Kidspeak

Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

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The initial idea for *Kidspeak* came out of the successful *Womanspeak* online consultation event that Women’s Aid ran in partnership with Margaret Moran MP, the All-Party Group on Domestic Violence and Hansard in 2000. Thanks go to Margaret Moran, e-Quality Networks, and Accenture for all their support and input into *Kidspeak*, and to those advisors who had input to the initial project development; John Carr, Davina James-Hanman and representatives from Barnardos, NSPCC and Miss Dorothy.

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And finally, our enormous thanks to the children and young people who contributed to *Kidspeak* - your voices are important to us.

Nicola Harwin CBE
Chief Executive
Women’s Aid
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

Foreword

For 35 years, Women’s Aid has been working to end domestic violence against women and children. Women’s Aid has played a key national role not only in helping develop crucial support services for children and young people affected by domestic violence but also in raising awareness of children’s experiences and needs. Through ongoing research, consultation and involvement with children and young people, we ensure that children’s voices are heard in the development of national policy and good practice to ensure that children are best protected and supported.

The facts about children and domestic violence are stark: in 90% of domestic violence incidents, children are in the same or the next room; child abuse is present in between 40 – 70% of cases of woman abuse; up to 70% of the 30,000 children staying in Women’s Aid refuges each year have also been abused themselves. The effects of domestic violence on children are dramatic and lifelong so our work with children and young people could not be more important.

As part of our work as the national domestic violence charity and the co-ordinating body for over 500 local services, Women’s Aid co-ordinates and supports a national network of children’s support workers, and has produced a wide range of resources both for those working with children affected by domestic violence and for children themselves. In 2005 we launched www.thehideout.org.uk, the first national domestic violence website for children and young people.

In 2004, we ran the national Listening to Children campaign to coincide with the passage of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Bill and the Children Bill through Parliament. As part of the campaign, hundreds of children who had lived with domestic violence, sent postcards with their statements, drawings and photographs to Margaret Hodge, Minister for Children, Young People and Families. In the three years since the Listening to Children campaign, we have seen key changes in responses to domestic violence, both through the government National Delivery Plan and in domestic violence legislation, policy and practice.

We therefore wanted to find out what children and young people now thought about domestic violence and what their experiences are in 2007. In 2000, we ran a successful online project called Womanspeak with Margaret Moran MP and The Hansard Society, where women contributed their experiences of domestic violence to a messageboard and engaged in discussion with MPs. We drew on this idea to develop a new partnership with Margaret Moran, this time in liaison with e-Quality Networks (supported by Accenture), and, thanks to funding for Women’s Aid from The Body Shop, we have been able to set up a similar online project for children and young people entitled Kidspeak. The Kidspeak messageboards gave the opportunity for young people to speak to both each other and to adults who were in key roles that had influence over children’s lives. Their feelings and views are reflected in the following report, grouped into key themes which echo some of the concerns raised by children three years ago: the need for information, specialist support and services, and safety from their abuser.
A key message from this project was the value to children and young people who had experienced domestic violence of being able to share experiences and talk to each other. As a result we now intend to provide an ongoing messageboard facility for children and young people as part of www.thehideout.org.uk to give children and young people who have experienced domestic violence the opportunity to communicate with each other and to be consulted on their needs on a regular basis.

Nicola Harwin CBE
Chief Executive
Women's Aid
Message from Margaret Moran MP

Throughout my political career one of my driving passions has been e-democracy; that is, how we can use technology to enable the largely unheard show up on the radar of policy makers and politicians. Add to that a keen interest in ICT (As Chair of the European Information Society Group I sit at the cutting edge of interactions between the IT industry and Parliament) and the safety of women and children – and that’s how my interest in Kidspeak was born.

It must be remembered that ICT is a great enabler and not just a problem. In recent years the expansion of cheap broadband services bringing the online world into practically every child’s bedroom has rightly brought concerns about online safety and the risks associated with exposing them to sexually explicit sites/images and vulnerability to online predators. Concern for the latter has understandably overshadowed the considerable benefits that the internet can bring to children as powerful tool for research, socialising and communication. Fundamentally, it was my desire to harness the power of technology and the internet as a force for good which provided the context for the genesis of this latest online project.

As founder and co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence I am painfully aware that more needs to be done to protect children in this area. According to the Department of Health, at least 750,000 children witness domestic violence each year. Further research suggests that around half that number are likely to have been subjected to direct physical abuse themselves.

The aim of Kidspeak was to provide a safe, secure and confidential online environment where children and young people affected by domestic violence can to share their stories/experiences with senior police officers, judges and parliamentarians. As Women’s Aid can attest, the effect of domestic violence on children is extensive and insufficiently recognised (a view shared by a range of children’s charities with whom we liaised during the planning phases of this project - and to whom my thanks are due). Effects can range from self-harm and unusually introverted behaviour to anorexia and truancy. Whatever the observable symptoms, it is abundantly clear that the terrible trauma experienced by children witnessing violence need to be more widely recognised and addressed by policy makers. I was pleased to be able to amend legislation to require courts to, for the first time, take into account the effect of domestic violence on children. But despite our undeniable progress in this area, we still know that more recognition, support and resources are desperately needed.

Working with Women’s Aid (and supported by The Body Shop, Accenture and eQuality Networks) we have enabled the voices of those affected to be heard by those who have the position and influence to tackle the issue.

I firmly believe this report will provide us with a powerful lever to persuade Government (and others with a role in assisting children) to take further action to protect and support young people from the threat of domestic violence.

For those of you who might think I’m being overly optimistic – there is a clear precedent for this in Womanspeak – the first ever online consultation between parliamentarians and survivors of domestic violence. This groundbreaking scheme led to many of the report’s subsequent recommendations being incorporated into Government legislation designed to tackle domestic violence.
**Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence**

*Kidspeak* is one of the first ever online consultations in this sensitive area to involve young people and parliamentarians. The project has served as a sounding board for children across the UK who have been exposed to domestic violence. It also presents a real chance to present policy makers with incontrovertible first-hand evidence gathered directly from those affected. *Kidspeak* is squarely aimed at showing young people two things. That they are not alone - and they do have a voice. Our job now is to ensure policymakers listen and act.

Margaret Moran MP
Introduction and development

Introduction to Kidspeak

Following on from our successful Womanspeak consultation in 2000\(^1\), Women’s Aid, together with Margaret Moran MP, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Chair of e-Quality Networks, decided to develop a similar on-line consultation for children and young people. One of the key issues raised by those contributing to Womanspeak was their concern about the effects of domestic violence on their children. In 90% of families where there is domestic violence, the children are in the same or the next room\(^2\) – meaning that at least 750,000 children witness domestic violence each year\(^3\); and nearly three-quarters of children on the ‘at risk’ register live in households where it occurs.

The Kidspeak on-line consultation with children and young people was developed with the help of funding from The Body Shop, and took place throughout the months of June and July 2007. We wanted to give children and young people the opportunity to talk about their experiences, to share them with each other, and in so doing to realise that many others had been through similar experiences. Through doing this, we aimed to identify the needs of children and young people who experience domestic violence, including their need for:

- additional local service provision;
- changes in government policy and practice;
- resources and services available to them.

Giving vulnerable children and young people the chance to speak out in a semi-public arena was both exciting and potentially risky: we needed to ensure that those who took part were safe from potential exploitation, and that they felt able to trust the process and share their feelings and experiences in this way.

Two separate secure message boards were set up, with the help and technical support of Tempero\(^4\), and linked to The Hideout, a website produced by Women’s Aid and providing information and support for children and young people affected by domestic violence (www.thehideout.org.uk). One message board was available for public access, and the other was private (by invitation to domestic violence services, children’s charities, and similar organisations). The private message board also gave them the opportunity to ask questions and get responses from MPs, judges and magistrates from family courts, officers from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service\(^5\) (CAFCASS), and other decision makers, who were invited to take part. All messages were pre-moderated – that is, they were checked by trained moderators before being available to read on the site\(^6\). Both message boards were open for 24 hours a day for just over eight weeks from Monday 4\(^{th}\) June 2007, and were

\(^1\) Womanspeak was an internet consultation with survivors of domestic violence, and took place throughout March 2000. See Bossy, J. and Coleman, S. (2000).

