust, with worries around other services that would become involved if you sought professional support. Other young people spoke about adults not believing or, taking them seriously. Crucially, others pointed out, if a friend said no to a suggestion of professional help, they would not go against their wishes.

Young people discussed searching for help online although the younger age groups didn't feel they would find suitable content for them. Some young people felt they wouldn't be able to find an answer online due to the complexity of the problem. Several young people had concerns about whether professional support would be culturally competent and services having cultural understanding.

"Like, I feel you can't really Google, "how do I get out of an abusive relationship because I'm a Muslim and nobody in my community can know"

Young person 20-24

Theme 11: "It's not normal...the real impact"

The final theme highlights the need to de-normalise the behaviours that young people are seeing in their social networks due to the trauma and impact this can have. Although the majority of young people stated the threat of physical abuse would trigger them to step in, several young people recognised the damage of the psychological abuse and controlling behaviours that appear to be widespread, and somewhat accepted, in their networks.

Some young people highlighted a worrying trend in schools where networks of boys and young men circulate nudes of girls and young women. When this happens, young people stressed it is young women that are shamed, not boys or young men; and the distressing impact this can have on them.

“It’s like a massive problem because every year when the children hit like, year nine... year ten, a group of boys they make group chats to circulate nudes in. So, it will even be boys from other schools and it’s like, it’s like a massive network thing that’s continuously happening year after year”

Young person 20-24

Several young people noted the impact of abuse on a person’s emotional and mental wellbeing. Other young people talked about the practical fears of leaving a toxic relationship, where someone will go and how overwhelming that situation can be.

“I just feel for...if someone's been putting you down and you did break up with them...you’re going to have that in your head that no one’s going to like me”

Young person 20-24

“He's saying like, I need to see you for lunch and he sometimes comes into [her] work as well but she's not working...but she's like, 'Oh I feel really bad because he says that he really loves me and that he'll do better.' I'm like, 'No, no that's b***s' but I think she is seeking some help because she has got to the point where she can't handle it anymore and her emotions are sort of getting in the way...I think she needs help from an outsider who knows what they're talking about, so not me”**

Young person 20-24

“And then she was just, I know, it was my fault and I was just, why do you think it's your fault and trying to make her think about it just a little bit more. Why did he say that to you? In my relationship, my partner doesn't shout at me, that's not a normal thing. And just getting some of those wheels turning about, hey, maybe this relationship isn't all good”

(Young person, 17-19)

4. Quantitative research phase

Partners in the project distributed a survey on their social media channels across England and Wales between June and July 2021. The survey was available in five languages including English, Welsh, Arabic, Polish and Somali.

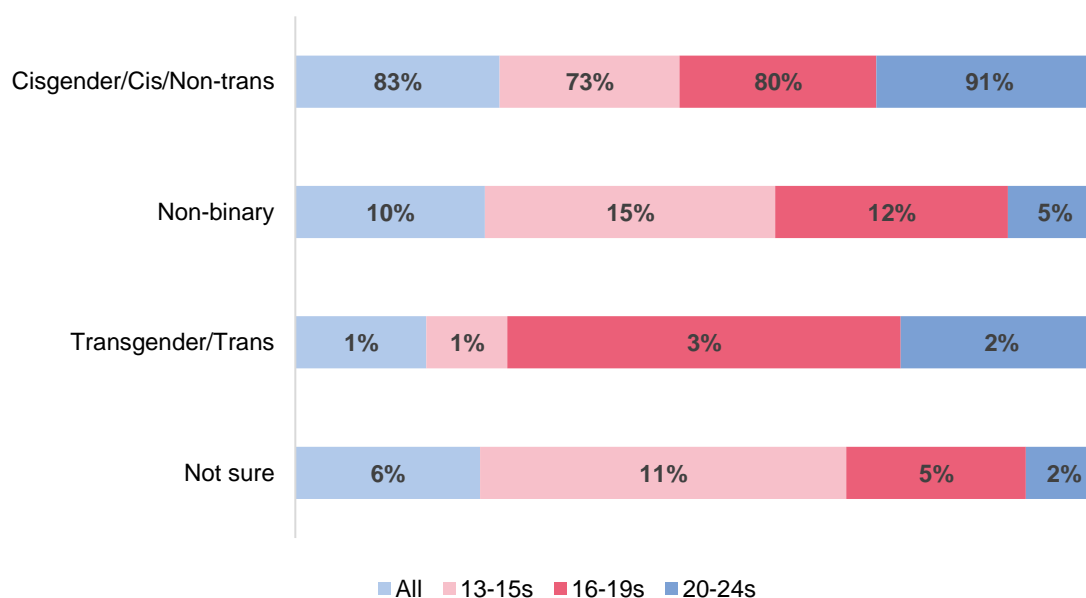
We received 786 responses to the survey however, 145 responses were removed due to young people not meeting the inclusion criteria for the project³ resulting in a sample of 641 girls, young women and non-binary young people.

