

Article

# “I Thought It Was My Fault Just for Being Born”. A Review of an SEL Programme for Teenage Victims of Domestic Violence

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**Abstract:** Research has established the life-altering effects of living with domestic violence on young people. Traumatic experiences negatively impact their education, leisure activities, and social-emotional learning (SEL). The secrecy concerning domestic violence means young people suffer self-blame, shame, fear of disclosure and family separation. The researcher designed a 12-week multimedia programme, ‘up2talk’, to enhance the communications skills and emotional literacy of the participants. Parents and teenagers were fully informed of the aims and previously attended the family service hosting the programme. Domestic violence was identified as a core issue, without the expectation of personal disclosure. This approach enabled young people to voice and explore the effects of domestic violence on their lives. Participants developed the elements of the programme and a family worker co-facilitated the groups. The third-party approaches: ‘how would a teenager feel?’, artistic expression, assertiveness, debates and videoing drama increased SEL and generated discussion, while protecting privacy. Parents provided two interviews concerning their children, and teenagers provided three individual interviews and ongoing group reviews. A thematic analysis showed a reduction in shame and self-blame, enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, increased engagement in education and recreation and improved family relationships. Themes were triangulated by facilitators’ observations, interview data, artefacts, group reviews and parental feedback. All families were offered follow-up support. The effectiveness of the interactive group indicates opportunities for its development in educational and youth settings.

**Keywords:** domestic violence; adolescence; teenage; Adverse Childhood Experience; social-emotional learning; voice; interventions; group supports



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to Silence, Prevalence and ACEs

This paper explores the impact of domestic violence on teenage victims through the lens of social-emotional learning (SEL). The researcher designed and ran a 12-week interactive programme called ‘up2talk’ for five teenage participants affected by domestic violence. The programme was hosted in a family services centre and a family worker co-facilitated sessions with the researcher.

The prevalence of domestic and family violence remains uncertain due to the hidden nature of the issue, particularly for young victims who may fear being taken into care. Øverlien and Holt [1], writing for a Special Issue in the *Journal of Family Violence*, noted the ongoing difficulty in establishing prevalence figures internationally. The World Health Organization declared gender-based and family violence an international epidemic [2].

The Irish figures are based on police reports, which were themselves challenged for how they were compiled [3]. Community-based research such as SAVI, Ireland [4] and the work of Radford et al. [5] in the UK, show levels of reporting as low as 5% among victims of domestic and sexual violence. Domestic violence and child sexual abuse were found to be frequently concurrent by Edleson [6].

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research internationally highlighted the fundamental impact of childhood trauma throughout one’s lifetime. Poor health,

education and employment, chronic illness and a shorter life expectancy are results of early trauma, with domestic violence being a significant factor [7,8]. Challenging behaviour in a school context and lower academic performance are significantly associated with victims of domestic violence and other traumatic ACEs, as noted by Gordon [9] (p. 11).

ACEs significantly impact learning as they can compromise a learner's ability to benefit from education. These learners frequently have trouble trusting teachers and other adults, and difficulty creating and maintaining relationships with their classmates [7–9].

### 1.2. Context for Research

Young victims of domestic violence are marginalised as individuals and as a group. The higher rate of domestic violence associated with extreme poverty is observed in many people in underserved communities [10]. The effects of living with domestic violence include physical neglect or injury, sleep disruption and emotional trauma [11]. These cognitive and emotional impacts on concentration, combined with the lack of resources for study, negatively affect a young person's education [12]. A United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report noted that children affected by family violence had up to a 40% lower reading ability than children from non-violent homes [13]. Leisure and extracurricular activities are restricted by lack of money, the keeping of the 'secret' of violence in the home, and teenagers having to care for siblings or the non-abusing parent [14]. The resulting isolation leads to shame and self-blame, as well as the belief that their situation is unique.

The aim of this research study was to design and deliver the specially tailored SEL programme 'up2talk' for young people affected by domestic violence. The model which was used drew on the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [15] model and specifically included elements that addressed the established negative effects of domestic violence on teenagers SEL. These included the loss of confidence, self-blame, isolation, and academic underachievement [16]. In light of the concerns around direct research within this group and the needs of young victims to manage their engagement [17], a social skills enhancement approach was chosen. As the sole researcher in this study, the term 'the researcher' is interchangeable with my personal identification in this paper.