\(^2\) British Medical Association (1998).

\(^3\) Department of Health (2003).

\(^4\) Tempero is a highly trusted company working in this field. They have previously worked with the NSPCC, providing a message board for children and young people to share concerns about abuse. They also provided relevant Women’s Aid staff with moderator training and support.

\(^5\) CAFCASS is the organisation which looks after the interests of children involved in family proceedings and advises the courts on what it considers to be in the children’s best interests, if parents are unable to reach agreement on residence or contact after separation.

\(^6\) See Appendix 1 for further information.
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

publicised through our own networks and those of children’s charities, other domestic violence organisations, and appropriate agencies in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

The information we received will be used to help children and young people who experience domestic violence, and in particular to:

- inform the development of new resources;
- improve and increase service provision;
- inform further development of The Hideout website and other on-line services;
- raise public awareness of the need for improved services and resources for children and young people.

This report summarises the main themes evident in the messages we received, and is illustrated extensively with direct quotes from the children and young people who participated. For further information about how we undertook this consultation, please see Appendix 1.

Development of Kidspeak: The two message boards

The private message board was divided into three broad discussion areas:

- Domestic violence: What are your views?
- How has your life changed?
- Getting help and protection: How was it for you?

Within each discussion area, there were a number of specific topics or “threads”, which were added to throughout the four weeks of Kidspeak. Our intention was to respond to and develop the interests and concerns of the participants, while at the same time keeping the discussion on track and relevant to the overall aims of this project.

The public message board had one general discussion area, “Domestic violence: What are your views?” within which there were separate threads as above.

Participation in Kidspeak

Invitations to participate in Kidspeak were sent out to all domestic violence organisations listed on our database, to the three other domestic violence federations within the UK, and to a number of children’s charities. These organisations in turn distributed information via their own networks. Organisations were invited to contact us to obtain user names, passwords and instructions so that they could support the children and young people they worked with to access the private message board. We also sent information, and a poster advertising the public Kidspeak message board to a number of other organisations, including Connexions, CAFCASS and domestic violence fora. Some of these organisations then distributed this information through their own networks.

A total of 43 young contributors - three-quarters of them girls - posted 100 messages on the private message board (and a further unspecified number read others’ messages but did not respond). The public message board was accessed by a much larger number – but only 62
messages were posted. From the partial information we have, it seemed that boys were slightly in the majority among contributors to the public board, and their average age appeared to be slightly higher. Overall, 63% of participants were girls, and 37% boys. See Tables in Appendix 1 for a detailed breakdown.

Twenty-five “public figures” registered for Kidspeak (the majority being MPs), and nine of these contributed at least one message (a total of 25 messages). Messages were also posted by the Kidspeak Host (a member of Women’s Aid staff) who helped to move the discussions forward and gave information on further sources of support if this seemed to be appropriate.
Using the *Kidspeak* messageboard

**Themes**

A number of different themes emerged over the two months – not always corresponding to those we had identified at the outset. Some of the children and young people initially gave accounts of the abuse they had experienced or witnessed. Others talked about their feelings and concerns – particularly about going to court, and whether that would mean they would have to have contact with the abusing parent. Some sent sympathetic messages to other children and young people, and some – particularly on the public board – also gave advice, or said what they would do. The following themes were particularly evident:

- Domestic violence can have long-term effects on children witnessing it.
- Children are often much more aware of what is going on than their parents think.
- Domestic violence and direct child abuse were, for some participants, directly linked.
- Children and young people said they often did not feel listened to or believed – particularly by those (such as social workers, judges, CAFCASS officers, etc.) who were supposedly there to help them.
- Many children and young people did not want to see the abusive parent – or not yet.
- Children and young people were very supportive of each other.
- Outreach and support groups, where children and young people could meet others who had had similar experiences, were much appreciated.
- Some older children and young people were very critical of current policies and procedures, which they felt had not served them or their families well.
- Safety was very important for all the children and young people.
- Children and young people felt safe in a refuge – and this generally outweighed the occasional discomfort and disruption of moving away from home.

Some of these themes are discussed in more detail in the following sections. We have also quoted at length from the messages posted by the children and young people, as we believe that their own words are often more powerful than any summary we could provide.

**Domestic violence and its effects on children and young people**

While children and young people are very often adversely affected by living with domestic violence, these effects vary a lot, and are mediated by a number of factors which either act protectively or alternatively increase the child’s vulnerability. Having a supportive relationship with the non-abusing parent, and access to other sources of support, can be very helpful; and those children and young people who already have high self esteem, and are able to employ a range of problem solving approaches and coping strategies, are least likely to suffer serious long-term effects.

The children and young people who chose to access the *Kidspeak* message boards were likely to be among those for whom the experience of living with domestic violence was most salient – either because it was very recent, or because they had been affected by their experiences.

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8 This has been established by a number of research studies: e.g. see Radford and Hester (2007); Kelly, 1994 in Mullender and Morley (1994).
9 See Radford and Hester (2007); see also Hester et al. (2007); Shenton (2006).
long-term. However, those who had access to the private messageboard were in touch with services which could provide them with support. In most cases, their mothers also had support from domestic violence services, and may therefore have been in a better position to help their children.

Parents might have tried to hide what was going on from their children, or to tell them it was nothing to worry about; however, children and young people in general are often much more aware of what is going on than their parents think:

"My mum also hits my dad sometimes. but itz cause my dad hits her loads and shouts at her and screams. He thinks i dont know cae he tells me that itz my mums fault wen she cries. I dont think itz my mums fault cause my dad always hits her loads and makes her and me really scared..."
Siobhan

"I was really scared when I first heard my Mum and Dad shouting. I was afraid to go downstairs, and when I realised it was a fight I didn't know what to do. I tried to forget all about it and go to sleep, but I couldn't because of all the things in my head. I didn't know what to do - should I say something, stand up and speak out, or lay here and let it unfold? One night I went downstairs but they told me to go back to my room, and when I woke up the next morning it was all back to normal again. I didn't know what to do..."
Silas, 11yrs

Children and young people who have lived with domestic violence say they still find it hard to trust anybody, and they feel anxious or depressed, and may have health problems10. The following are among many such comments:

"... It's finding the person to trust that is hardest. I should also stand up for myself more too."
Marcus, 17yrs

"... i jump and have a panic attack wwn wva i see the same casr and i have nightmares all the time tooo!"
Natalie

"i've suffered domestic violence through the whole of my life..... i've rebelled against my mum through it, although it was not her fault... she has had bad partners, i use to think it was ok to hit your parents un till i went to a different place... it really has effected my life, i even went into a relationship with a lad and he mentally abused me.. i've found a nice lad who treats me right but im too scared to trust him, he undersatnds a little bit of it but not all... i'm not over it all..."
Elisa 18 yrs

"... my heart jumps when i see a familiar car to my dad's one. it's horrible..."
Daisy

"i have been living with my brothers dad for about 7 years now and for the past 6 years i have experienced mental and physical abuse almost daily... being hurt is something i can stand ... its driving me to self harm ... yesterday my boyfriend noticed a mark on my right forearm, he confronted me about it and all i could do was change the subject, i was embarrassed by the subject, i felt it was my fault. I am angry at my brothers dad for making me feel this way...."
Samara

10 See Radford and Hester (2007).
Some children and young people are (understandably) very angry:

- *Tara, 8 yrs*
  
  _I am mad with my daddy for hurting my mummy and me and my sisters and brother…._

- *Callum, 13 yrs*
  
  _I’m a very argumentative person, and I shout a lot at people (if they annoy me)…_

- *Miranda, 18 yrs*
  
  _I feel safe when my father is locked away some day… but the bully wins legally in secret courts. Now there are many bullies in society as a result of this. So then where is safe. Judges, etc have allowed this to happen.WHY???

