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# TEENAGE RELATIONSHIP ABUSE

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN  
TEENAGE RELATIONSHIPS

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# Teenage Relationship Abuse

A teacher's guide to violence and abuse in  
teenage relationships

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# Introduction

Nearly 75% of girls and 50% of boys have reported some sort of emotional partner abuse (NSPCC and the University of Bristol 2009). It is therefore likely that there are young people in your school who are experiencing relationship abuse.

It is important for all school staff to understand that this needs to be taken seriously.

One survey reported that 77% of young people feel they do not have enough information and support to deal with physical or sexual violence. Schools can provide this in a safe environment.

**It is perfectly possible to talk to children and young people about interpersonal and domestic violence; indeed, there is a great need to do so.**

**This is because children and young people are confused about the issue and want to learn more. Those children and young people who have lived with violence, or are living with it, want to talk about it and make sense of their experiences.**

Below are a few simple steps to enable teachers to tackle teenage relationship abuse.

**READ** this leaflet and learn about teenage relationship abuse

**EMAIL** all school staff with this leaflet and mention it in staff meetings

**SUPPORT** young people who choose to talk about their experiences (see pages 9-10)

**PROMOTE** information on support services (see page 20)

**ENGAGE** the whole school to stop teenage relationship abuse (see page 8)

**CHECK** out the campaign education pack (<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk>)

**TEACH** a lesson on teenage relationship abuse (see accompanying Expect Respect lesson plans)

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# What is teenage relationship abuse?

Research has shown that some teenagers have worryingly high levels of acceptance of abuse within relationships and often justify the abuse with the actions of the victim, e.g. because they were unfaithful.

A recent study by the NSPCC and the University of Bristol questioned 1,353 young people (aged between 13 and 17 years old, from eight UK schools) on violence in their intimate relationships. Key points from the research include the following:

"And he raised his fist to hit me and I was stood there and I was thinking, I, and at one point I know it sounds stupid but I wanted him to, because I felt, I felt as if I deserved it, but I was, I was scared."

"You know K – if she calls me names I'll smack her around the cheek... I'd just grab her and I'd punch her and make them pay for it. I can't help it. It's not me – my hand just goes, boom. My hands are, like, alive."

(Young man, Year 7, WOMANKIND research 2007)

- 33% of girls and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse.
- 25% of girls (the same proportion as adult women) and 18% of boys reported some form of physical relationship abuse.
- Around 75% of girls and 50% of boys reported some form of emotional relationship abuse.
- Most commonly reported forms of emotional abuse, irrespective of gender, were 'being made fun of' and 'constantly being checked up on by partner'.
- Girls were more likely than boys to say that the abuse was repeated and that it either remained at the same level of severity, or worsened, especially after the end of the relationship.
- Younger participants (aged 13 to 15 years old) were as likely as older adolescents (aged 16 and over) to experience some forms of relationship abuse.
- The majority of young people either told a friend or no-one about the violence; only a minority informed an adult.
- Risk factors which may increase a teenager's susceptibility to relationship abuse can include previous experiences of parental domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse and violent peer groups.
- Teen relationship abuse can have serious outcomes including depression and suicide.

# Why is teenage relationship abuse a hidden problem?

Teenagers experience as much relationship abuse as adults. Several independent studies have shown that 40% of teenagers are in abusive dating relationships. Domestic violence is still a 'hidden' issue in our society; and it is even more so for teenagers. This is exacerbated by the fact that adolescents can be more accepting of, and dismissive about, this form of behaviour than adults.

**The lack of awareness around this issue can be explained, to some extent, by the following factors:**

- Teenage romantic relationships can often be short-lived but they are experienced as intensely as adult relationships. Unfortunately, parents and professionals do not always take these relationships seriously enough.
- Adolescents can be more susceptible to gender-role stereotypes and can be confused about what their role is within society.
- Because of a lack of experience in constructing respectful relationships and because of their peer group norms it can be difficult for teenagers to judge their partner's behaviour as being abusive.
- Teenage relationship abuse is influenced by how teenagers look at themselves and others. This can be influenced by the media and its portrayal of how we should look and behave.
- First relationships are daunting enough, yet this can be even more difficult if someone is entering into a same-sex relationship and does not feel ready to tell people yet.
- If the young person attends the same school, college, youth club as their abuser, this can increase their sense of fear and entrapment.