### 1.3. Research Focus

The need to hear the voices of young people was the primary research focus. As research identified the benefits for custodial parents (mothers in this case) of understanding the processes that young people are engaged in [18], and due to the opportunities to gain support and understanding of their own experiences, mothers' voices were included in the study [19]. As the sole researcher, I designed and facilitated the group but also participated in the games and activities. Therefore, this qualitative study used an active practitioner approach in line with the dual aims of action research [20]: learning from participants and aiming to enhance the relevant service [21]. The notion of the re-traumatisation of victims as a result of participation in the study, is a barrier to active research into domestic violence, although data from participants suggest this is unfounded if principles of respect and effective communication are maintained [17]. The work of Houghton and Youth Advisors [19] in Scotland culminated in young survivors making direct submissions to Parliament concerning the effective support and interventions as part of designing materials and building networks. However, the voices of young survivors are rarely heard, and they are seldom consulted in the design of interventions that address their needs [11].

Thus, the interactive group programme, 'up2talk' was devised to enhance SEL skills, in order to facilitate the discussion and understanding of domestic violence without the necessity of sharing individual traumatic stories. The domestic violence focus of the group was discussed in the initial interviews with the parents and children. They were informed it was not a therapy group, although support was available on site weekly or in the long-term through the family services. The young people, who participated in the study, developed social and emotional skills and effective communications through a variety of media. The

choice around their depth of engagement and the activities remained with them. This programme aimed to enhance emotional literacy and communication skills [22]. The need for nurturing activities and relationships in the recovery from trauma is vital [23].

Lundy [24] stresses the need for children to have the ability to speak out, a platform to do so and an audience to hear them, otherwise the right to a voice is ineffective:

An important first step is that children are asked which matters they consider impact them, and how (or indeed whether) they would like to be involved in influencing the outcome of the decision. Children complain that the issues which they are allowed to influence are predetermined (p. 934).

The original research questions of the study proposed that the 'up2talk' could enhance SEL, the awareness of the effects of domestic violence among participants and generate materials for other groups:

1. How can a specially tailored SEL programme positively affect social-emotional skills in 12–14-year-olds impacted by domestic violence?
2. How can such a group help participants to develop an awareness of how domestic violence in their families affects their SEL skills?
3. How can a small-scale programme generate themes, ideas and instruments to develop SEL programmes for other young people affected by domestic violence? [22] (p. 9).

The efficacy of the programme was evidenced in the increased confidence and enhanced SEL skills in the behaviour and expressions of young people in the activities, processes and reviews. Their expanded skill sets were also reviewed and exemplified in their individual interviews. The time frame proved too short for initiating designs for further programmes, although transferable elements were developed.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Preliminary Investigations

The literature review generated an extensive understanding of the sociological complexity of young peoples' experiences of family violence. I consulted family support workers, women's domestic violence refuge workers, social workers, local victim support agencies and several young adults who had left a violent home situation, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of young people and families. Frontline workers in addiction services and youth services were also consulted [22] (p. 128). The initial proposal was to run the group in a youth service. I attended the youth service for three weeks and had informal conversations with workers and club members. Secrecy around the issue was mentioned when a young volunteer insisted that the posters for 'up2talk' be put up in the toilets as nobody would pause and read them in the hall.

The second proposal to work with Poplaville family services centre was successful and meetings with the coordinator, the co-facilitator, Luke (a family worker) and the team followed. Luke had an extensive local trust and genuine empathy for young people which guided the recruitment process. He believed that families involved with the services had answered many intrusive questions to access income and other supports. Therefore, the paperwork should be simple and personal interaction should be the preferred method of working [22]. This view was supported by UK research suggesting that social workers spend the majority of their time on paperwork rather than with clients [25].

### 2.2. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from Trinity College Dublin. Each participant and parent completed an informed consent form including the permission to publish materials generated by the programme. A commitment to complete anonymity concerning all identifying names and details was given to participants. This was maintained with the final data set involving numbers and pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of families. The option to leave the programme at any time without explanation was included.

### 2.3. Designing the Programme

Action research was the approach chosen, as the aim was an increased understanding of the issue informing an enhanced practice in the field. A review in a Canadian journal [20] found that:

For example, action research is recursive: It starts out from experience or practical problems, but when findings are determined to lead to improved practice, the process begins anew. It is a field-intensive process in which the researcher acts as a participant observer, often working in collaboration with colleagues. (p.64)

The model of change for the 'up2talk' programme was informed by Wight et al. [26] using a phased approach:

- Definition of the problem: the effects of domestic violence on teenage SEL
- Factors receptive to change: enhanced levels of SEL skills in participants
- Mechanism of change: interactive SEL peer group
- Delivered by means of a structured group SEL skills programme

The instruments were used successfully by the researcher and were trialled specifically for this programme. The data were generated directly by the participants.