- *Lee*
  
  _when I felt unhappy/ sad, I made myself feel better by punching my hand or my pillow or my teddy…_

- *Daisy*
  
  _i hate my dad so much i don’t say "dad" any more, I say "you-know-who". i hate my dad for hurting my mum… i’d like to talk to my dad one last time and annoy him so badly. b4 i left i kept bugging him and saying that i wanted to dye my hair and he screamed at me and hit me. so when i talk 2 him 4 the last time, i’m gonna say "i dyed my hair!" just 2 annoy him! i hate talking about him, he’s so grrrr! stupid man!

On the other hand, some children and young people felt they had come through the experience of domestic violence feeling more positive about the future, and even having gained some indirect benefits, in terms of greater maturity and understanding:

- *Ryan*
  
  _I've had to move home and schools due to domestic violence… if i had to give you advice i would tell you to just hope for the best because if you get away from the domestic violence then you can move on with your life without all the stuff going on in your household , ever since i've left home with my mum through domestic violence im more happy then i was when we lived there because we get on better and we don't get anymore violence in mothers relationships so just look forward to moving away from it.

- *Jessica, 15yrs*
  
  _i feel more mature for going through such an experience and i don’t think i would be the same person that i am today! to all those going through domestic violence you can come through it for the better!

**Domestic violence and child abuse**

As research has established, domestic violence and direct child abuse were linked in a number of cases; for example:

- *Jay*
  
  _my dad used 2 hit me and my sisters and every week he used 2 come home drunk and hit me and my sisters… he hurts my mum and us and i feel sad i hate him and i dont want 2 see him again.

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12 It is possible that some of those accessing the public messageboard interpreted “domestic violence” as child abuse; i.e. a few of them may not have witnessed abuse of a parent or other adult family member, but had directly experienced abuse themselves.
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i have been hit by my dad, i have been strangled by my uncle, i have been kicked by my dad and my uncle and i have been pushed by my uncle … i had to sit in the room while my brother and my sisters had to go out, i have been slapped by my uncle, my uncle pinched my cheek and bit my cheek really hard…
Tyler

me dad mentally, physically and sexually abused me. menatlly and physically abuse my mum, big sister, me and my wee sister. i left him 2 years ago because of it. i have a wee brother aswell. my big sister … nearly died when she was 6 weeks old in a cot death but i think my dad tried to kill her but i cant prove it. i find i need more help because i suffer from post traumatic stress disorder because of my dad…
Zetta, 17 yrs

my mams boyfriend always hitted me and my mam and in the end the police got involved i was scared of him…
India, 9yrs.

… also my dad and both my uncles used to beat up my 8yr old brother…
Daisy

i use to get sexually abused my dad too. i no wot its like. my dad got arrested for child abuse … in the end me and my brother called [a helpline] they listened to what we had to say. i was gob smacked that my brother was abused… things are starting to get back to normal now (whatever normal is !!!!!). … no i listened til i called [a helpline] they helped me out got me put into care coz no1 luved me. now im luved by every 1
Dina, 12 yrs

My Dad had to move out of our house because he was the nasty one. i am not allowed to see my dad because he cracked my head open. i am glad that my dad doesn’t see me anymore because he was the one who hurt me and my brothers…
Maya

Sometimes, as in this case, realising that her children were also being abused could be the final straw, resulting in the mother leaving the perpetrator:

… He kicked me badly one day and my mum then decided that enough was enough. She also caught him trying to sexually abuse me and [she] never left me alone after that. She was worn out, tired from doing all the work and paying all the bills- but to hurt me- [that] seemed to hurt her more. We left and went to refuge…
Miranda, 18yrs

Safety

Safety was very important for all the children and young people13. This included: being in a safe place, away from the abuse, not fearing seeing the violent parent each week – and support from a loving parent/mother:

i am safe now… no one is shouting now.
Lila

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13 See also Mullender, et al. 2002; McGee, 2000.
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im feeling safe now because i have people around me and im talking to them now so if you get lonely call [a helpline] or talk to someone you fell safe with.

Ethan

… Me and my Mum and sister came to the refuge and I think it is really good. I have never lived in a house with a garden before…. It may seem scary coming to refuge to start with but its really nice, and safe.

Kayley, 9 yrs.

Staying with my mum makes me feel safe. A big hug from her makes me feel better

Sami

… i feel safe when i’m with my mum. if i feel scared, i don’t act like a younger kid and cry, i kind of snuggle up to her and hide my face in her arm and try to breath in her perfume. i feel bettr.

Daisy

I think feeling safe is being able to be relaxed at all times. You wouldn’t have things running through your mind like am I moving soon or should I expect to be treated aggressively today. Also I would feel safe if there is somebody for me to talk to if I had a concern about something.

Marcus, 17 yrs

Getting to a safe place was often not easy:

i had 2 run away. it was so scary. we left when my dad was ova my uncle’s house. he only went for 10 mins and we had 10 mins 2 run!!!

Daisy

One contributor had obviously thought a lot about safety – perhaps as a result of feeling very unsafe for a period of time - and clearly the issue was very important to her:

I believe that feeling safe means that you dont have to worry about goings on around you, people should not feel concerned or scared in their environment, wether it is their homes, public places or social places e.g. school, parks, youth clubs. Feeling safe in homes is important because when living in a house where domestic violence occurs may not feel like a real home to most people who experience it or if they are victims. Feeling safe in public places is also very important… Feeling safe around your peers is also suprisingly important, because you need to make sure that no bullying happens to you or to people around you, which is important when mental, physical or verbal bullying takes place which may cause serious harms on your self esteem.

Beth

Another contributor was very enthusiastic about the safety provided by a refuge, and advised everyone to contact Women’s Aid:

… this is my life on the ege of a clif im so scardy . i have been in a refuge 4 5 weeks if u are in 1 2 then i now wat it is now like u dont have worry about anything u are now safe in

1 no i can put a thinger on u are any thing so if u are been hurt or sexuly aboused then call the wemans aid now u can be safe and no can find u. u can be safe all u need 2 do is get the number of some 1 u can trust that wont say any thing nd then they will find a refuge and then u can be so safe u wont belive it even if u have any kids u can still come no matter how many u have all of u will be safe and then u can go out and find a place some where far away 2 live and then u can start all over again ok so please do that…

Hamida
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Everyone should feel safe in their own homes. The fact that many children and young people do not is a serious concern which should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Moving into a refuge

Reaching a place of safety - for these young people - often involved moving home, going into a refuge, losing friends, changing schools – and all this could be very disruptive (particularly if it was done several times). Some children and young people were, understandably, quite ambivalent about the experience of moving into a refuge14 - and for some, the refuge experience itself was not particularly positive; but if it meant there was no further violence, they usually felt it was worth it and – after a bit - that they could start to get on with their lives.

my dad was mean to my mum me my sister he never let me go out and hang with my friends when i went in a refuge my life was ruined because i coud not have friends round my sister blamed everthing on me i wanted to go home and when i went to my dads he didnt want me i was too much to handle me when i dint do noffing wrong…
Ellie, 10yrs

Making new friends was particularly significant; most of the children and young people mentioned this as a positive factor, both in itself, and because it helped them to settle in to their new temporary home.

i had 2 leave evrything behind, it was horrid. i am in a refugee and i hav made loads of new friends though…. i had 2 leave all my friends though i stay in contact. i hav 2 b careful wot i say 2 them though. the refugee is gr8. it's a luvly oppurtunity to meet new ppl safely and u know that they hav gone through exactly the same thing as u hav
Daisy

wll what can i say i 've made friends, gone 2 a new school, and left my dad so right now i'm in a safe spot.
Sidney

ive been in the refuge for a year but im living with my mum now. when i first moved in to the refuge, i was shocked because i didnt know weather i was actually in a right place. to be honest i thought i was having a nightmare. but it wasnt , it was reality. when i was living in there for a while, i got used to it, expecially the rules. i gained friends and i lost friends. i had an alnight time in there. but yeah i got all the support i needed, and in the end it was, what was best for me and my mum.
Mandi

i've lived in a refuge and it wasnt that bad. i left my friends and family behind which was upsetting, but there was a lot of support and i made a few more close friends, but i must admit to be truthful its very hard for me to trust anyone now, but as for the refuge it was good.
Harvey