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# Look out for warning signs of relationship abuse

Some of the signs below could indicate that a young person is experiencing relationship abuse. This list is not exhaustive and young people respond differently. These signs could also be due to other causes, but it is useful to be aware of common responses.

- **Physical signs of injury / illness**
- **Truancy, failing grades**
- **Withdrawal, passivity, being compliant**
- **Changes in mood and personality**
- **Isolation from family and friends**
- **Frequent texts and calls from boyfriend / girlfriend**
- **Inappropriate sexual behaviour / language / attitudes**
- **Depression**
- **Pregnancy**
- **Use of drugs / alcohol (where there was no prior use)**
- **Self-harm**
- **Eating disorders or problems sleeping**
- **Symptoms of post-traumatic stress**
- **Bullying / being bullied**

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## Impact on education

Relationship abuse can have a negative impact on a young person's cognitive ability which can affect how they behave at school. Signs can include:

- **Being late for school / not attending (especially if abuser attends same school)**
- **Arriving early / staying late to avoid abuser**
- **Disturbed sleep affecting concentration**
- **Not focussed in lessons as he or she is preoccupied and worried**
- **Very gendered expectations of career and achievement**
- **Feeling unsafe as afraid of being traced by abuser via school**
- **Appearing isolated and removed**
- **Worried that everyone at school knows what is happening**

"Relationship abuse can have a negative impact on how safe young people feel in school - this will impact on their participation, achievement and education."

## Same-sex relationships

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) young people experience relationship abuse at similar rates as heterosexual young people and, for some, it can be an increased risk factor. LGBT young people can face additional barriers to identifying abuse and seeking help. They may be concerned about revealing their sexual orientation; fearful of homophobic reactions from family, friends and professionals, and unaware of specialist support services.

## Teenage pregnancy

The UK has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in Western Europe. Being pregnant is a high-risk time for the onset or escalation of abuse as the prevalence of abuse is higher among young mothers than other young women. In fact, young women who are being abused are 4-6 times more likely than their non-abused peers to become pregnant

## Domestic violence at home

At least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence at home.<sup>2</sup> Discussing teenage relationship abuse may raise issues for young people who have experienced neglect and / or witnessed domestic violence at home. It is important to be aware of this and to deal with it as you would any other child protection issue.

## Staff experiences

There may be staff in the school that have experienced or are experiencing relationship abuse themselves. Discussing relationship abuse may therefore raise issues amongst staff so it is vital therefore to provide appropriate support. Schools should have an up-to-date policy and procedure on staff experiencing domestic violence. Taking time to have whole-school training will support staff in the long-term.

## Acceptance of violence against women and girls

36% of people in a recent Home Office survey<sup>3</sup> believed that a woman should be held wholly or partly responsible for being sexually assaulted or raped if she was drunk. These beliefs are wrong; a woman is never responsible for experiencing sexual assault. Some school staff will hold these damaging views and it is important that they are challenged. School staff must not collude with abuse and perpetuate harmful attitudes.

Staff may lack the skills and confidence to handle the subject and may benefit from relevant continuing professional development, for example, on gender equality.

**"I don't think everyone is so committed to challenging these types of behaviour or attitudes. Some people don't know how to deal with it - they are afraid of conflict. We haven't had enough training on it."**

**(Member of staff from WOMANKIND school research 2009)**

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health (2002)

<sup>3</sup> Home Office Survey 2009



# Gender equality education

## What is gender?

It is important to understand that gender is more than just biology: it is how we learn to be girls and boys, women and men, female and male. Young women and men are forming their identities and conducting their actions according to what is perceived appropriate to their gender. Young people's femininity and masculinity is rewarded by adults and policed by their peers.

## Sexualisation of young people

Many people are concerned that children and young people are being sexualised from a young age through exposure to hyper-sexualised messages. These messages are full of gender stereotypes and can lead to young women and girls learning to be 'sex objects' and young men and boys learning to be 'macho players'. This can influence the way that young people think about themselves, sex and relationships. It can make it difficult for young people to build respectful relationships. A recent report by Dr Linda Papadopoulos (Sexualisation of Young People Review 2010) found that 'Sexualisation lowers important barriers to child sexual abuse, and undermines healthy relationships, increasing the likelihood of violence against women and girls.'

## Violence against women and girls

Young women and girls disproportionately experience teenage relationship abuse. Teenage relationship abuse is a form of violence against women that is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality.