### 2.4. Recruitment

The family centre contacted 21 families with teenagers aged 12–14 who had experienced domestic violence and invited the parent/guardian and young person to a meeting to explain the programme. Six families responded and five continued to participate in the group. This initial meeting involved a parent and child meeting both individually and together, with myself as the researcher and the family worker, Luke. Young people filled out a short cartoon-based sheet of seven questions, 'the feelings chart', and their mothers completed the same chart concerning their child [22] (p. 320). This colour chart is listed as Appendix A, Figure A1. Parents and young people were asked about their queries and hopes for the programme.

### 2.5. The Process of the Programme 'up2talk'

The programme ran for 12 consecutive weeks for two and a half hours every Wednesday afternoon. The five participants, two girls and three boys, all aged 13, completed the programmes with an absentee rate of one session each. All participants and parents attended the final exhibition on the celebration day.

The key principles of the 'up2talk' programme included providing a safe, supportive atmosphere and building trusting, respectful relationships between facilitators and young people, and among the entire group. The research indicates that understanding relationships and participants maintaining a choice over their engagement levels and activities are prioritised by young people in such groups [27,28]. This emerged in the participant reviews of 'up2talk', discussed in the Findings section.

### 2.6. Approaches to Weekly Sessions 'up2talk'

The use of third-party approaches, both in discussion and activity, allowed for 'what if' scenarios and questions which did not request personal disclosure. The use of multimedia and sensorial activity aligned with an understanding that "children who experience violence in their homes experience it with all their senses" [29] (p. 181). An ongoing review of the activities and the process of 'up2talk' was combined with an opt-in or opt-out to any activity, question or debate. Theron et al. [29] emphasise the value of visual arts in working with young people, but urged caution against applying an adult interpretation of the participant's art.

As participants' SEL skills developed, their engagement and confidence in planning and reviewing activities increased. The plan-do-review model enhanced their skills and these developments were noted, reviewed weekly with the group and further analysed by the facilitator. The programme was structured to develop group trust and SEL skills,

build on successes and expand the range of activities and depth of engagement in line with participants' choices and the ongoing review.

### 2.7. Instruments

The activities of 'up2talk', such as the assertiveness games used in the programme, were piloted in the youth service groups. Key instruments such as the 'feelings chart' were trialled on a mixed group of eleven young people aged 10–14. Tape recorders for interviewing were previously successful in numerous youth groups and were used for individual interviews.

### 2.8. Individual Interviews—Parents and Young People

The interviews were conducted on the first meeting and the last week of the programme for the five participants and mothers. A group review was held midway through the programme for mothers. Follow up interviews, four months later, were attended by three young people. Feelings charts were used each time as a reference point and questions around specific developments and changes were included. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interview schedule. [22] (p. 173).

Interviews	Participants	Parents	Purpose	Approach	Time
Initial	Young people Individually w/ researcher		To explain the programme	'Feelings chart' and follow up questions	Day 1 15 min.
Initial	Young people Individually w/family worker		To explain the programme and take questions	Explain context-support of family centre	Day 1 15 min.
Initial	Young person (5 duos)	Child parent researcher and family worker (5 duos)	To ensure clarity between family members and facilitators	Discussion of hopes for the programme	Day 1 15 min.
Initial		Individually with researcher	To build trust and answer queries	Parent filled 'Feelings chart' re. their view of their child	Day 1 15 min.
Initial		Individually with family worker	To answer queries/explain support role of family centre		Day 1 15 min.
Interviews	Participants	Parents	Purpose	Approach	Time
Four-week review	Researcher and family worker	Three out of five mothers attended	To inform Parents + check for queries/ concerns.	Group review by mothers. Peer discussion.	Week 4 30 min.
Final week review	Each participant (5) had an individual interview with researcher		to explore changes in understanding and actions. Reflect on the programme process	To revisit the 'Feelings Chart'. To review the programme from participant's view	Wk. 12 20 min.
Final week review		Four mothers had an individual interview with the researcher	to discuss observed changes in child's understanding and actions.	To explore parent observations of the young person's responses to the programme	Wk. 12 20 min.
Follow up review— 4 months	participants individual interview with the researcher.		to explore the long-term view of the programme.	Revisit the 'Feelings Chart'. A discussion of effects observed.	Wk. 27 20 min.

Feelings chart: cartoons not shown (see Appendix A for illustrated colour chart).