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14 For example, see the two comments from Alex, below (posted on the same day, 20 minutes apart).
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The following two messages – from the same child - indicate the ambivalence some children and young people feel when they find themselves in a refuge:

I do not like my house its rubbish and im not ust to the house
Alex

However, later the same day, Alex wrote the following:

I like it were I am in the refuge… I have got new frends… but I do miss my artys [aunties].
Alex

Refuges were generally appreciated for the safety they provided, and the companionship and support – from staff and other resident children and young people. The main complaints – apart from the loss of some friends and family members - were not being able to invite friends round, and having to leave their animals behind:

I am in a womens refuge and I find ok, its not ther best thing in the world but its ok. I think that my childworker here is really nice I like her a lot…
Natalie, 13yrs

… i had to go in a refuge … my pets arent allowed and … i miss them and when i get a proper house i will get my dog back…. i had to leave home and at first it is scary but it is not all bad some plasers have play room … but the ally bad thing is you are not allowed friends round.
Ellie, 10 yrs

its ok bein in a refuge cause u can make a lot of new mates nd u can feel really safe when yr in here
Waheed

The Refugee was very scary at first and we had to get to know everybody quickly. It didn’t take us long to settle down though. We have made quite a lot of friends. It is a bright place filled with LOADS of children! I feel safe in the refugee because I know my dad and the others will not find me here. I love the refugee, I don’t normally call it that, I call it my home… The refugee does have some rules, but that’s what we need. The refugee is a chance to meet new people safely, get a new home and start all over.
Daisy

Effects on education

Going into a refuge not only means leaving friends behind, but also changing schools – which, at least for a time, is likely to affect the young person’s education adversely. No matter how much the refuge staff and the new school try to help, changing schools without warning - and perhaps leaving coursework behind - can be very disruptive, and children and young people may under-perform in exams, and/or be unable to go on to the courses they had hoped to attend. Also – as Natalie’s comment indicates – schools in the new area are sometimes unable to take children/young people immediately, or they may have to attend part-time until a place can be found for them:

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15 See Mill and Church (2006).
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

i only moved 2 weeks ago but i really miss my friends and my old shool, i used to love goin to that school… I have to do a lot of things to get into school [here] at the moment I am going to a school where i do 2hrs a day, 4 days a week! Then by September I will be going to full time education school!!…
Natalie 13 yrs.

… the hardest thing for me has been leaving my friends behind and knowing i have to make new ones where i live now. i also miss my belongings that i was unable to bring such as teddy bears from when i was born, clothes, jewlery, and cd’s and player, and really important my computer with all my course work on it… it has been a different time in my life but it is alot better now and we are starting a new life and it will all be worth it in the end.
Sophia, 16 yrs

… i am 16 too and i am in a refuge and it feels like i have been taken away from my mates and family that are back were i used to live i dont want to start a new collage down here because i have hardly no friends just finished my gcse i wish i could go back to my old house and carry on but i can not because all sort of things are so wrong there…
Gemma, 16 yrs

Another contributor responded to the last comment as follows:

Hi…. iv never lived in a refuge but I bet it is hard leaving every one you know behind. What are you going to do now you have left school! your whole life is ahead of you, and you cant change what happend in the past but you can have a great life now your 16!!!…
Chanelle, 15yrs

One contributor did find, however, that going into a refuge helped his education, as he was now able to work harder and concentrate better than when he had to hide from his abusive step father:

I think because I came into refuge it helped me with my gcse’s and my schoolwork because it was easier to concentrate when I went to refuge on my schoolwork and my exams because there was less arguing etc… I know I am lucky to be in refuge because nearly all refuges don’t take boys in to refuge at the age of 16. My mum and my brother are my family and the only family I got near by so I should be allowed to stay with them. I think that they should let more boys from the age of 16 into refuge.
Jared, 16 yrs

Support

The children and young people were very supportive of each other: they believed and listened to each other – both on the message boards, and to their own friends16:

I read your messege and I would like to say that It made me feel sad for you, but you are not alone. Loads of people are in the same situation… I hope that someone can help you!
Milly

well don your doig all you can… I kow what it feals like ive been through it as well.
Robert

16 Mullender et al. (2002) found that some children and young people turn more readily to their friends than to adults for help and support. They also stressed the importance of listening support – both from their friends and from adults and agencies supporting them.
hey u shouln't feel stupid it happens to loads of people. your mates were a lot of help... its good now that you have a group of friends that have been through it already cause they can help you through it.

Dawn

hi 2 every 1 this has happened 2 im relly sorry about the u had 2 go throght i dont really now wat its like but im really sorry i fill it 4 u really badly man im sooooooooooooooo sorry

Hamida

i know how you feel .... i feel so sorry for you to because you have been through so much take care....

Gemma, 16 yrs

im really sorry to here all this that you are goin through especially if your going through with it on your own... i feel really hope you and your freind sort this situation out best of luck and all my love

Elisa 18 yrs

You live is head of you and no you can't change the past but if you want to have a great life, you go out and forget about the past .... hope you have fun with your life ... p.s. you can have fun with your life thinking about the past or not. luv ya

Dianne, 15yrs

Several contributors to Kidspeak advised others that they should talk about the abuse they had experienced or witnessed -- so that people could help them.

I have been sexualy abused by my dad i felt stupid and enbarsed but i phoned [a helpline] they told and reasured me it wasn’t my fault. It helps if u tell some one. Don’t be scared to tell your mates, they were the ones who told me to phone [the helpline]..... DON'T BE AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dina, 12 yrs

plz any 1 who has a parent who,hits them tell sum 1 plz be4 it gets worse

Jamie

I suggest that when he goes to school to tell somebody like teacher and tell them how he feels and to try and sort some thing out ... or there is going to be more trouble... My dad has hit me and I have told people and they have sorted it out...

Piara 12yrs

As we have seen above, the opportunity to make new friends was one of the positive factors associated with moving into a refuge. For those who remained in their own homes, outreach and support groups, where they could meet others in similar circumstances, were also much appreciated:

... I really enjoy the girls’ group i would miss this support, it makes me less worried.

Cara, 11 yrs

I'm in a domestic violence group ... and it’s really fun. We go on trips together and there's always somebody to talk to, which really helps me as there are people that care about me...

Rosie 11yrs
In the girls’ group we paint, cook, go for walks and write about domestic violence and the different types of it. I think that there should be more care workers who can look after children because they really help, and now if I ever have any domestic violence in my life I know what to do.
Leah, 12 yrs

Others have pointed out that if children and young people who have experienced domestic violence are given professional support, either individually or in a group, they can usually cope better with the impact of the abuse17; they can be helped to talk about what has happened at home, to vent their feelings, and receive reassurance that it was not their fault. This helps them to feel properly listened to, and to re-build their self-esteem. Group work has the added advantage in enabling children and young people to realise they are not alone.

We know, however, that support groups like this - usually run within the voluntary sector - are available in very few areas. Reliable ongoing funding for outreach support groups for children and young people affected by domestic violence would not only be immensely valued by potential service users, but could help to alleviate the long-term mental health consequences of domestic violence on these young people. Also, domestic violence organisations generally need reliable ongoing funding for children’s support workers, both in refuge accommodation and in outreach services.

One young person found some positive support from a young people’s advocacy service – again, something that is not readily available in every area, but can be very helpful. Another boy said that the outreach worker who visited him was very supportive:

I’ve been getting help to try and make sense of the domestic violence I lived with. I have an Outreach Worker who visits me in school or at home and gives me the time to talk. This is really helpful as she listens to me and helps me cope with the difficult stuff. It has given me the chance to see things more clearly and try and understand that the arguments were not my fault…
Shaun

All these services - which are specific to certain local areas - are very valuable, and should ideally be established throughout the country.

