

feature

Helping the 'hidden victims'.

Domestic violence may be "the next big issue in youth work". Ymlaen looks at new approaches to help youth workers tackle the problem.



Welsh Women's Aid reports that up to October 11,033 women in

Wales sought advice and support from the refuge movement in 1995, a 52 per cent increase on the same period last year. South Wales Police dealt with 3,660 cases of domestic violence in 1994, against 3,196 in 1993, and 1,192 by June 1995. Domestic violence is the second most common violent crime in Britain.

The issue of domestic violence has received considerable publicity recently, partly through the

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efforts of a range of Welsh organisations who mounted the No Excuses campaign. It has also informed the debate surrounding the Family Bill, the parliamentary progress of which was thrown into doubt late last year following a 'pro-family' campaign by

backbench Conservative MPs.

Though domestic violence may be between adults, they are not the only casualties. There are more children in refuges in Wales than there are women. These are the "hidden victims" of domestic violence.

The No Excuses campaign booklet, *When home is where the hurt is*, says: "Not all children will suffer, but some may feel fear, anxiety and guilt, and have behavioural problems...Girls might tend to internalise their distress and become withdrawn, while boys are more likely to act out their troubles with defiant behaviour... Long-term exposure to violence at home causes some kids to think that resolving a conflict with aggression is normal, and they may resort to assaults and threats, particularly towards female teachers."

Rose Hislop, co-ordinator of the Wrexham Open Doors NCH Action for Children Project in Wrexham, sees the effect of domestic violence on young people as "the next big issue in youth work". It was the subject of a

major conference in Wrexham in November, entitled 'Domestic violence and its effects on young people - the professional response'. However, help for young victims is often available only at point of crisis.

Wrexham Open Doors Project and the XY-Zero Project, also based in North Wales, take a more preventative and holistic approach.

The Open Doors Project has produced an activity pack which seeks to help young people in a number of ways, developing the skills, for example, to: intervene in the cycle of violence that can occur when young men have a violent role model; recognise the signs of domestic violence in their own relationships; and help them recognise the extent to which abuse in relationships is based on a power imbalance between men and women, and the ways in which this is perpetuated by society.

Rose Hislop says: "Domestic violence is perpetuated by the whole

society we live in. We need to start educating young people as soon as possible about gender imbalances, power bases and conflict."

The XY-Zero Project is a joint initiative by Welsh Women's Aid and the Save the Children Fund, and is aimed at 11-14 year olds. It is being piloted in five schools and youth organisations in Wales, including a youth group in Pwllheli.

Using a teaching pack and video, it addresses gender stereotyping, how violence occurs and how it should be dealt with. Project coordinator Menna Elfyn says the pack "looks at what leads to a situation where violence is used. We are trying to show how it is totally unacceptable and develop strategies which 'unlearn' the aggressive behaviour that some children may be seeing."

If successful, the project could be extended to younger children. Older children will be trained as playground mediators, able to intervene when conflict arises and help children deal with it. Menna Elfyn hopes the subject could eventually feature in the National Curriculum. "I would also like to see a properly accredited qualification like GNVQ which will prove young people can resolve conflict."

Such approaches to the problem of domestic violence are necessarily long-term. Welsh Women's Aid and its network of refuges can provide immediate shelter from a violent partner. Children will feel more secure with one parent in a stable environment than with both parents in an unstable one.

Refuges are usually ordinary-looking houses shared by women and



children. Apart from providing a safe place to be, they also supply information and support. Addresses and phone numbers are secret but Women's Aid can be contacted through the local Social Services or Housing Department, the Citizen's Advice Bureau, or the police. In an emergency, contact the police.

Contacts:

Welsh Women's Aid is a national organisation representing Wales' 40-plus local groups. It has three national offices at Cardiff 01222390874 Rhyl 01745 334767 Aberystwyth 01970 612748

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No Excuses guide to dealing with domestic violence is available from the Equal Opportunity Unit, South Glamorgan County Council, County Hall, Atlantic Wharf, Cardiff CF1 5UW. Tel 01222 872610.

The *NO EXCUSES* campaign is being run by South Glamorgan County Council with the active support of Women's Aid, the police and many other agencies. Photograph: Mo Wilson.