### 2.9. Young People Interviewed Each Other, the Facilitator and Parents

These interviews were initiated by the young people in the final weeks, their questions reflected their new understanding.

### 2.10. Group Review for Parents Mid-Point, and Young People—Ongoing

These group reviews used unfinished sentences, art materials and wooden puzzles to generate ideas. The group feedback informed the media and methods used in the weekly group sessions.

The following table offers examples of the core elements of the programme contained within the materials and media chosen and developed by the participants. (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Instruments for data collection. [22], (p. 153).

Application Instrument	Method of Use Participants			
Instrument	Application	Purpose	Activity	Participants
Group games	Practice social emotional skills weekly	Relax and bond. Build skills and confidence	Communication and listening games	Young people researcher + Family worker
Assertiveness cartoons	Introduce concept visually	Learn the skills in action	Cartoons and games about life situations	Young people
Drama	Developed from assertiveness games	Express issues and dilemmas of life	Young people wrote, acted and filmed short pieces	Young people researcher + Family worker
Visual charts of life issues	Express emotion/ideas visually	Develop Emotional literacy	Concept + materials supplied	Young people
Debates	Express + listen to opinions. Explore difference in key issues	Expand empathy and understanding	Walking debate. Place yourself on a spectrum of opinion in room	Young people
Clay pieces	Creating a clay piece for a chosen emotion	Name and represent an emotion	Each one selects an emotion card and creates in clay.	Young people
Cookery	Bond and enjoy. Teamwork	Provide lunch each week	Participants prepared lunch and snacks	Young people researcher + Family worker
Domestic violence story and response 'Amanda's story'	Group listen to story. Express emotion by pouring water individually	Safe to express emotions and discuss at a remove.	Family worker reads. Participants listen and respond. Discuss	Young people researcher + Family worker
Instrument	Application	Purpose	Method of use	Participant
Celebration Day Event	Group prepare art work exhibit. Drama, song and video for families	Share success and display work to family	Participants design and deliver entire event.	Group (5) Families (5) Staff of centre (10) Facilitator and family worker

### 2.11. Assertiveness Cartoons, Games and Activities

Assertiveness skills began with creating cartoons of 'happy head', 'sad head' and 'aggro head' and attributing thoughts, words and feelings to each 'head', as they represent an emotional state. This progressed to games and quizzes, example below:

Sample early question game of Assertiveness [22] (p. 320):

A friend asks you to lend them money, you can't do it, and they pressurize you by saying . . . .	A little boy on your road is stealing a lot in the shop, his mum works very hard and doesn't know, his sister asks you to keep the secret.	Your friends are going to . . . ? IT'S TROUBLE you don't really want to and you will get in loads of hassle but they are all going?	A school mate calls your family names and says mean stuff about them. You hear about it AND . . .
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#### 2.12. Drama and Filming Vignettes Written by the Group

The sketches originated from the Assertiveness programme and were written, acted and filmed by the group drawing on their ongoing concerns. Several sketches included heated scenes in the school principal's office with an angry and defiant young person shouting and nobody listening to their point of view.

#### 2.13. Group Games, Discussions

These exercises graduated from switching, guessing and counting games to exploring beliefs and experiences.

#### 2.14. Walking Debates

Topics began with general viewpoint questions such as:

"should we have to wear school uniforms?"

The questions progressed to topics such as:

"what makes a happy family?" "Would you accept a gay sibling in your family?"

#### Team Building

Cookery challenges led to requests for an evening mountain hike with team challenges.

#### 2.15. Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy was developed in the programme from games that matched the names of emotions to a more complex interpretation of the deeper emotions associated with domestic violence effects.

#### 2.16. Art and Clay—Individual and Group Expressions

Participants created clay pieces expressing an emotion or thought, either random or self-selected.

Charts and drawings were used to express relationships and their importance in young people's lives.

#### 2.17. Empathy with Others' Feelings

In week four a small bird got tangled in security wire and the group became very upset when it was attacked by a larger bird. They wanted to get ladders and save it; further discussion followed.

#### Debates—Relationship with Fathers (in this Group, Fathers Were the Absent Abusive Parents)

A debate arose about the role of fathers. The idealised father figure and the reality of family difficulties, including violence and separation, was discussed.

#### 2.18. Releasing Feelings through Pouring Water, and Painting over Old Feelings with New Hopes

'Sam's story', in week three, described a bad day. Participants were asked to pour water if they felt concerned for him as the story was read aloud. Later, 'Amanda's story' recounted a domestic violence incident.