Finding help in the statutory sector

Agencies in the statutory sector are more widely and uniformly available than voluntary sector services. We were interested to find out what children and young people thought of the agencies to which they or their parents might have turned for help – such as the police, social services and courts. In many cases, the comments we received were very critical of the services offered or provided. In at least one case, the response from the “caring” agencies only compounded the problems, and – for this young person - seemed to be worse than the original abuse:

I found by talking to the authorities the abuse worsened, my friends were not in a position to help, so I ended up carrying the burden alone. It is a shame we all seem to have to carry the burden alone…
Marcus, 17 yrs

17 See, for example, Mulender (2004).
And later, the same boy added:

... One thing I noticed as well is it is SO much easier to take the side of fellow adults. Because at the end of the day if the adults don't get what they want they can get heard whereas with us we can only do nothing...
Marcus, 17 yrs

Children and young people said they often had not felt listened to or believed by those who were supposed to be helping them – or they feared they would not be believed\(^1\). For this reason, among others, they sometimes found it difficult to know the best place to go for help.

*My friend is being subjected to domestic violence. ... he has been trying to find help but he doesn’t know where to go…. He can’t talk to anyone, noone believes him. What do you think he should do. Is there anything i can do to help. I just wish that i could do somethibg to stop it.*
Sara, 12yrs

One child found that a teacher gave positive support to her family:

*i couldn't tell any1 i was so scared. my sis went 2 school and while she was playing she said "mummy crying upstairs, daddy gr-gr, me crying, sister, brothers crying, we crying, daddy horrible". my sis' school, had a talk with my mum and helpd her.*
Daisy

One girl had had support from both the police and social services:

*police do help my mum because if anyone in our family gets a weapon we have to call 999. the social workers help if anyone has a problem like mum or dad then they ask them what the problem is and how did you get into the problem, sometimes they talk to me. they tell us whats going on in our lives so we're not worried which helps all of us....Cara, 11yrs*

A few spoke positively of their experience of contacting the police for help:

... its not your fault that domestic violence is going on and you suffer for it. i see where everyone is coming from because i exspierenced it myself and if you need advice the best advice i can give for domestic violence is talk to someone or ring the police to stop domestic violence.
Ryan

... The police were actually one of the most proactive ones. I remember back when I was 12 I was taken down to the police investigating team in [my area]. They were really eager to help. However I was accompanied by a social worker … who kept giving me looks and prompts as to what to say to the police… I ended up saying to the police lady sorry for wasting your time I don’t know why I ever wanted to complain in the first place...
Marcus, 17 yrs

*i found them [the police] very helpful they did a lot for me there still helpig me*
Robert

\(^1\) Fear of not being believed if they disclosed abuse was also reported by children participating in Caroline McGee’s research; see McGee, 2000.
However, not everyone had good experiences of the police:

…[My friend] ran away to his mums and rang the police and all they said was wait a few weeks and if it still happens phone again and we will see hat we can do but we cant promise anything. The police are so stupid why doesnt anyone believe children. Just because we are young it doesn’t mean that we shouldnt speak up...
Sara, 12 yrs

… ive gt neighbours who have domestic violence, you tell council or da police and they dont want to know... maybe cuz i wont give my name to da police as i kno my nieghbour is a violent person...
Elisa 18 yrs

Mum hits my dad most days and is always screaming at him… dad just tries to go in a different room where we are not when mum hits him so we can’t see. The police just tell her off and dad just ends up crying with black eyes, scratches, cuts. Why dont people believe us when we say mum hits our dad…
Harvey

In the last example, the police may have been sceptical of claims that – in this case – the woman was the abusive partner, given that it is well-established that the vast majority of abusers are male.

Contact with the abusive parent: when the court decides

Going through the court process could be particularly frightening, even more so when the children and young people thought they might not be believed, and that their fears – both of the abuser, and of being forced to visit him – would be ignored:

i am very scared and frightened of my daddy. i am mad with my daddy for hurting my mummy and me and my sisters and brother. i want my daddy to stay out of my life but he is taking it to court to see us….i am very scared incase no one listens to me, i want to be heard what if they dont listen ?? i dont want to be made to see my dad please help me and my family.
Tara, 8 yrs

My dad is taking us to court for contact, we don’t want to see him or have anything to do with him, I just hope the court will listen to me and my mummy I think we shouldn’t have to see him. we can think for ourselves, I think the court should let us have oursay. I don’t know what I will do if they say I have to go.
Suzey 14 yrs
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

Children and young people do not always attend court themselves, but they usually know that their mothers are going, and that decisions made will affect their lives, too. If contact or residence is disputed, children and young people are likely to see an officer from CAFCASS, usually on their own, so that as far as possible their views are not coloured by those of either of their parents. It was presumably in an attempt to avoid any outside influence that this child’s mother was told to tell him nothing about what happened when she went to court:

\[
\text{on monday my mum went to court and after that we asked her what had happened and she wasn't aloud to tell us because the lady from cafcass told my mum not to tell us but i asked her one more question and that was you know who looked liked and mum said scruffy and smelt like alcohol and cigars i felt disappointed and sad thumbs down.}
\]

Jay

Other children and young people had themselves given evidence in court – or were about to.

\[
\text{… now i haft to go to court to give evidence to the jugde because hes saying he didnt do anything to us and hes saying that he isnt guilty when he is and im really scared to go…}
\]

India, 9 yrs.

\[
\text{… i have 2 go away 4 2 day 2 go court tuesday so i hope i will go ok and we get 2 see who we live with and who go the house and everything…}
\]

Hamida

That these children’s fears were not groundless is borne out by the experience of other young people who had already been through the court process\(^{19}\). Several of them said they had told social workers, judges or CAFCASS officers that they did not want to see their abusive parent, but they had been forced to do so regardless:

\[
\text{my dad used to hit us and mum and shout and throw things all the time my mum used to cry then he left and we were a real family without being scared. then my dad said he wanted to see us and he used to shout when we saw him and was mean all the time except when the lady from the court was there. The judge said we had to see him now were all not happy again. I just want dad to go away. Why cant he just leave us alone?????I fink the judge is mean for this.}
\]

Reuben

\[
\text{… It all went so wrong once we got to court. My father said he did not want contact but the lawyers and social workers said he had to have it. I did not want to ever see him again either. I spoke to the judge and he agreed, but [the CAFCASS officer] kept saying I had to go or mum would be put in prison and I would be locked away in care and never see her again. I was scared but I would not lie like they asked me to. They tried to force me to draw pictures that they wanted, but I said- you asked me to draw what I want…}
\]

Miranda, 18 yrs.

\[
\text{i experienced domestic violence around 5 years ago and at the time i found the cafcass was rubbish! i didn't receive the sort of service you would hope to get but portrayed myself as a young child who couldn’t make up her mind! now i am 15 and i have come out of this experience better off. i don’t speak to my dad anymore and i live with my mum and sister…}
\]

Jessica, 15 yrs

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\(^{19}\) For a discussion of these issues, see: Radford et al. (1999); Saunders with Barron (2003).
One said that the court had decided she should live with someone who now abuses her:

> i have been living with my brothers dad for about 7 years now and for the past 6 years i have experienced mental and physical abuse almost daily... I am living with him because a judge decided i would be safer with [him] rather than my mother who is an alcoholic!

Samara

It may be that, since Miranda, Jessica, Samara and their families went through the process, additional safeguards developed by the courts and by CAFCASS have meant that, now, children and young people do not have their views disregarded, and that, where domestic violence is an issue, the potential dangers will be taken fully into consideration before any orders for contact or residence are made. The Department for Constitutional Affairs advises that the court should “only make an order for contact if it can be satisfied that the safety of the residential parent and the child can be secured before during and after contact” 20. CAFCASS’s *Domestic violence toolkit* 21 also stresses the need for safety, and that in some cases of domestic violence, an order for no contact should be recommended. The two adult contributors who represented CAFCASS advised young contributors as follows:

> … Be brave - speak to people at the court. When the court hears that these things have been going on they will listen. There are people at court who can spend time with you and your mum and begin to understand what has been happening and help the court to make the right decision.

CAFCASS representative 1

> … If a parent takes it to court to try and see you when you don’t want them to, the court very often sends a person out to see you and get your views. What you need to do when that happens is to find even more courage and tell this person what you want and how you feel, don’t just wait for their questions. They should give you some private space to talk to them. If they do not then don’t be afraid to ask for it as they are there to help you get your voice heard.