## Gender equality education

Schools have a role in creating an equal and respectful culture through challenging attitudes, preventing teenage relationship abuse and supporting young people who

experience it. Young people need to learn to negotiate gender stereotypes, identify abuse and develop skills to build respectful relationships. School staff need to have the skills and confidence to teach about and challenge any incidences of gender inequality. The whole school needs to be engaged to learn that girls and boys, men and women are equal. Schools should have an up-to-date policy and procedure on staff experiencing domestic violence. Taking time to have whole-school training will support staff in the long-term.

*Schools have a vital role to play, together with parents, in helping young people to develop healthy relationships, manage their emotions, and challenge the behaviour of some young men towards women and girls (Dr Linda Papadopoulos, 2010).*

## What about the boys?

It is equally important not to ignore the experiences of young men and boys who do experience relationship abuse. Young men and boys need to be engaged in intervention and prevention. Gender stereotypes limit and harm the lives of young men and boys. All children and young people will benefit from gender equality education.

## School priorities

Gender equality education is not just another initiative, it fits within the work that the school is currently committed to. It ensures young people are safe, healthy, enjoying, achieving and protected from harm.

# Whole-school approach to stop teenage relationship abuse

## Support students

**1.** All staff are informed about the school's child protection procedures and how they relate to teenage relationship abuse. They know when to discuss concerns with the designated senior member of staff and how they can refer young people to children's social care when they have identified an incidence of relationship abuse; children's social care and/or the police may also need to be involved with the abusing young person where appropriate.

**2.** Information about local support services is displayed in the school. This includes students having access to school counsellors and peer mentors who can provide appropriate support.

**3.** External agencies are referred to for specific support, including youth justice, police, sexual assault referral centres, children's social care services and local domestic violence agencies.

## Proactive prevention

**4.** Age and ability appropriate lessons on teenage relationship abuse are delivered to all students, including discussions on respectful relationships and gender stereotypes (femininity and masculinity). This can include lessons within PSHE education, SEAL and all subjects of the curriculum, following a review of the curriculum to identify all relevant links on gender equality and respectful relationships.

**5.** All school staff receive training on violence against women and girls, including awareness of teenage relationship abuse and gender equality. Training develops their understanding, knowledge and skills in identification and referral of relationship abuse. Additional training builds skills on teaching about teenage relationship abuse and gender equality.

**6.** A working group of staff and students develop, deliver and monitor a strategic approach to promoting respectful relationships and gender equality in the school. Ensure there is clear leadership and commitment to develop a 'whole school' approach to stop teenage relationship abuse.

**7.** Raise awareness of teenage relationship abuse across the school through joining the national campaign. Display campaign posters and the short film (<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk>), and talk about the campaign in assemblies and form time. Young people should participate in the running of this campaign.

## Equal environment

**8.** All school staff work together to promote gender equality and respectful relationships. All schools should also develop a respectful and equal culture where all incidences of gender inequality are challenged.

**9.** Develop, design and display a clear and concise statement on teenage relationship abuse. Students, staff and governors should all participate in the creation of this and be involved in its display and monitoring. This statement should be included in relevant school policies including the Anti-bullying, Behaviour and Gender Equality Duty.

**10.** School policies clearly outline procedures for responding, resolving, reporting incidences of teenage relationship abuse as well as provide support to the victim. All school staff are confident in identifying and challenging incidences of relationship abuse, including making relevant referrals when they consider that a young person requires protecting from harm or a crime may have been committed. Information can be included in the gender equality scheme, Anti-bullying policy and child protection procedures.

## Talking about teenage relationship abuse

Where young people are encouraged to talk about their experiences, they may turn to school staff for support. School staff can talk to students about teenage relationship abuse and tell them about the different support services that are available, such as helplines and websites that are free and confidential (<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk>). Remind them that you and the school take teenage relationship abuse very seriously and the school has a child protection procedure.

## Listening to young people's concerns

A young person may reveal that they are in an abusive relationship or that they are affected by domestic violence at home. Either way, what they are experiencing can be harmful to them.

Any disclosure of abuse should therefore be treated seriously and as a potential child protection concern, with appropriate steps taken in line with the school's safeguarding procedures.

If a child or young person starts to tell you about something that might indicate potential child abuse, listen but do not ask for any details. You need to let the child or young person know as soon as possible that if they tell you something that might cause you concern about their safety, you will have to tell someone else, usually the school's designated child protection senior member of staff.