4.1 Demographics of young people

The majority of young people were between 20 and 24 years old (41%) with a third between 16 and 19 years (32%) and just over a quarter (27%) between 13 and 15 years. The majority of responses were from young people in England (88%) and 12% from Wales.

Seven in 10 (70%) young people identified as White British (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish) and 30% were from a Black or minoritised ethnic group. Ten per-cent (10%) identified as a d/Deaf or disabled young person and one in 10 (10%) of young people identified as non-binary. A higher proportion of 13-15 year olds identified as non-binary than young people 16-19 and 20-24 (See Figure 5).

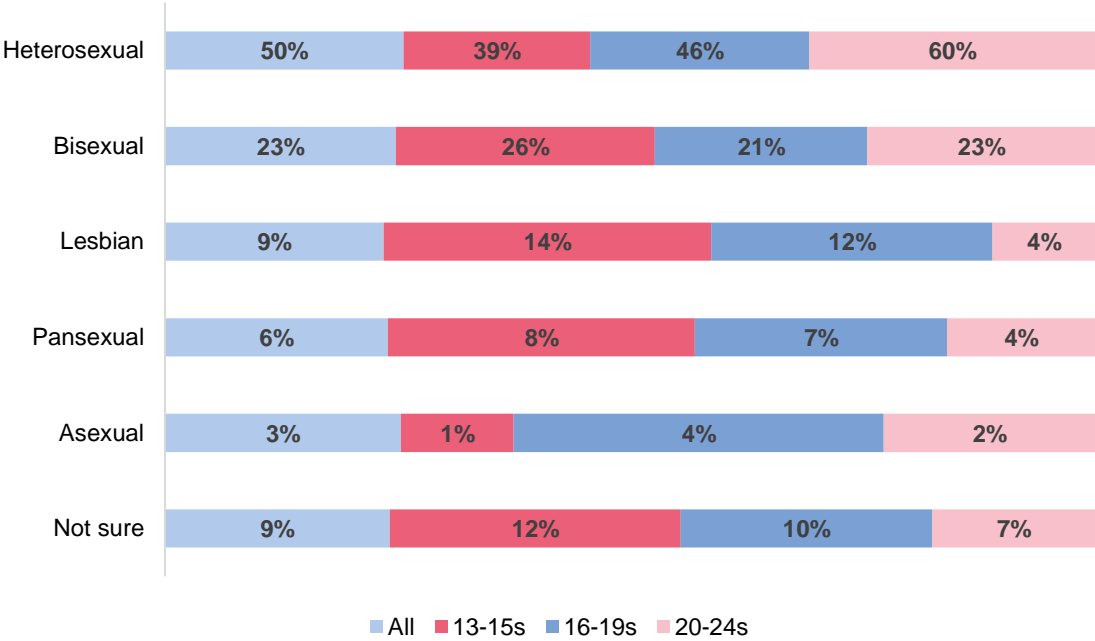
Figure 5: Gender identification of young people



Half of young people (50%) identified as heterosexual with nearly a quarter (23%) saying they were bisexual. Less young people aged between 13 and 15 years identified as heterosexual than those aged between 16 to 19 and 20 to 24 (See Figure 6).

³ That young people were between 13-24 years, were based in England or Wales, identified as female or non-binary young person.