CAFCASS representative 2

However, despite these reassurances, many children and young people remained sceptical:

> … all I see is the abusers winning custody and tormenting women and children every week for control… the bully wins legally in secret courts…

Miranda, 18yrs.

> … My mum said that the judge wold keep us safe but he was like my dad he finks its ok to hit kids. now we have to see my dad coz he said so… i fink its bad to hit your kids but grow ups fink its ok. i don’t wanna see him but why do they make me?? mum says its coz hes my dad but dads ain’t all mean, why cant i have a dad that isn’t bad?????

Reuben

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21 CAFCASS (August 2007, originally produced in October 2005).
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

Some children and young people, however, did see their fathers and seemed happy to do so – despite sometimes continuing violence and unpredictable behaviour:

I still keep in touch with my dad, we have fun and I enjoy it. My mum is happy now but they still talk to each other. My dad has a new girlfriend and I like her. I love both my parents very much…
Chanelle

My Dad tried to strangle my Mum, so I grabbed the phone and threatened them by saying I would phone the Police, and they stopped. I still have contact with my Dad and he can be fun sometimes, but other times I don’t have a clue when he’s going to erupt.
Leah, 12 yrs

Two participants said they wanted to see their fathers and other family members, but were not able to:

yr likey [i.e. lucky] u get 2 see yr family im not allowed 2 see mine
Hamida

… I dont see my Dad now but I still miss him. My Mum misses his hugs but not when he hit her. I will have to hug her now…
Natasha

How could services be improved?

Some contributors were very critical of current policies and procedures, and also quite cynical about the possibility of real change in the foreseeable future:

Why is that if the offender breaks an injunction they do not get arrested the first time, they should only get one chance. Also why is it that the people fleeing domestic violence have to leave their home and the abuser gets to stay.
Amelie, 16 yrs.

I think it is great that you [i.e. MP] are trying to change the law on domestic violence but what worries me is that it takes time and what about all of us that need you now. ?
Suzey, 14 yrs

… there is a likelihood that women’s organisations have probably already told you some of the things we are, AGES ago. What is the difference between hearing it from them as opposed to us. Does it mean you are going to act more quickly because you are hearing it from us or can we expect more of the same? …
Marcus, 17 yrs

Some children and young people had recommendations for policy makers, for example:

more supported accommodation, and hostals under 15 more places to phone … and more workers.
Ethan

I reckon help can best be given under a structure where accountability exists. It doesn’t happen that much in these scenarios… Open up things more, not necessarily with press in
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

the family court but introduce a medium that can accurately report what happens to children like us…. I think there is much more sufferers than your official stats say.
Marcus, 17 yrs

I hear that in the future we will divorce violent parents. Can you imagine it though?????Peace...ahhhhhhhhh. We did ask- and they looked at us as if we were crazy. But it is logical and sensible.
Miranda, 18yrs

Among the responses from adult contributors to comments such as the above were the following:

… I can understand that you feel frustrated and let down because of what you have gone through. It is important though that we can hear experiences from your point of view… Although other groups can speak out on your behalf I always think it is better to listen, wherever possible, to the people who have personal experience… you have turned the awful experience of domestic violence into a positive outlook for the future…
An MP

… Kidspeak enables feelings to be heard but also gives the experts a deeper understanding of the improvements that need to be made. Life will never be perfect but I can assure every young person who has experienced domestic violence that we will try to make things better. If we didn’t care we would not be listening!
A magistrate
Conclusion and recommendations

The children and young people who contributed to *Kidspeak* clearly wanted to be listened to, and they wanted their views and experiences to be taken seriously. They wanted adults to believe them and, most importantly, not to patronise them – just as they believed and supported each other. While they were living with the violence, they often felt frightened and helpless, and did not know what – if anything – they could do. Some children and young people said their parents had tried to protect them from knowing about the domestic violence – but without success*.22*

Many children and young people said they did not want to see the abusive parent – or not for a while – yet they often found their views disregarded and they were persuaded or forced into contact visits when they were not ready for this.

Children and young people who were or had been in a refuge mostly found it a very positive experience – despite the disruption caused by leaving home, leaving their friends, changing schools, and leaving their possessions behind. They valued the safety it provided, and the support and friendship from the staff and from other children and young people who had gone through similar experiences.

Some children and young people had found it hard to know where to go to get help when they and their families were living with domestic violence. Some of them said they had found the help given by agencies – particularly those in the statutory sector – had often been useless or had even made their situation worse. Social workers and CAFCASS staff came in for most criticism; whereas experience of the police seemed to vary considerably. Several young contributors said they and their families had been given help by voluntary sector organisations, specifically Childline and Women’s Aid.

What children and young people want: key messages

1) Children and young people are almost always aware of the abuse – even if their parents try to keep it from them.

2) They would like to find someone they could talk to about their experiences, and whom they could trust.

3) They wanted to be listened to, to be taken seriously, and to be believed.

4) Children and young people who had experienced domestic violence and other abuse were very supportive of each other.

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*22 Children and young people who were unaware of the domestic violence would not have contributed to the *Kidspeak* messageboard; and, with regard to the private messageboard, those whose mothers had hoped to shield them from the abuse would probably not have allowed their children to register.*
5) Children and young people wanted their views to be taken into account, whenever decisions were made that would affect their lives.

6) In particular, they did not always want to see the abusive parent or not until they were ready to do so.

7) Children and young people wanted clear information and an appropriate response from any agency they approached for help and support – but sometimes found that was not forthcoming.

8) They appreciated the help provided by refuge organisations and other specialist domestic violence services – though they also found it hard if they had to leave home.

9) Those children and young people who had ongoing support were appreciative of the help provided - for example through a special Women’s Aid support group set up for children and young people who had experienced domestic violence.

These messages from children and young people should not be ignored. It is clear that children are profoundly affected by hearing and witnessing domestic violence. They want to be able to talk about their experiences, and get help and support – but often such support is not readily available.

Recommendations from Women’s Aid

1) Funding for children’s specialist support services: 73% of domestic violence organisations in the Women’s Aid national network provide services for children and young people who have lived with domestic violence\textsuperscript{23}, but only three-quarters of these receive any funding for this work, (mostly through charitable sources such as Children in Need) and the majority of that funding is for services within refuge accommodation.

The new commissioning framework for voluntary sector service provision means that refuge based specialist domestic violence services are under threat, following the move towards priorities being set and funding allocated at a local level\textsuperscript{24}. Moreover, the needs of children affected by domestic violence are still not specifically addressed by any funding streams. Supporting People does not fund children’s work although there are more children living in refuges than adults. Without sufficient participation in local decision-making bodies, the needs of women and children are not represented or prioritised in planning and funding strategies.

There should be a strategic approach to the development of state-funded specialist services for children and young people affected by domestic violence, available throughout the country; this should include services within refuge accommodation and in the community, for example support groups, outreach projects, and therapeutic services for children and young people who have been traumatised by domestic violence.

2) Safety, risk and children’s wishes in post-separation arrangements through the family courts: Women’s Aid have had a long-standing concern for the safety of children who are required to have contact with an abusive parent in the face of ongoing risks, and often against their own

\textsuperscript{23} The Women’s Aid annual survey 2005/06 shows that there are more children than women living in refuge accommodation (almost one third more).

\textsuperscript{24} Whilst women’s organisations represent around 7% of the total voluntary sector, they are severely under-represented on Local Strategic Partnerships, comprising only 1.8% of voluntary sector representatives. \textsuperscript{\textcopyright} Guðnadóttir, Elin, Smith, Sue, Robson, Sue and Corry, Darlene (2007).
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wishes\textsuperscript{25}. The Family Justice Council Report\textsuperscript{26} recommended moving away from the assumption that contact was always the best way forward, and stressed that contact should always be "safe and positive for the child". CAFCASS advises that – even when contact is felt to be in the best interests of the child - the safety and protection of the child and the abused parent must be paramount. Despite this, 65% of respondents to a recent Women’s Aid survey\textsuperscript{27} said that family courts still do not take adequate account of safety when making contact/residence orders, and that there is considerable inconsistency in practice. There is also concern about the continuing use of mediation where there is domestic violence\textsuperscript{28}.