Under no circumstances agree to keep this information a secret. Remember abuse thrives on secrecy. Make sure you are aware of your school's child protection procedures, and follow them, even if they are different from the information given below. You can also refer to the Government's inter-agency guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010)* available at [www.publications.education.gov.uk](http://www.publications.education.gov.uk)

Do not ask probing questions or suggest answers. It may undermine any investigation by the police or enquiry by children's social care services if it looks as if the child has been asked leading questions or given suggestions with regard to their answers. The Police, children's social care services and the NSPCC are the only organisations that have legal powers to investigate allegations of child abuse.

When listening to a child or young person, try to make sense of what you are being told:

- are they **currently** being harmed?
- are they **likely** to be harmed in the future?
- is anyone else at risk of being harmed?
- do they need medical attention?
- what are their overall needs?
- what is important to them?

It can help to keep in mind the three steps outlined below – but as mentioned previously, follow your school's child protection procedures.

## RECEIVE

- listen, do not look shocked or disbelieving;
- do not be judgemental;
- take what they are saying seriously and believe them;
- do not make the child or young person feel bad, for example, by saying things like "You should have told me earlier".

## REASSURE

- stay calm, tell them that they have done the right thing in telling you;
- acknowledge how hard it must have been to tell you;
- tell them that they are not to blame;
- empathise – but don't tell them how they should be feeling;
- don't promise confidentiality – explain that only those that need to know will be told (i.e. the designated staff member for child protection);
- be honest about what you can and cannot do.

## RESPOND

- do not interrogate – let them tell you as far as possible;
- do not ask probing questions or suggest answers – it's not your job to find out "who, where, when?", etc;
- refer your concern on to your school's designated senior manager for child protection – in line with your child protection procedures;

- record the date, time and any information given to you; always use the words said to you; never interpret what was said or put it in your own words. (This information could be used as evidence);
- record what you did next and with whom you shared the information – ensure that all this is in line with your school's child protection procedures;
- do not criticise or judge the abuser – the child or young person may have feelings for him or her; remember abuse often happens by someone known and trusted by the child or young person;
- try to follow things through yourself so they do not need to repeat their story to other staff – again, only if this is in line with your child protection procedures;
- explain what will happen next – for example, the designated officer will be informed, and they may want to speak to the child/young person further. If it is safe, the non-abusing parent or carer might also be informed (but always take great care where there is domestic abuse) – the Police and children's social care services might also be informed;
- get support for yourself. It can be distressing dealing with this type of information.

*Adapted by Women's Aid for their Expect Respect Educational Toolkit from 'Standing By', Cheshire County Council*

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## Safeguarding students

Whatever you do, make sure it is in line with your school's child protection policies and procedures. They may differ from what is written above. If in doubt, speak to your designated senior manager for Child Protection, local children's social care services, or the NSPCC.

### Early intervention of teenage relationship abuse

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) may be appropriate to identify the additional needs of a young person at an early stage. Early intervention will send clear messages that abusive relationships are unacceptable, promote a safe school environment and prevent escalation of abuse. School staff have a responsibility to recognise conduct that is serious and/or criminal and to refer to appropriate services as outlined under the local safeguarding children procedures and criminal law.

### Safeguard students

Schools have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children under Section 175 of the Education Act 2002. School staff who identify children and young people experiencing or witnessing relationship abuse need to refer them on to other statutory services to ensure they are safe and properly protected from harm.

There will need to be a co-ordinated response from children's social care services, police, youth offending teams and health services. Criminal justice agencies and children's services should work together to ensure the best outcomes for young people.

### Young people suspected of being in an abusive relationship

Young people who are suspected of being in an abusive relationship need to be referred to a statutory agency in accordance with local child protection procedures. All school staff should refer to the designated child protection lead senior manager (see flow-charts on pp.13-17). For more information about this process see the Government's inter-agency guidance, *Working together to safeguard children (2010)*, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of agencies and professionals where there are concerns about the safety and welfare of a child or children. It is available at [www.publications.education.gov.uk](http://www.publications.education.gov.uk)

### Young people identified as being abusive to others

Young people identified as being abusive to others may also have underlying unmet needs which require addressing by school or staff in other settings. These needs should be considered separately from those of the person being abused. Concerns about the young person who is being abusive to others may need to be discussed with the designated child protection senior manager. Local agencies should follow the appropriate child protection procedures, including a plan of action to address the identified needs and where necessary convene a child protection conference in respect of the young person who is being abusive. The young person will also need to be held responsible for their abusive actions and, where appropriate, criminal justice agencies will need to be involved. Child welfare and criminal justice agencies should work together.