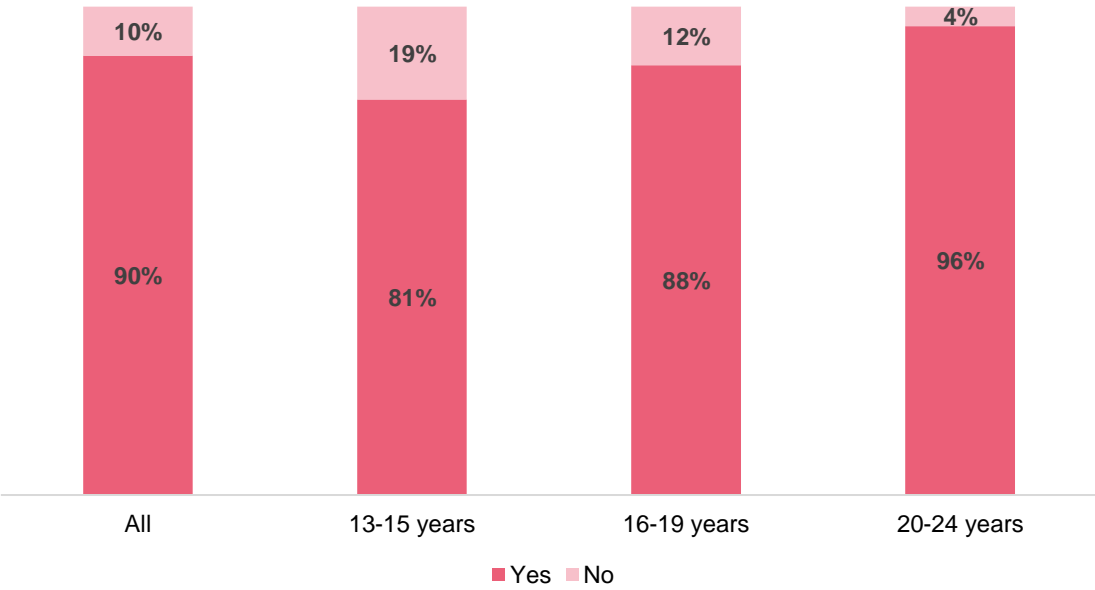
Figure 6: Sexuality of young people



4.2 Survey findings

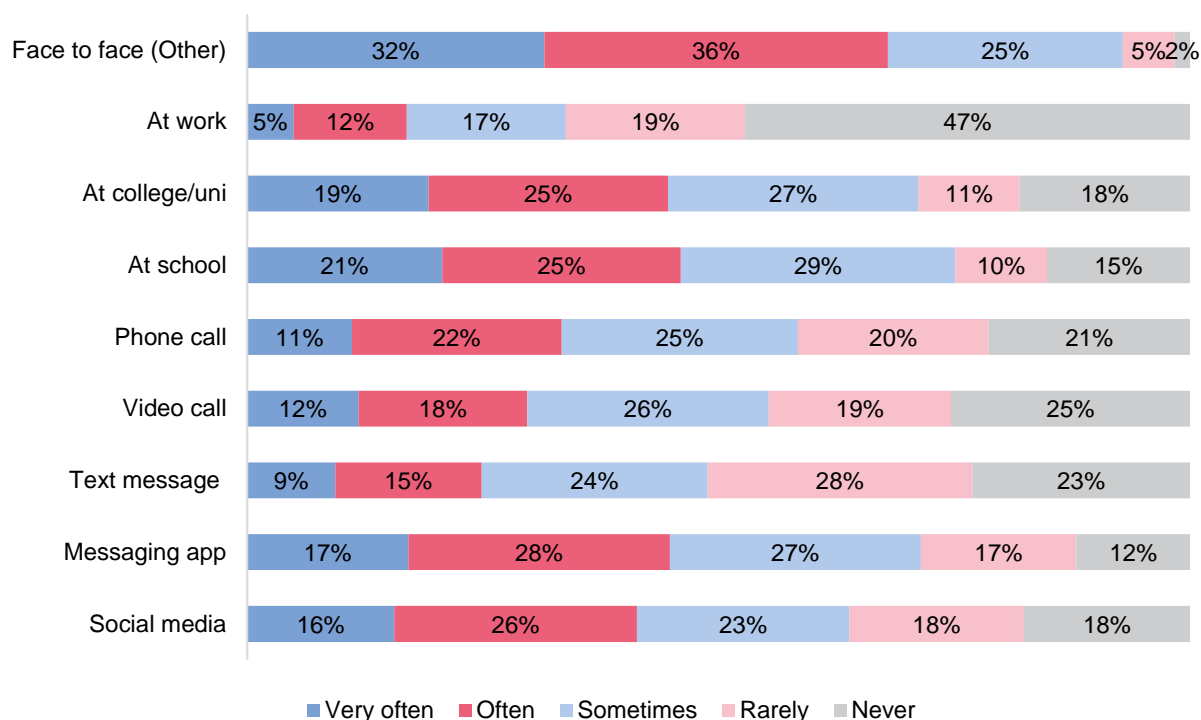
Nearly three-quarters of young people (71%) have seen, or have had a friend talk to them about behaviours that worry them in friends’ relationships. This was higher in those aged between 20 and 24 years (79%) and non-binary young people (78%). Of those, 9 in 10 (90%) young people had talked to a friend to try to help them with a toxic or unhealthy relationship. Young people aged 13-15 years were less likely to have talked to a friend than those in the older age groups (See Figure 7). Young people from a black or minoritised ethnic group were more likely *to not talk* to a friend than young people who identified as white British (14% vs 8%).