All those involved in the family courts system should take account not only of safety, and risk management but also of the wishes of the children involved, when considering applications for contact or residence; a separate specialist advocacy service should be set up to meet the specific needs of children and young people who have experienced domestic violence, and to put forward their wishes and concerns to the family courts.

3) Support for children and young people within the education system: Three-quarters of respondents to our recent survey thought schools responses to domestic and sexual violence had improved either a little (47%) or a lot (28%). However, most of the comments were qualified in some way. And while local authorities are required to promote a domestic violence education pack\textsuperscript{29} for use in schools, schools are not required to use this pack.

Domestic violence issues, gender inequality and sexual stereotyping be included as a mandatory part of the PHSE curriculum in all schools; integrated with work on anti-bullying, conflict resolution and healthy relationships.

All schools and colleges should ensure that their staff are trained to understand and respond appropriately to students who are experiencing domestic violence at home, and that the core curriculum includes issues such as abuse, gender inequality and sexual stereotyping.

Above all – all those approached for help should always believe and take seriously children and young people who report domestic violence or other abuse.

We leave the final comment to one of our young contributors:

\textit{I think domestic violence is unacceptable... Every child should feel safe everywhere. Milly}

\textsuperscript{26} Family Justice Council Report to the President of the Family Division on the approach to be adopted by the court when asked to make a contact order by consent, where domestic violence has been an issue in the case (December 2006). This report followed Lord Justice Wall's Report on Twenty-Nine child homicides (March 2006).
\textsuperscript{28} HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (2005) expressed concern at the policy emphasis at that time on seeking mediated agreements.
\textsuperscript{29} Under BVPI (Best value performance indicator) 225.
Appendix 1: Setting up and managing Kidspeak

Introduction

The Kidspeak on-line consultation with children and young people was developed with the help of funding from The Body Shop, and took place throughout the months of June and July 2007[30]. It followed on from our successful “Womenspeak” consultation in 2000[31], and was developed by Women’s Aid, together with Margaret Moran MP, Co-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Chair of e-Quality Networks.

Two separate secure message boards were set up, with the help and technical support of Tempero[32], and linked to The Hideout, Women’s Aid’s website for children and young people affected by domestic violence (www.thehideout.org.uk). One message board was available for public access, and the other was private (by invitation to domestic violence services, children’s charities, and similar organisations). Both message boards were open for 24 hours a day for just over eight weeks from Monday 4th June.

Development of Kidspeak: The two message boards

The private message board was divided into three broad discussion areas:

- Domestic violence: What are your views?
- How has your life changed?
- Getting help and protection: How was it for you?

Within each discussion area, there were a number of specific topics or “threads”, which were added to by the Kidspeak Host throughout the eight weeks[33] the message boards were open. Our intention was to respond to and develop the interests and concerns of the participants, while at the same time keeping the discussion on track and relevant to the overall aims of this project.

The public message board had one general discussion area, “Domestic violence: What are your views?” within which there were separate threads as above. This was because we expected there would be fewer contributions to the public message board, and therefore it would be better not to split them up; however, this assumption was not always borne out, and initially, the public board received most messages.

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[30] Originally, it was to take place for four weeks, only; but due to the slow start and the gradually increasing number of messages received throughout June, Women’s Aid decided to extend the consultation period for a further four and a half weeks.


[32] Tempero is a highly trusted company working in this field. They have previously worked with the NSPCC, providing a message board for children and young people to share concerns about abuse. They also provided relevant Women’s Aid staff with moderator training and support.

[33] Initially 4 weeks – later extended: see below.
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

Engaging participants – and some difficulties

*Kidspeak* was publicised by sending invitation letters and emails to our own networks and those of children’s charities, other domestic violence organisations, and appropriate agencies in the voluntary and statutory sectors. We suspected that these written invitations did not always reach the right people within each organisation; or that, if they had, they could nevertheless have been “lost” due to a constant flow of more pressing demands. We therefore followed them up with phone calls to domestic violence organisations and children’s charities, encouraging them to take part.

While our phone calls were often successful in raising awareness of this initiative, and some organisations did indeed register for it as a result, it was extremely time-consuming, and also highlighted some of the difficulties in undertaking a project of this kind, requiring input over a relatively short period of time from voluntary sector organisations – many of which often have limited resources.

Some organisations expressed interest in the project, but were for various reasons unable to participate at this time. The following were the main factors we identified that hindered or completely precluded many organisations from participating:

- lack of support staff for children and young people;
- the unavailability of (easy) access to internet facilities for many children and young people living in refuges or attending domestic violence support sessions in the community34;
- few or no current service users of appropriate ages and/or having an interest in participating.

On the last point – it is the case that many children living in refuges are very young; our most recent Annual Survey shows that 50% of children and young people resident in refuges are under five, and a further 34% between five and ten years of age, meaning that the numbers available to participate in an event of this kind during a four week or even an eight week period are likely to be fairly small. (Several services told us that all the children they were currently working with were under the age of 5.) Domestic violence organisations which ran children’s outreach support services were often the most enthusiastic – and did in fact support more child participants overall35; however such services are available in relatively few areas, due to lack of resources.

Most organisations working with children and young people asked permission from the mothers before inviting their children to contribute to *Kidspeak*. Some organisations told us that none of the families they were working with took up the invitation - despite encouragement. One suggested that this could be “due to the lack of openness regarding domestic violence between the parent and children” – and that the children and young people who did attend sessions had previously received a high level of support, both from their families and from children’s workers in domestic violence services. One service said that they had introduced *Kidspeak* to the children and young people they were working with, but found it difficult to engage them because they rarely had access to a computer; therefore, once they did, they immediately wanted to do other things on it. (On the other hand, we also had feedback from several organisations that the children and young people who had written messages had found this a positive and exciting experience – particularly when they received a response!)

34 We suggested to organisations that could not themselves provide children/young people with access to the internet that they look into hiring an outside venue – such as a room in a children’s centre – for a few sessions, or that they take interested children to a public library or internet café. This was only taken up by one organisation, however, often due to lack of support staff to accompany children to the venue.

35 See Table 4, Appendix 2.
Participation in Kidspeak

Despite these difficulties, during the preparation period and throughout the two months Kidspeak was operating, 74 organisations registered for the private message board: 53 refuge organisations (some of which also had children’s outreach services), seven other domestic violence organisations (mostly outreach and floating support projects), eleven children’s organisations of various kinds, and three “other” projects. Of these, 20 eventually supported at least one child or young person to access the Kidspeak private message board and write a message or messages on at least one occasion before it closed.

A number of children and young people also accessed the public message board – having heard about it from various sources, or seen one of the posters. Twenty-three children and young people posted a total of 62 messages to the public Kidspeak message board during the two months, and judging from the number listed as “members”, many more registered a user name and password and accessed the board, though without posting a message themselves. The availability of appropriate internet access may also have been a factor here: most children and young people would not have wanted to access such a site at school, for example. One girl wrote on behalf of her friend who did not have computer access himself. Others may have had their internet use monitored by their parents. One mother phoned to tell us of her concern that introducing her child to Kidspeak might look “emotionally abusive” or manipulative, if her former partner found out.

During the period they were open, 419 individuals registered a user name and password on one or both the Kidspeak message boards. This number does include those attempting to post advertising messages, and also members of staff from Women’s Aid and Tempero, and perhaps also some who accessed the site but then decided it was not relevant to them; nonetheless it is considerably higher than the 60 children and young people, and the nine “public figures” who actively contributed messages to the board.

Results

The Kidspeak message boards got off to a very slow start: we received no messages at all until mid-afternoon on 6th June (the third day of opening.) Then a sporadic flow of messages started to appear on both public and private boards, and this flow increased over the next few weeks (hence our decision to keep the boards open for a further month beyond the initial four weeks originally planned.) However, towards the end of the two months, the flow of messages tended to slow down again, particularly on the public message board – perhaps indicating that publicity about the extended opening period had not filtered through to everyone. Both message boards received the largest number of messages (54 in total) during the week beginning 25th June – which was to have been the final week.