### 2.19. Celebration Day

This day was entirely designed and delivered by the group, from the invitations to the entertainment. On this final day, their work was displayed with explanatory posters and families were invited. Refreshments were served, guests were shown around the work and encouraged to ask questions.

Each young person gave a short unscripted speech.

They were asked individually what they had gained from the programme when receiving their certificate, and each one chose to speak. This exercise melds a public speaking challenge with an internal reflection.

This complete set of exercises, activities and experiences of the participants generated the data sets and enhanced their practical social-emotional skills, as well as understanding of the effects of domestic violence in their lives.

## 3. Findings/Results

The interpretation of the participants' art, artefacts and dramatic materials was checked with the participants in the weekly sessions of 'up2talk' and their statements were recorded without challenge. If a young person produced a distraught face in clay, gave it a comic name and stated that it meant nothing, this was recorded. In some instances, when member checking, participants revised the original interpretations, but this was at their own volition. The interviews were semi structured and used visual aids and prompts, with the choice of using the third person responses available.

The findings consisted of the young participants' and mothers' voices, and all originated in their materials generated during the programme. The materials included the interviews, charts and drawings, and the drama recorded and discussed. The interviews with teenagers and parents, as well as the group discussions, formed the majority of the data.

### 3.1. Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically according to the method of Braun and Clarke [30], and themes were coded using the Saldaña [31] method. Weekly reviews of the sessions, materials and observations with the co-facilitator, Luke, the use of a reflexive journal and a critical friend were employed to reduce bias on the part of the researcher. The semi structured interviews (ssitv) were all conducted by the researcher, and were all individual and private, with the feelings chart used as a discussion point. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software.

### 3.2. Triangulation of the Data

The facilitator and family worker recorded their observations in a weekly review. The participants member-checked their expressions for accuracy in all media. The role of the mothers was vital in validating both the opinions of young people on change, and observations of new behaviour by the researcher and family worker. Examples are provided in the findings of this vital element.

### 3.3. Central Themes of the Findings

This section explores the overarching themes emerging in the participants' direct voice. This approach aligns with the aim of the study to enhance the SEL skills of participants to enable their unique voice to be heard. The involvement in and evaluation of such a programme by the practitioner is a key element of action research [18,32].

This is followed by a review of the findings in relation to the research questions regarding the enhancement of social skills and emotional literacy, and the possibility of generating materials for other groups from this study 'up2talk'.



### 3.4. Silence

The culture of silence, which blankets the issue of domestic violence, was prominent from the preliminary investigations through to the final interviews with participants. This increased anxiety and isolation. The issue remained unspoken, even in family therapy by participants:

*"I don't really remember, a lot happened outside the house"* (Linda: ssitv 3)

and:

*"I don't know, I just never really . . . dunno . . . didn't talk about it."* (Jack: ssitv 3)

Mothers also struggled with secrecy within the family; two of the mothers had never directly discussed the violent events with their children and expressed fears of

*"upsetting the kids, bringing it all up again, just when we are settled"* (Ruth: ssitv 2)

and debated the reasons for their silence:

*"I don't know why I never talked about it (in therapy), I thought they were over it, didn't want to drag it up again. I've never really gone into the ins and outs and talked properly. I either think, well he doesn't remember, or it might affect him if I bring it up."* (Sara: ssitv. 2) [22] (pp. 197–198)

A lack of voice for two participants meant that they asked privately *'what does domestic violence mean?'* This occurred in a programme addressing the issue with information and consent supplied before and during the programme.

### 3.5. Self-Blame

Self-blame was another important issue where confusion about the reason for the violence was expressed:

*"I didn't know what my mam and dad were arguing about so I would have thought . . . is it because of me? Something I did . . . ?"* (Linda: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 220)

Self-blame was part of a struggle to make sense of the violence, and Jamie questioned it:

*"You wonder if it's your fault, like for being born?"* (Jamie: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 219)

In their final interviews, the mothers expressed regrets about the situation:

Researcher: Do you think maybe one of the reasons you take it (negative behaviour from children) is because you feel guilty?

Mother: *Yeah, because it was going on for a long time, and was very hard on the kids, but I didn't see that for a long time.*

Researcher: So you feel guilty you didn't do it early enough. However, you were hoping one day he would get better?

Mother: *I did, I think I got blinded by that, one day he will get better.* (Betty: mother ssitv) [22] (p. 220)

### 3.6. Relationship with Father

The debates about family and art pieces called *'closest to my heart'* initiated conversations about fathers.