Figure 7: Young people who had talked to a friend, by age



Over two-thirds (68%) of young people said they would *'very often or often'* talk to their friend about this topic in a face-to-face situation (other than school, college/university or at work). Nearly half said they would *'very often or often'* talk at school (46%), via a Messaging App (45%) or at college/university (44%). Four in 10 young people (42%) said they would talk *'very often or often'* via social media. Young people were least likely to say they would talk to their friends at work with nearly half (47%) saying they would *'never'* talk there. Non-binary young people were more likely to talk *'very often or often'* via social media (63%) or Messaging App (61%) than the overall sample (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: Where young people talk to their friends about toxic relationships



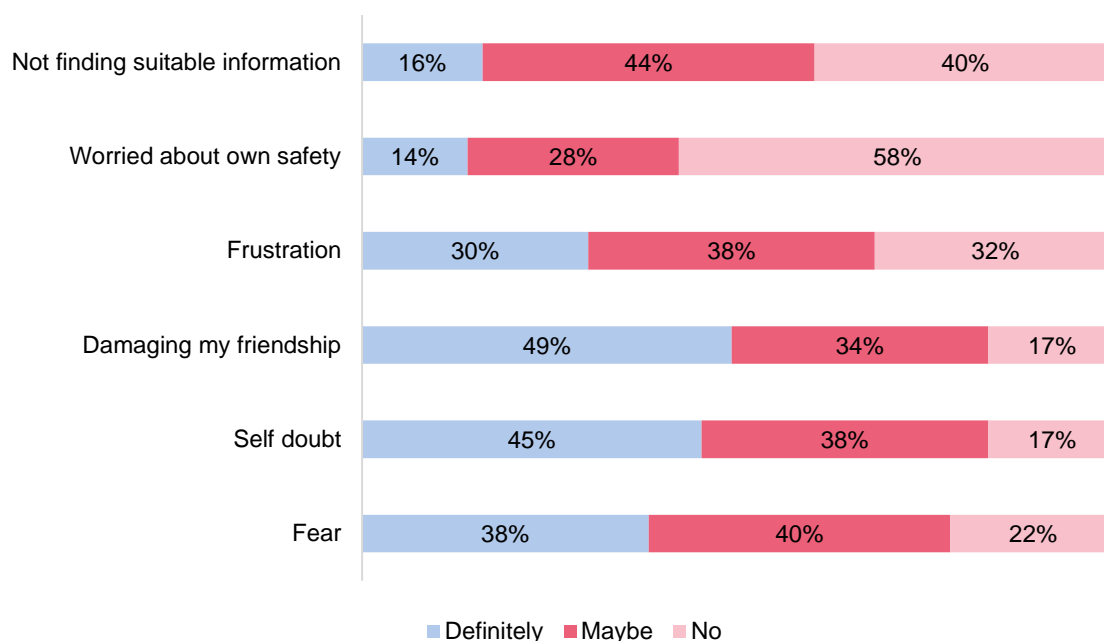
“If I am particularly worried about a friend, I will always try to talk face to face but I would generally talk about the concept of toxic relationships casually over message”