Feedback from users of the message boards suggested that some had found it difficult to gain access to the site, perhaps because they had inputted their user names and passwords incorrectly. Some also found the message board difficult to negotiate: the multitude of “threads” that built up towards the end of the eight weeks meant that it was not always easy to find particular messages – or to locate responses to messages previously posted. It also seems that a few messages got “lost” somewhere in the system – either because the user believed they had posted a message, but had failed to do so; or because of a technical problem of some sort, meaning that a message which had in fact been posted went missing between then and when it was moderated and could appear on the board.

36 We do not know whether this child did in the end contribute or not.
37 This does not include those who were given a user name and password by Women’s Aid for the private message board, but then did not activate it.
Receiving and dealing with messages

In total, over the entire period of Kidspeak, we received 187 messages from 69 active users\textsuperscript{38}, plus an additional 39 posted by the Kidspeak Host. We also posted some messages at the outset explaining “What is domestic violence?”, “How to get help”, “What is the Kidspeak message board for?” and “What are the Message Board Rules?” These have not been counted in the total. (See Table 5, Appendix 2, for a full breakdown of messages received).

All messages to both boards were pre-moderated – that is, they were checked by trained moderators before being available to read and respond to by other contributors – and, if necessary, they were edited in order to remove any personal identifying information, or anything which might be experienced as offensive to any individual or group\textsuperscript{39}. We did not alter spelling, grammar or remove abbreviations unless this was necessary to avoid misunderstanding.

During weekdays, this moderating was undertaken by three members of Women’s Aid staff, who had been trained by Tempero to do this; and at night and during weekends, it was done by Tempero.

The Kidspeak consultation did not in itself provide direct support and information\textsuperscript{40}. Some messages, however, required a personal response and/or signposting to sources of help. Before the messageboards opened, Women’s Aid developed some standard “moderator messages” which could be adapted and personalised by both Tempero staff or ourselves, in cases where it seemed a quick response was necessary; for example, when children or young people talked about suicide or self harm or were currently experiencing abuse. These messages included helpline numbers and websites which could provide further direct information and support.

We had also developed procedures for use in cases of emergency (such as a direct threat to safety) – but fortunately we did not need to use these.

Identification of themes

Apart from reading messages as they came in, during the pre-moderation process, all messages received were collected together and sent to us by Tempero on a weekly basis. From these, we identified the main themes which are outlined in the body of the report, and illustrated by extensive quotes from the children and young people who contributed. To some extent, our choice of initial “threads”, and the open questions we used to encourage responses, will have influenced the topics raised; however, it was clear that the children and young people only responded to issues they were interested in – and when, for example, we tried to elicit their views on other issues we felt were particularly pertinent, they often failed to respond, or did so only briefly. We can therefore be fairly certain that the themes which emerged most prominently are those which are of most concern to the young people themselves.

Information on contributors

Those registering for and using the private message board were asked to fill in a monitoring form for each child or young person who accessed the board, giving brief details of age, gender,

\textsuperscript{38} We also received some attempts by commercial companies to post material advertising pharmaceutical drugs, maternity and children’s clothing and pornography. These messages were deleted during the pre-moderation process, and have not been included in this total.

\textsuperscript{39} This was essential: while almost all those who posted messages kept to the rules, and only very rarely did we have to edit a message, there were, as noted above, several attempts to post mass advertising messages, most of which were very inappropriate, and which were deleted. For this reason it would be impossible to run such a message board without pre-moderating all messages.

\textsuperscript{40} It was, however, sited on The Hideout website, which does provide information on options and services available to children and young people affected by domestic violence.
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

ethnicity and so on. (As an incentive to complete and return forms promptly, those organisations who returned their forms to us by 10th August were entered into a draw with a chance to win £250 for their organisation.) The monitoring information we collected is given in Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 2 (for the private messageboard, only).

We had no certain way of collecting such information from those children and young people who posted messages on the public board; however, a few of them did give their ages and/or gender in their messages, and Table 3 gives the information we have. This – admittedly very limited - information suggests that those young people accessing the Kidspeak public messageboard tended to be older on average than those being supported to use the private message board. They were also slightly more likely to be male than female – whereas girls were much more likely than boys to access the private messageboard. According to the information we have, none of the young contributors was disabled. Taking contributors to both messageboards together, girls constituted 63% of participants, and boys 37%.

Table 4 shows that – although more refuge organisations participated – domestic violence outreach services were able to support more children and young people to access the messageboard.

Implications for running messageboards for children and young people

One consideration when developing the Kidspeak message boards had been to use them as a pilot to determine the feasibility of running a message board facility as a permanent feature of The Hideout website, for children and young people to access at any time. As we hope that this will now take place, the following points will need to be addressed:

• Some means of archiving non-current messages should be developed.
• It is essential that all messages are pre-moderated – in particular to avoid inappropriate advertising appearing on the site, but also to safeguard vulnerable children and young people from possible “grooming”.
• More publicity is needed – so that children and young people who are not in touch with services can nonetheless find out about the message board.
• Particular topics/questions could be highlighted on occasion – with publicity on The Hideout and the Women’s Aid website, inviting contributions on that topic.
• There were some technical problems with the message board: not everyone could get into it easily, the “search” facility did not work adequately, and sometimes users found that the view they had was different from that of other users, even sitting nearby.
• Although messages were pre-moderated, user names were not. This, combined with the fact that the last “member” who registered was welcomed by name on the front of the message board, could result in sometimes inappropriate names being highlighted41.

Overall, however, we feel that the project was very successful, in allowing children and young people who had experienced domestic violence to express their thoughts and feelings, safely and in confidence, and receive support and information from other children and young people, and from concerned adults with specific expertise in the areas under discussion. Many young people valued the experience of reading others’ messages and making their own contributions, and expressed their appreciation either to those supporting them or via the messageboard.

41 For example, the user name “sexman” appeared on the front page and on one occasion, and could only be removed by the moderator registering herself as a new user under a different name.
Appendix 2: Tables

Table 1: Kidspeak private messageboard:
Age and gender of contributors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>% of contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 – 9 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – 12 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 15 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 – 18 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43^12</td>
<td>100%^3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Kidspeak private messageboard:
Ethnicity and gender of contributors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>% contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1 White British</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1 White and Caribbean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3 White and Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4 Other mixed background</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Bangladeshi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2 African</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3 Black other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No information</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Kidspeak Public Messageboard
Age and gender of contributors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>% contributors (public messageboard)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7 – 9 years</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 – 12 years</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13 – 15 years</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16 – 18 years</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23 contributors</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^1 Four children for whom monitoring forms were returned did not write any messages – though they did visit Kidspeak and read others’ messages.

^3 Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to exactly 100%.
Table 4: Types of organisation supporting children and young people to access Kidspeak private messageboard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of service</th>
<th>Number of children/young people supported</th>
<th>% children/young people</th>
<th>Number of services</th>
<th>% services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refuge</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV Outreach service</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority ch/yp service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This total includes four children who were supported to access the messageboard, but who did not post any messages. It also includes the two services which did not return monitoring information about the children they supported.
Table 5: Contributors and messages to Kidspeak message boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4/6 -10/6</th>
<th>11/6 -17/6</th>
<th>18/6 -24/ 6</th>
<th>25/ 6 -1/7</th>
<th>2/7 -8/7</th>
<th>9/7 -15/7</th>
<th>16/7 -22/7</th>
<th>23/7 -29/7</th>
<th>30/7 -3/ 8</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private Board</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages this week</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from ch/yp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ch/yp</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>contributors this</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(43&lt;sup&gt;45&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ch/yp</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
<td>contributors this</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>from “public</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>New public figures</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contributing this</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages this week</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>from ch/yp</td>
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<tr>
<td>New ch/yp</td>
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<sup>45</sup> Four children who are known to have participated in Kidspeak did not actually post any messages, though they did read others’ messages and sent back monitoring forms, so they are included in the total numbers.
Kidspeak – Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence

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