Love and complex emotions surrounding the participants' missing fathers were expressed, from happy memories to the anger and helplessness that emerged in response to *'Amanda's story'*. The confusion between a father being kind and fun and feelings of yearning for this were expressed in comments by participants, such as: *"this is the Dad we want"*. This was mixed with anger and futility at a man who is violent towards women and frightens his children:

*"she (the child, Amanda) can't put a gun up to her Dad's head and tell him stop, can she?"* (group debate after *'Amanda's story'* of violence) [22] (p. 218)

The views of mothers were often in conflict with the teenager's positive view of the relationship, with mothers expressing much fear regarding access times because of previous instabilities and substance abuse. One mother felt that:

*"He'll (son) say you're always giving Dad a hard time but my view is that no, when he's with you he should be sober, but he seems to be very loyal to his dad in a way, even though he (Dad) doesn't do a lot for him, or when he's with him, he's bored a lot of the time."* (Sara: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 238)

The ambivalence present in the ongoing relationships with a separated father was expressed:

*"you probably think it's hypocritical after what he did; but he really helped me"*,

and another teenager found that:

*"he's just always there for me."*

The difficulty in accepting the reality of a father's behaviour was mentioned in attempts to repair relationships with him:

*"we tried but it all kicked off."* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 238)

### 3.7. The Ability to Regulate Disclosure by Participants

The participants consistently benefited from the indirect third-party approach. Phrases such as 'a teenager might feel this or think that' were used to explore sensitive topics. In the second interview at the end of the programme, as the interviewer, I asked individually if the participants were comfortable enough to discuss the effects of living with domestic violence more directly. Four agreed and one participant responded as follows:

Researcher: So, are you OK with talking more directly about the domestic violence now we know each other better?

Dylan: *Yeah . . .*

Researcher: If it's too nose-y like, would you tell me to stop?

Dylan: *Yeah, sure, assertiveness and all that!* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 227)

Another participant corrected their first response, which presupposed a group view:

Researcher: Additionally, when we did the clay pots, did you feel it was a bit too serious when we asked people about effects of violence and things like that?

Linda: *No, if it was a bit too serious, we would have said that we didn't like it.*

Researcher: OK, that's good. Additionally, do you think all the group could have said 'oh no, I don't like that' or just you?

Linda: *I don't know about the rest of them. I just know I could have said out straight, it's making me feel uncomfortable or whatever.* (Linda: ssitv 2)

Researcher: Now that we have worked together and know each other, do you think you would be comfortable to talk more personally with me about the effects of living with domestic violence? If you find it too nose-y or you want to change the subject . . . It's up to you, same as always.

Jamie: *Well . . . I just call that a nuisance . . . it just went right over my head* (makes a sweeping gesture over his head with his hand and pauses) (*silence*).

Researcher: Ok. So, would you like to review the feelings chart and the other things we did?

Jamie: *Yeah . . .* (ssitv 2) [22] (pp. 227–228)

The latter participant chose an indirect review, and then provided a detailed summary including the possible feelings and effects of living with domestic violence.

### 3.8. Improved Family Relationships

Mothers mentioned more affectionate exchanges:

*When I came in from work yesterday, he gave me a hug, which is now—that's not very unusual, but he is doing it more frequently now.* (Ruth: ssitv 2)

Unexpected acts of generosity were very touching for a parent, where a young person returned shopping money for clothes, while saying

*"thank you for taking care of me all these years."* (Mother 3: ssitv 2)

Others noted that

*"we are having a laugh again",* (Liz)

and

*"we are closer, I thought that was gone for good."* (Sara) [22] (pp. 238,239)

### 3.9. Review of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The analysis aligned with the research questions of the thesis is as follows:

1. How can a specially tailored SEL programme positively affect social-emotional skills in 12–14-year-olds impacted by domestic violence?
2. How can such a group help participants to develop an awareness of how domestic violence in their families affects their SEL skills?
3. How can a small-scale programme generate themes, ideas and instruments to develop SEL programmes for other young people affected by domestic violence? [22] (p. 9).

In the 'up2talk' programme, social skills and emotional literacy were woven through the research but, for clarity of analysis, they are presented separately.

### 3.10. Social Skills—Positive Effects for Participants

The weekly attendance and participation in the programme demonstrated commitment and achievement of goals at each phase of the research. Individuals who had initially avoided drama became involved in it and engaged fully. The exhibition of work on the celebration day and all the planning and hosting of the day were organised by the group. The singing and acting were initiated by two teenagers who originally stated an inability to speak in public at any time. The team challenges in the house and on the mountain hike involved cooperation and planning to solve team puzzles.