# Safeguarding students

## Criminal offence

Young people may experience forms of abuse that are criminal and in these cases the Police need to be involved.

## School sanctions

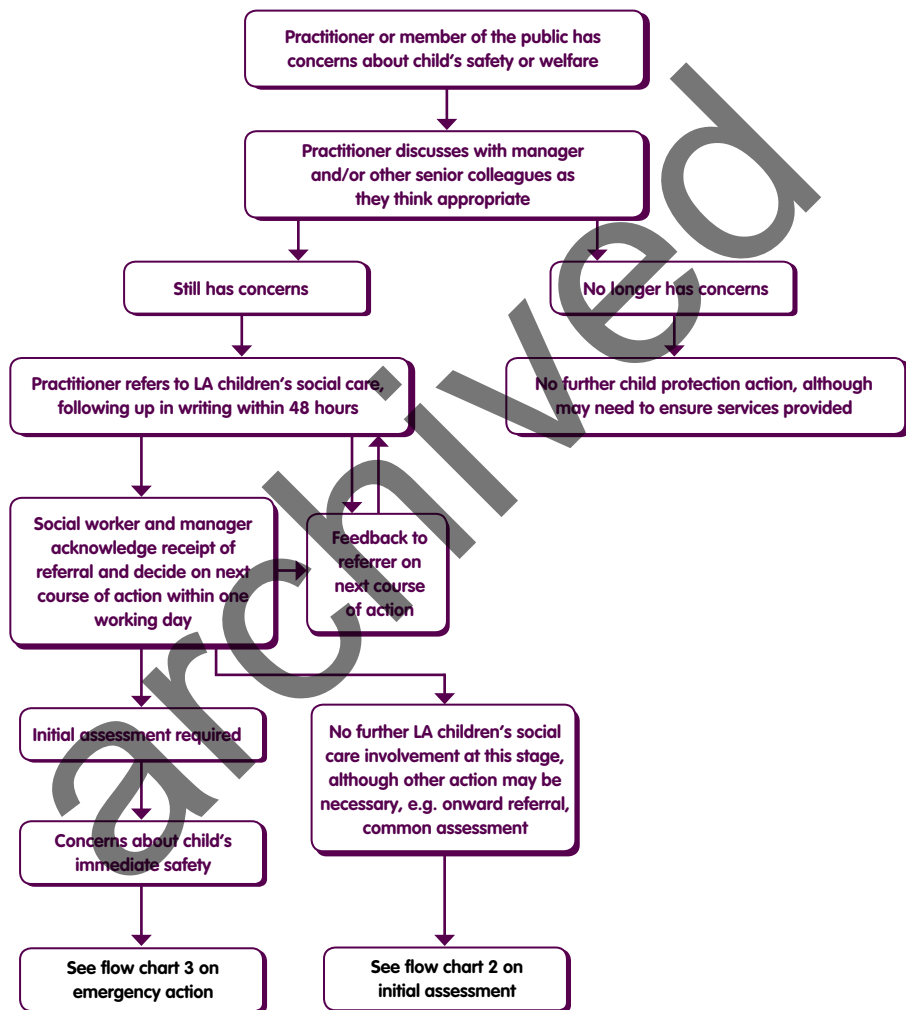
For abusive conduct which is not deemed to be a child protection issue or a criminal matter, for example, use of language or 'name calling', interventions should include sanctions. The focus should be on positive action to promote respectful relationships.