Young person 20-24

We asked young people what would be a key barrier/s to them trying to help a friend in a toxic relationship. Over three-quarters of young people said damaging their friendship (e.g. arguments, being pushed away, 'ghosting', etc) (83%) and self-doubt (e.g. getting it wrong, not understanding the situation) (83%) would *'definitely or maybe'* prevent them. Fear (e.g. making things worse, not wanting the responsibility) was also a major factor with 78% of young people saying this was *'definitely or maybe'* a barrier.

Over two-thirds (68%) of young people said frustration (e.g. my friend not listening to advice) would *'definitely or maybe'* be a reason for stopping them talking. Six in 10 (60%) young people felt not finding any suitable information would *'definitely or maybe'* hinder conversation and four in 10 (42%) would *'definitely or maybe'* not talk to a friend, as they would be worried about their own safety (See Figure 9).

Figure 9: Barriers to young people talking to friends



When considering the barriers that would *‘definitely’* stop young people from talking to their friends, there were some differences between groups. A higher proportion of non-binary young people said self-doubt would *‘definitely’* be a barrier than Cisgender/Cis young people (56% vs 44%). More young people from a Black or minoritised ethnic group than white British said frustration would *‘definitely’* stop them (39% vs 27%); and Black or minoritised young people would *‘definitely’* be more worried about their own safety than white British young people (22% vs 11%).

Young people were asked what would make them seek support from a trained adult (e.g. a police officer, teacher or youth worker) or domestic abuse expert. The majority of young people said a friend being threatened with physical harm (79%) or being physically harmed (92%) would *‘definitely’* make them seek support. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of young people noted a friend saying they were scared would *‘definitely’* make them search for a trained adult and over half (54%) if a friend’s mental health was suffering. Fewer young people said seeing a friend shouted at, insulted or put down (33%) or a friend experiencing controlling behaviours (25%) would *‘definitely’* prompt them to look for professional support (See Figure 10). Open-ended comments from young people on this question reveals their mistrust, and negative experiences, of seeking support and that they would not seek support without their friend’s consent.

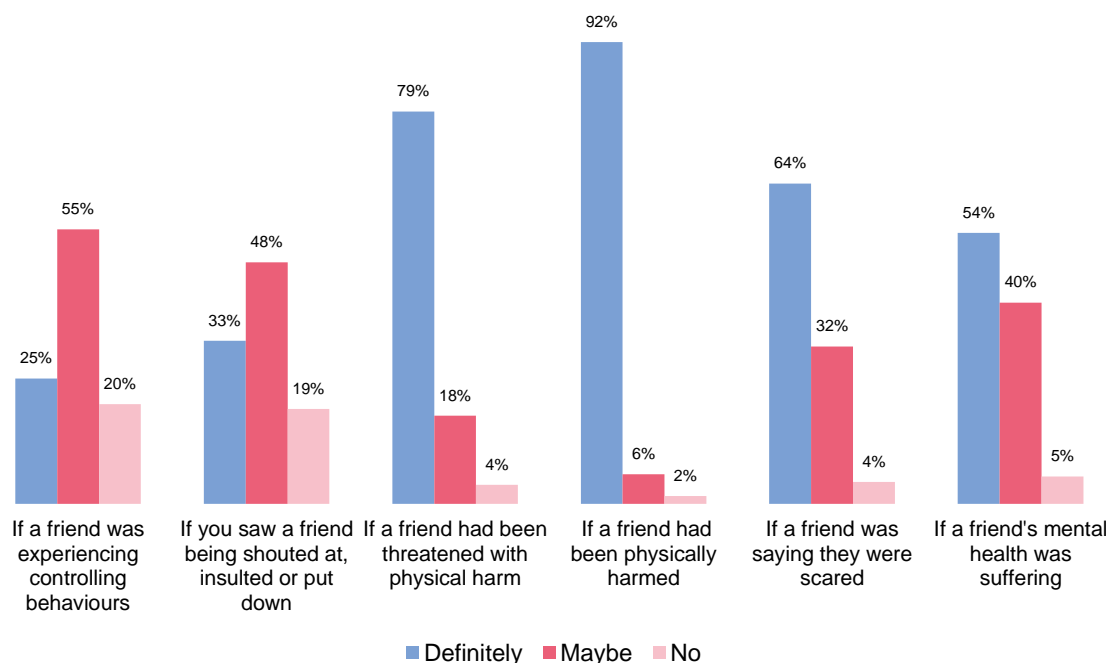
“A few years ago I sought help for my own toxic relationship related to these issues and didn’t receive any help in return. I told both my college and the police and they didn’t do anything. I really hope these issues will start to be taken more seriously”