More confidence was apparent, according to several mothers. Liz had definite examples of this increased confidence in daily life:

Researcher: He had said, and you had said from the start that what you would like to see for him is more confidence. Do you see any changes in that department?

Liz: *All the different friends coming to the house, going to more sleepovers . . . a different variety of people he's interacting with . . . he's more confident . . . in front of everyone, in front of the class . . . People he knows, before he would have been nervous . . .* (ssitv 2)

Researcher: What did you think was the best part of this for your child?

Angie: *Definitely the confidence, I see a big change that way. She's definitely more settled and outgoing* (celebration day).

Another change was that young people appeared less anxious about leaving their mothers alone:

*"yeah, used to be always hanging around me, now it's: 'I'm off'"* (Betty: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 237)

### 3.11. *New Goals Regarding Commitment to School*

Participant 1: *Well, I don't know if the course helped me but I've started putting my head down in school a lot more.*

Researcher: Yeah?

Participant 1: *100% a lot more, and I find myself in less trouble . . . like they are speaking to me, like how good I'm doing and that I should get A grades in exams. (ssitv 3) [22] (p. 204)*

### 3.12. *Assertiveness Was Put into Action*

Participant 4: *I know one thing that's changed. Assertiveness, when the computer game was broken, well I just said, like real calmly, no, it was broken when I got it . . . That's not right! And they gave me the money back. (partcpt 4: ssitv 2.) [22] (p. 235)*

### 3.13. *Luke (Co-Facilitator) Review*

Luke: Yeah, definitely the acting and the role playing of different situations, whether it be in the home or whether it be damaging situations in life; it was brilliant them being able to voice thoughts, feelings; challenge, develop their own life skills, build them as people, you know. [22] (p. 233)

### 3.14. *Developing Listening Skills and Expressing Opinions*

The ability to empathise with the position of others while expressing personal reservations was shown in the debate on: *"should gay marriage be legal"*. A range of views were expressed including:

*"well, I wouldn't stop anyone but I wouldn't like it in my own family",*

while others felt:

*"you would have to stand up for your family"* (walking debate) [22] (p. 211)

When participating in activities with the group, a preference could change, as one remarked:

*"Some people didn't like to do acting but everyone wanted to do it in the end, it was fun."* (p. 226)

### 3.15. *Emotional Literacy: Positive Effects for Participants*

The reflexive abilities of the participants affected the understanding of domestic violence and wider issues in their lives.

*Loved the clay . . . it was very inspiring looking at what everyone else was doing and calling their pieces. You could just tell that it made sense. Like the spine of anger—I get a shiver in my spine when I'm angry. (partcpt 2: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 216).*

### 3.16. *Naming the Issue*

Researcher: Like, I would call it domestic violence, 'course that's kind of the formal word but in your mind what do you think of it as . . . when people are just . . . Very violent at home, behaving badly, would you have had a name for it?

Dylan: *No, I don't know . . . I never . . . actually had a name for it*

Researcher: Would you have ever talked to anyone?

Dylan: Shakes his head.

Researcher: So . . . be like a big secret?

Dylan: *Yeah.*

(Dylan: ssitv 2) [22] (p. 198)

### 3.17. Expressing Emotions

The clay pots were painted with negative emotions about family violence and then decorated, planted and watered during the reading of Amanda's story. A participant made the card for this display: *"We realised bad feelings don't have to last forever"*.

### 3.18. Awareness of Domestic Violence Effects on SEL

The extremes of behaviour regarding the effects of domestic violence could be heard in one participant's response:

Researcher: How do you think that could affect how you behave at school?

Jack: *Being really bold.*

Researcher: Additionally, your work?

Jack: *Either good, expressing it through art or just being really . . . not want to do anything and be really upset in school.* (ssitv 2)

### 3.19. Enhanced Self-Esteem

More confidence in practice and reduced self-blame enabled more self-esteem, and the ability to reach out to:

*"tell someone you really trust, like family"*

and that you should

*"just talk to someone."* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 215)

### Empathy

Concern for others who might be suffering domestic violence demonstrated high levels of empathy:

Researcher: So they could be a bit nervous about relationships, you mean?

Jack: *Yeah, and they could maybe feel a bit guilty, is it happening to anyone else that I don't know about?* (ssitv 2) [22] (p. 219)

The third aspect concerning the development of materials for other groups could not be explored in depth due to time constraints, but transferable approaches and guidelines are indicated, and the participants displayed empathy and concern for others who might be suffering violence.