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## Safeguarding students

Flow chart 1 – Referral



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## Safeguarding students

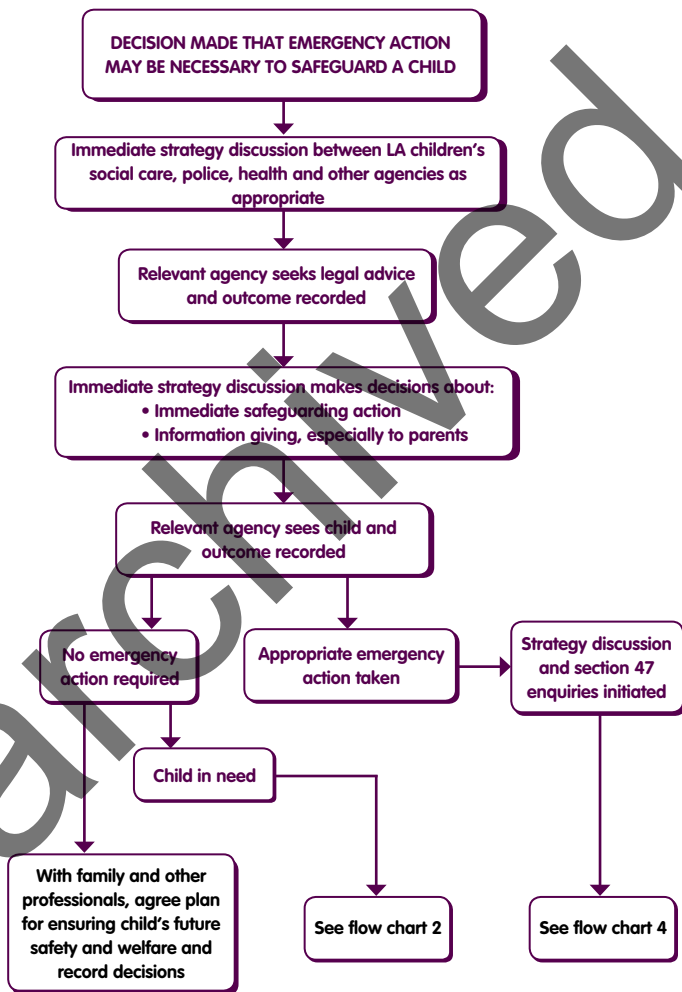
Flow chart 2 – What happens following initial assessment?





# Safeguarding students

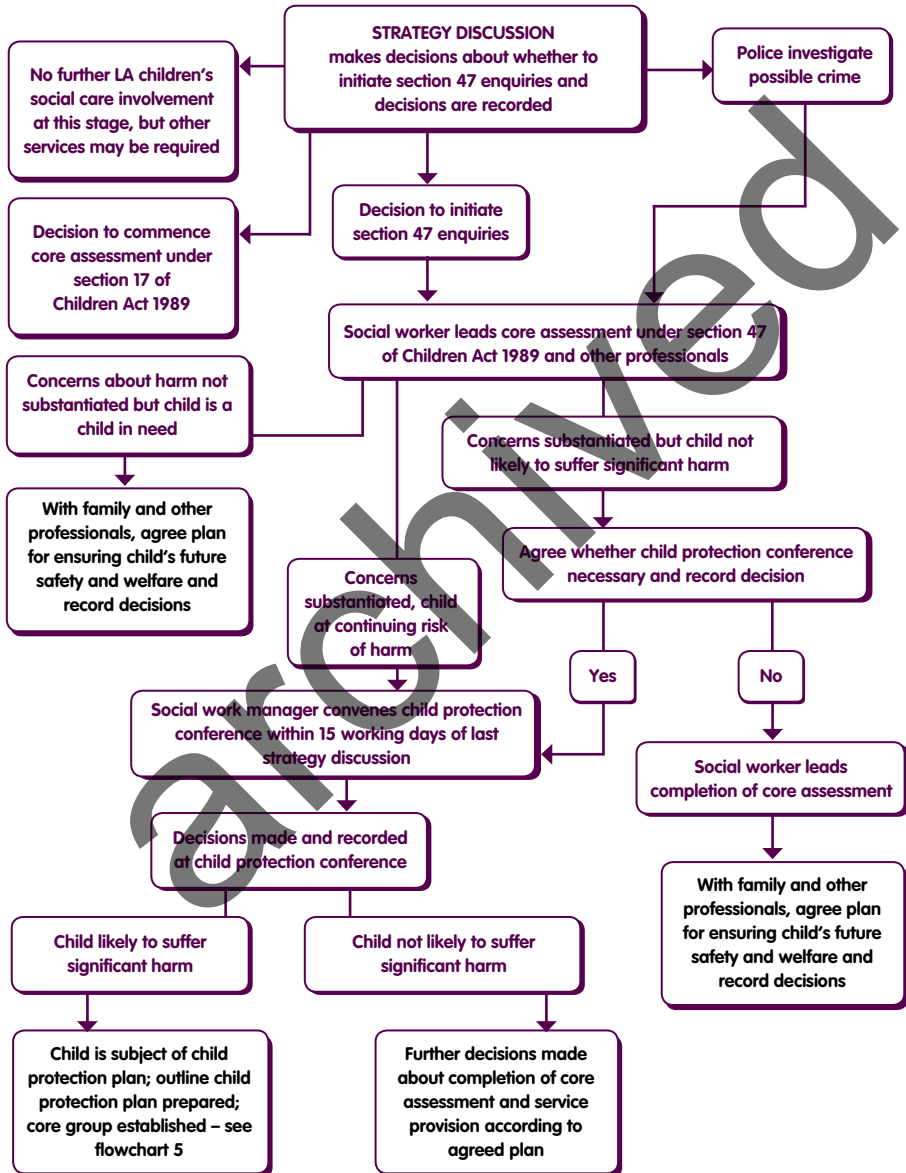
Flow chart 3 – Urgent action to safeguard children