Cisgender young person, 20-24

“I have trauma related to the safeguarding process and absolutely don't trust it. I tried to use it to get help for my friend when I was younger, and it made everything so much worse. All it led to was my friend having even less control over what was happening”

Non-binary young person, 17-19

Figure 10: Seeking support from a trained adult or domestic abuse expert



“I would only do so if they want me to. Sometimes involving adults makes problems worse”

Non-binary young person, 16-19

“It depends on the severity of the above points and the friend's wishes. I wouldn't feel comfortable disclosing information about them to adults who might be too reactive if my friend wasn't ready for massive interventions”

Cisgender young person, 20-24

Responses from young people revealed they are experiencing frequent online harassment when chatting and linking with other young people online. Over three-quarters of young people (83%) have experienced unwanted personal or sexual comments. For nearly half of young people (46%) this was *very often or often*. This was more frequent in the 20-24 year olds but a substantial amount of 13-15s had faced this (66%) (See Figure 11).

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of young people had been asked for nudes. For a third (32%) of young people, this was *very often or often*. Again, those in the older age groups had experienced this more but over half (57%) of 13-15s had been subjected to these requests and nearly a quarter (24%) said this was *very often or often* (See Figure 12).

Having unwanted people message them was also something young people are experiencing regularly with eight in 10 (84%) reporting this has happened to them. Four in 10 (42%) said this happened *very often or often*. This had occurred for nearly all 16-19s (91%) and nine in 10 20-24s (89%). It was also common for 13-15 year olds with two-thirds (66%) saying this takes place (See Figure 13).

Young people are also receiving unwanted sexual images/nudes. Seven in 10 (70%) young people have received these with over a quarter (27%) saying this is *very often or often*. Once more, this is happening more frequently with 16-19s (77%) and 20-24s (74%) but a concerning amount of 13-15s (57%) are revealing receiving these unsolicited pictures (See Figure 14).

