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## Breaking the cycle of harm in adolescent relationships

*The Netflix series Adolescence portrayed the gruesome reality of teenage violence, and the numerous and complex causes behind it. Polina Obolenskaya, Annie Bunce and Ruth Weir draw on their research into adolescent toxic relationships to highlight the sources of such behaviour, and argue that schools can play an important role in prevention and early identification of harmful relationships between peers.*

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The British mini-series drama “Adolescence”, featured on Netflix in March 2025, provides a harrowing portrayal of the challenges faced by young people during a critical period of development – their teenage years. The series reveals a terrifying picture of how cruel young people can be to one another, the harmful views towards women boys can hold, knife crime, misogyny in young people’s cultures, and just how little parents often know about the lives of their children online. It also highlights the overlap of using and experiencing harmful behaviours, as well as the difficulties in identifying and addressing these behaviours before it is too late. The series has been recognised for its accurate and raw portrayal of the complexities children and their parents face today.

Our own research on adolescent toxic relationships, funded by [the UK Prevention Research Partnership \(UKPRP\)](#), chimes with many of the issues covered by/raised in the series. While the focus of our work is on romantic relationships, there are clear parallels between these and other forms of peer-relationships among teenagers. The parallels can be found in using and experiencing harmful behaviours, unhelpful and simplistic stereotypes of victims and perpetrators and the important role that schools play in educating young people about healthy relationships, identifying harm and providing support for children and young people.

# The overlap of victimisation and perpetration

As portrayed in “Adolescence”, a recent rapid systematic review found that for adolescents there is a complex interplay and overlap between using and experiencing violence and abuse, suggesting dynamics that go beyond simple characterisations of victimisation and perpetrator. The main character, 13-year-old Jamie, is both a victim of online bullying and harassment by a girl at his school – Katie – as well as a perpetrator of violence, in this case – a murder by stabbing. At the same time, Katie was also both a victim of violence as well as a perpetrator of abuse towards him. While the girl’s abusive online behaviour is in no way an excuse for the boy’s violence, the fact remains that violence and abuse (including non-physical) result in devastating psychological, physical and social and behavioural consequences for both girls and boys, which cannot be underestimated. “Adolescence” reminds us of yet another disturbing consequence – the escalation and continuation of a cycle of violence. Preventing perpetration in the first place would not only reduce violence victimisation but also stop the cycle of violence it creates. Both boys and girls need to be heard and can have access to appropriate support. Understanding experiences leading up to the perpetration of violence by young people, and the complex interplay of risk and protective factors, is necessary for our understanding of how to prevent incidents of the horrific scale portrayed in “Adolescence”.

## Victim and perpetrator stereotypes are overly simplistic

### *Hiding behind the mask of a “good student”*

Jamie, a young and sweet-looking boy, was a “good student” in the top set for English along with Katie – his victim, which was part of the picture of the seemingly harmonious family life initially painted in the series. Our work with young people who experienced abuse in their teenage relationships revealed that just because someone looks OK doesn’t mean they are OK. Young people who participated in our research spoke about how, what they referred to as the “gifted and talented” or “good student” stereotype, could be the very reason that signs of harm go unidentified by teachers. They highlighted the importance of teachers keeping in mind that students who are performing academically and appear to be healthy and confident may be having problems outside of school or online and hiding behind the “good student” mask. These findings, which are also echoed in the series, are in contrast to other research which has highlighted the negative impact of adolescent toxic relationships on educational outcomes. Together these findings reflect the range

and complexity of experiences and impacts of abuse amongst adolescents, which has clear implications for those tasked with preventing and identifying it.

### *Boys are not stereotypical victims of abuse*

The main character did not confide in his parents or teachers about the bullying he was experiencing online. This is a typical reaction – boys rarely disclose these experiences to professionals or adults, **much less so than the girls**. Boys also appear to be less affected by these harmful experiences which, at least in part, reflect broader **societal expectations** around gender roles, whereby boys may suppress their vulnerability to conform to masculine norms.



*Boys need to feel like part of the conversation, shown examples they can relate to and be encouraged to break down gender stereotypes and explore their own beliefs and feelings.*



In our conversations with young people who experienced abuse in past romantic relationships, our male participant spoke about his fear of talking to teachers about the abuse he was experiencing in his relationship, worrying they would not listen because of his sex. Likely compounding this is a lack of education in schools around men and boys, with any provision around abusive relationships generally **targeted at women and girls**, which may lead to boys and young men feeling it cannot happen to them or subsequently being afraid to speak up if it does. Boys need to feel like part of the conversation, shown examples they can relate to and be encouraged to break down gender stereotypes and explore their own beliefs and feelings.

## Schools can be a good place to learn about healthy relationships

Without teachers being proactively attuned to signs of potential harm and reaching out to their students to check that they are OK, the onus is on children, or as in Jamie's case – his peers, to come forwards and disclose any abuse they experience. We found in our research that young people can face several difficulties when considering disclosing their experiences to a professional and often it is a friend or peer they turn to instead. Whilst young people could readily identify room

for improvement in teachers' responses to toxic relationships, they also felt that school is the opportune time and setting to teach children and young people about healthy and harmful relationships. Existing research supports these findings – schools could be a significant risk factor for abuse or play a protective role.



*Our research with young people highlights the importance for professionals to speak to young people about harmful behaviours in their relationships using language that they would be able to relate to as opposed to using adult-centric terms and phrases that do not feel relevant to them.*



Our participants also called for more comprehensive relationship and sex education that begins earlier and includes discussions about respect, boundaries and healthy relationships, but also directly addresses the issue of abuse and what the signs are. They critiqued the current curriculum as outdated and overly focused on heterosexual relationships. By fostering open, inclusive discussions about healthy relationships and abuse, which are also relevant to young people's lives and experiences, participants believed schools could play a critical role in equipping young people to recognise and address harmful relationships in their lives. "Adolescence" portrays Jamie and Katie's school as a chaotic environment where children as well as staff are disengaged with only one teacher who is proactively trying to reach out to Katie's friend and provide her with guidance and support.

## Prevention and early identification of harmful relationships

Children and young people experience violence and abuse differently to adults. Recognising young people's distinctive needs is key to providing age- and generation-appropriate support. As "Adolescence" highlights, adults need to understand the language young people use around harmful behaviours, including the meaning of their online communication, such as emojis. Our research with young people highlights the importance for professionals to speak to young people about harmful

behaviours in their relationships using language that they would be able to relate to as opposed to using adult-centric terms and phrases that do not feel relevant to them. This, as the series suggests, has to include a range of harmful behaviours ranging from bullying (particularly that which has a potential to be “hidden” online) to the use of serious violence. Our participants shared examples of both effective and inadequate responses from teachers, police, and other professionals to their experience of violence an abuse in their relationships, emphasising the importance of building trust with young people, communicating genuine care and taking proactive safeguarding actions.

“Adolescence” may have shocked some people, caused parents to worry about their own children and been an uncomfortable watch for many. It also confirmed in an unusually accessible way what those of us working in this area are already painfully aware of– young people’s lives are complex, emotional, at times painful, and potentially very dangerous and we, as adults, need to do all we can to not just protect them but support them to thrive. This is a critical task that requires far more than “just one conversation” with young people. Given the devastating effects of misogyny and violence – as portrayed in “Adolescence” on victims, perpetrators, parents, siblings, friends, peers and even teachers and psychologists- breaking down gender stereotypes, showing young people what healthy relationships look like and identifying effective prevention and intervention approaches to teenage relationship abuse is a task well worth pursuing.

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## About the author

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