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## Safeguarding students

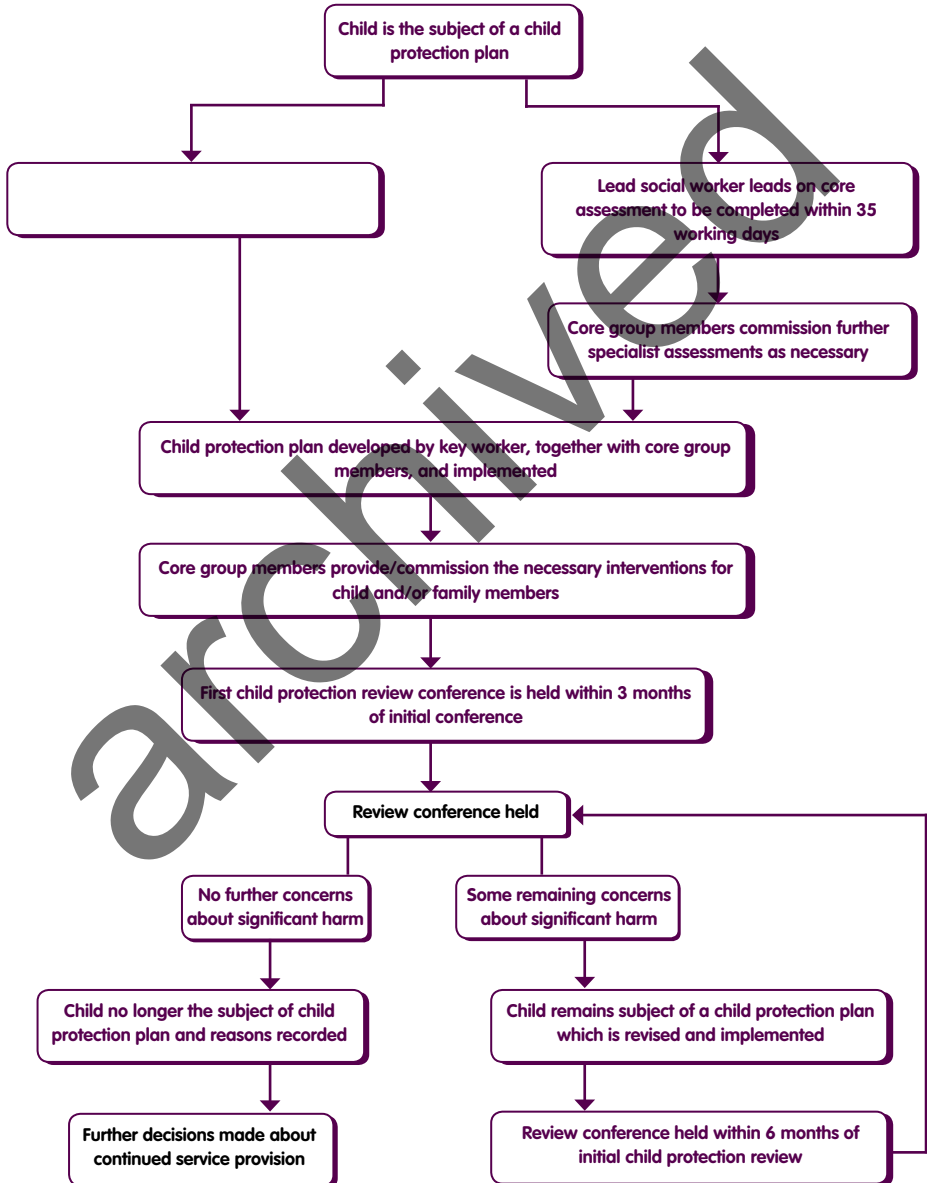
Flow chart 4 – What happens after the strategy discussion?