Figure 11: Unwanted personal/sexual comments

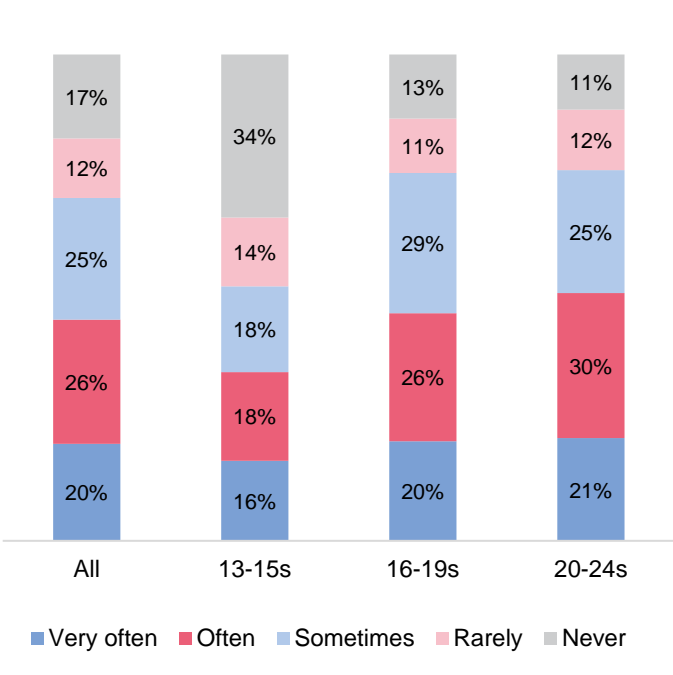


Figure 12: Being asked for nudes

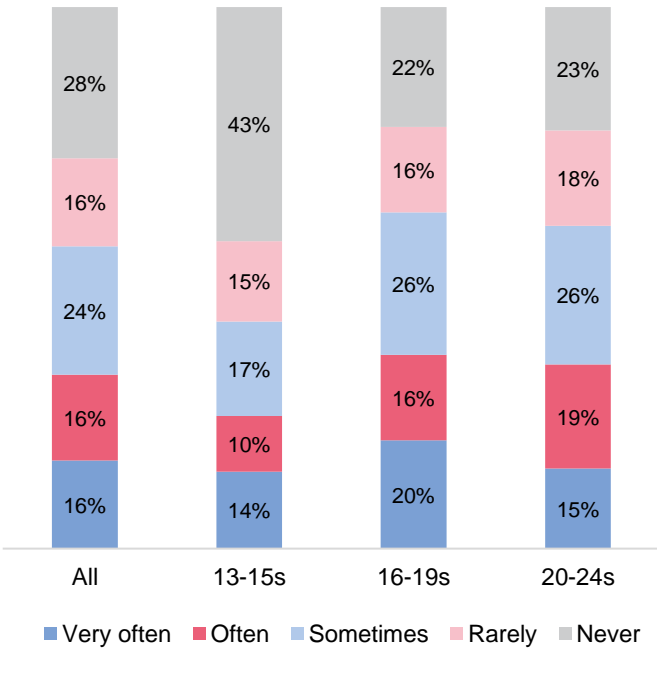


Figure 13: Unwanted people messaging you

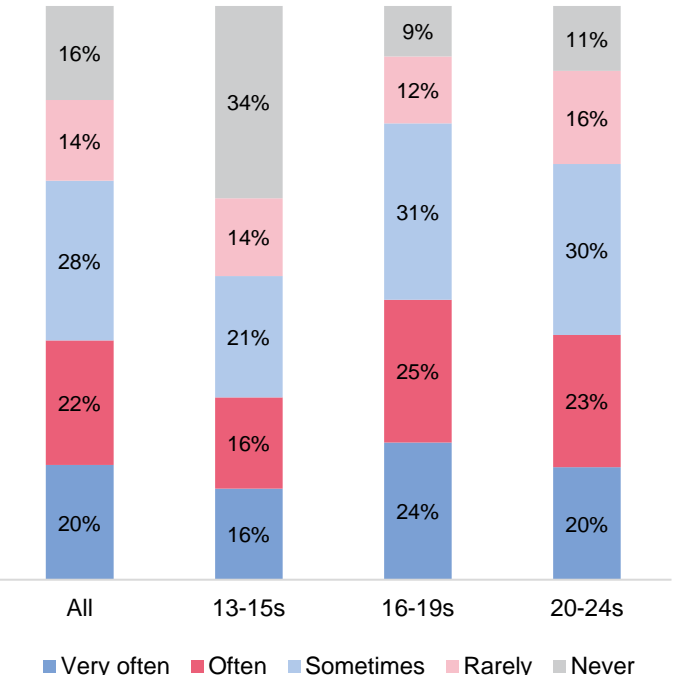
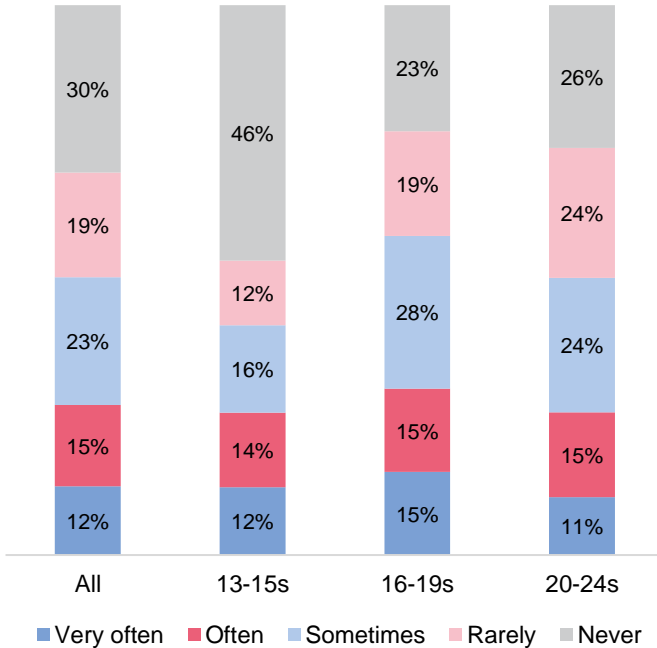