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## Safeguarding students

Flow chart 5 – What happens after the child protection conference, including the review process?



# Education information and resources

**HM Government (2010)** *Working Together to Safeguard Children*. **HM Government (2006)** *What to do if you're worried a child is being abused*

<http://publications.education.gov.uk>

**Women's Aid and Home Office (2010)** **Expect Respect: A Toolkit for Addressing Teenage Relationship Abuse in Key Stages 3, 4 and 5**

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications)

## Against Violence and Abuse (AVA)

This organisation works to improve the safety of women, children and young people experiencing relationship abuse. They run training courses for school staff and all professionals working on these issues.

[www.avaproject.org.uk](http://www.avaproject.org.uk)

## Challenging Violence, Changing Lives, Womankind Worldwide

24 secondary school lesson plans aims to raise awareness and transform attitudes to stop violence against women.

The lesson plans consider gender equality and sexual bullying. Free of charge.

[www.womankind.org.uk](http://www.womankind.org.uk)

[www.respect4us.org.uk](http://www.respect4us.org.uk)

## Expect Respect Educational Toolkit, Women's Aid

The Expect Respect Educational Toolkit consists of one easy to use 'Core' lesson for each year group from reception to year 13. Free of charge.

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

[www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk)

## Westminster Domestic Violence Prevention Pack for Schools, Westminster Domestic Violence Forum

A pack and supporting video for schools on issues around domestic violence

[www.westminsterdomesticviolenceforum.org.uk](http://www.westminsterdomesticviolenceforum.org.uk)

## Spiralling, National Youth Theatre and Safer Bristol

DVD and lesson plans about how relationships can become increasingly controlling and abusive.

[www.bristol.gov.uk](http://www.bristol.gov.uk)

## Respect, Zero tolerance Charitable trust

For primary and secondary schools, this challenges the notion that abuse is inevitably part of our lives and offers positive choices to develop healthy relationships.

[www.zerotolerance.org.uk](http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk)

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# Education information and resources

## Women's Rights, Amnesty International UK

Information, facts and activities themed around six topics including domestic violence, rape and campaigns to stop gender violence. Free of charge.

[www.amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_19116.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_19116.pdf)

## Bwise2 Sexual Exploitation, Barnardo's

This preventative education programme is based on the real-life experiences of children and young people who have been supported by a specialist Barnardo's service.

[www.barnardos.org.uk/books\\_and\\_tools\\_tools\\_for\\_professionals.htm#bwise2](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/books_and_tools_tools_for_professionals.htm#bwise2)

## Respect Not Fear

Nottingham domestic violence forum website for young people about relationships and domestic violence.

[www.respectnotfear.co.uk](http://www.respectnotfear.co.uk)

## National Union of Teachers

The NUT has produced national guidelines on domestic abuse for teachers called 'Silence is not always golden'.

[www.teachers.org.uk/node/652](http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/652)

# Support services for young people

## Women's Aid

Women's Aid is a national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children. They support a network of over 500 domestic and sexual violence services across the UK.

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)  
[www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk) (a dedicated website for young people experiencing domestic violence)

## Refuge

Refuge is a charity that offers help and advice to women and young girls in abusive relationships.

[www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

## The National Domestic Violence Helpline

The Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge, is a national service for women experiencing domestic violence, and for their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

**T: 0808 2000 247**  
[www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk)

## Rape Crisis

Offers a range of specialist services for women and girls who have been raped or experienced another form of sexual violence – whether as adults, teenagers or children.

**T: 0808 802 9999**  
[www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)

## Respect

A charity that runs support services and programmes for those who inflict domestic violence, and an advice line for men who are victims of domestic violence.

**T: 0845 122 8609**  
[www.respectphoneline.org.uk](http://www.respectphoneline.org.uk)

## Men's Advice Line

Also run by Respect, this is a helpline for male victims of domestic violence.

**T: 0808 801 0327**  
[www.mensadvice.org.uk](http://www.mensadvice.org.uk)

## Broken Rainbow

A national charity that provides support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-people experiencing relationship abuse, including a national helpline.

**T: 0300 999 LGBT (5428)**  
[www.broken-rainbow.org.uk](http://www.broken-rainbow.org.uk)

## Victim Support

A national charity that can help young people if they have been a victim of abuse or violence.

**T: 0845 30 30 900**  
[www.victimsupport.org](http://www.victimsupport.org)

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With thanks to:

Jo Sharpen  
Hannah Wharf

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