Figure 14: Receiving unwanted sexual images/nudes



“You can see, can’t you, why young people would get fed up if they’re hearing this constantly and they’re still not trying to help themselves.

But I think that’s the part of lack of education, then, as well around it, and the normalising it. Because that’s when you think... you’ve had enough...you walk away and then fed up of hearing it, sort of thing”

Young person 17-19

Appendix 1

Brooke and Georgie: Part 1

Brooke (17) and Georgie (22) met online. They started FaceTiming each other and meeting up. Brooke thought Georgie was kind, caring and loving – and treated her like an adult.

After a few weeks, Georgie started asking Brooke to send nudes. Brooke wasn't sure but Georgie said it would make them closer. Georgie said, "if you don't feel the same, we may need some time apart".

Brooke wanted to buy Georgie a surprise present, so she turned her location off in Snapchat. When Brooke saw Georgie, Georgie started shouting and calling her names saying she was cheating. When Brooke tried to walk away, Georgie grabbed her wrist and looked really angry.

Brooke began to see more of Georgie and spent less time hanging out with her friends so they could stay together and be happy. Georgie asked Brooke to send pictures of what she was wearing every day as Georgie didn't want others staring at her, because she was special, and they were in love.

Lyrics - "Oh it's funny how the warning signs can feel like they're butterflies" (Halsey, Graveyard)

Brooke and Georgie: Part 2

Brooke and Georgie had been dating for nearly 6 months. With friends around, Georgie would be nice but when they were on their own, Georgie could yell and swear at Brooke over nothing. Sometimes Georgie would make fun of her body but when Brooke got upset, Georgie would say, "lighten up, it was just a joke".

Brooke didn't like the way Georgie was treating her, so she broke it off. Georgie constantly sent Brooke texts and called her crying, begging for her to go back, saying "I'm sorry, I'll change, I can't live without you" - and they got back together.

Brooke started to see less and less of her friends as Georgie said, "they don't like me". To reassure Georgie she wasn't speaking to others, Brooke handed over the passcode to her phone and Facebook account.

Sometimes Georgie would pressure Brooke to do things she didn't want to do. If she said no, Georgie would ignore her for days. Brooke felt confused, and was worried about upsetting Georgie, because the last time they had a row, Georgie threatened to hit her. Brooke told her friend that she was scared but her friend said, "just tell Georgie, you're dumped".

Appendix 2

Can you talk about the typical ways young people your age get approached and start chatting/linking?

Prompt: What makes you want to chat further?

Prompt: What puts you off or makes you feel uncomfortable? How do you deal with that?

How would you describe dating versus being in a relationship?

Prompt: What are other in between connections you can think of? How are they different?

Prompt: How does dating change to a relationship?

What are your thoughts about Brooke and Georgie's story so far?

Prompt: Is their story common for young people when they first start seeing each other?

Prompt: What other behaviours can happen when young people start seeing each other that aren't mentioned in Brooke and Georgie's story?

What do you think these lyrics are describing?

Going back to Brooke and Georgie's story, if Brooke was your friend, what would you think about Georgie's behaviour?

Prompt: Are there any behaviours you would have found concerning?

Prompt: Would you talk to her or offer any advice about Georgie's behaviour?

Prompt: What would stop you talking to her or giving advice?

What are your thoughts about Brooke and Georgie's story now?

Prompt: Is there anything happening that you think is worrying?

Prompt: What do you think of Brooke's friend's reply to her?

If your friend told you this was happening to them, how would it make you feel?

Prompt: Would you be worried for a friend if they told you this was happening to them?