## 4. Discussion

The central theme of the secrecy around domestic violence and how this constitutes young people as hidden victims was established in international research [5,33–36].

The resulting difficulties in conducting research with young victims were highlighted in the 2021 review of Elliffe et al. [36]. This silence denies their right to a voice and to be participants in research, according to a European review [1]. The research into children's voices highlights the need for preparatory work to develop necessary skills [37–40]. The shift in attitude reflects that in policy terms, there is a growing emphasis on children's rights and the importance and understanding of children's perspectives on their own lives [41].

The need for a rights-based approach to research with children is developing but the need for a change in practitioners' attitudes and training is apparent; a gap exists between the adult view of how a child's voice is heard and the child's own experience [40–42].

The approach of this study (up2talk) was to build SEL skills in a multimedia interactive programme. The five participants managed their level of engagement and chose the activities. The growth in skills and trusting supportive relationships enabled a deeper discussion of domestic violence and its effects on families and children. Personal reflections in individual interviews were beneficial to some participants, while third-party approaches maintained boundaries in the group setting. The behaviour and attitudes in the group

evidenced the growth in self-confidence, reflexivity and decision making. The reduction in shame, secrecy and self-blame was significant in all five teenagers, an element noted in reviews of effective support groups [42–44]. The self-reported SEL changes in this study were confirmed by participants' mothers and behaviour in the group, and improved family relationships were reported in line with reviews by Barnardos [18]. The ability of the young people to manage their level of engagement was notable, as was the importance of trusting relationships; this is in accordance with international research of support groups [27,43,44]. The value the participants placed on speaking for themselves runs through all their reviews, in line with the research of groups such as 'young experts' of Voice against Violence [19].

#### 4.1. Limitations

The study was a small-scale qualitative study. The recruitment was limited by all of the difficulties identified in research—secrecy, shame, lack of awareness and fear of disclosure leading to more violence and gatekeeper issues [36]. The degree of silence on the topic meant that the pace of engagement was slow in the group, and thus the aim of creating new materials was only briefly addressed. The transferable elements of the programme are the use of indirect third-party discussion, multimedia methods informed by participant choice and the support of a local, trusted organisation and representative (Luke). During the ongoing and detailed review of the process it was essential to remain cognisant of the participants' experiences and preferences, which developed as the awareness of the effects of domestic violence grew among the group. The contribution of the mothers was invaluable in grounding and triangulating the data and supporting the changes in the participants.

#### 4.2. Recommendations

The level of isolation and secrecy shown in this particular group is validated in international research. The value of SEL programmes as a universal, mainstreamed element was established in the work of 'CASEL' [45]. The use of SEL material for targeted interventions in schools is a developing field [46]. The reviews conducted with Irish students in Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) programmes in second-level schools [47] found that students wanted more information on sensitive topics such as sexual and domestic violence, addictions and mental health [48]. There is a need to mainstream these issues [49], and this could range from information/discussion sessions to the development of groups focused on issues such as domestic violence. SPHE on sensitive topics and trauma-informed approaches in education are often resisted by teachers who feel they lack training [48]. Durlak et al. [49] found that cooperation between agencies and schools was the best practice. The role of siblings in supporting each other is a key factor [50]. The pathologising of young people affected by trauma can lead to an emphasis on 'diagnosis' rather than an active engagement with the individual child and their experiences [51]. An active engagement allows the young person to explore their feelings and options and find a voice for their needs to access support. This was the theoretical model implemented in this action research project 'up2talk'.

### 5. Conclusions

Prevalence studies indicate that a significant proportion of children are affected by family violence [33–35]. The need to empower the voice of young victims through direct research, and to develop relevant supports, is urgent [1,19]. This requires the cooperation of specialist professionals, community experts, education services and, most importantly, the young people who suffer, quite literally, in silence. The ongoing difficulties in contacting young victims of domestic violence, issues with gatekeepers, and the obtaining of parental permission, are detailed in the recent Irish study of young victims' experiences [36]. The growing understanding of children's abilities to participate in research can be hindered in practice by 'protection'-based thinking towards children, which positions them as helpless [40,41]. The use of social skills programmes to enhance the understanding of domestic



violence can be included at the mainstream level in schools, and focused interventions can be developed to meet specific issues [47,52]. Irish second-level students requested such programmes, around domestic and sexual violence and addiction in reviews of the SPHE programme [52]. The Cosc (2012) review of the SPHE programme in Ireland [53] found that the issue of domestic violence was inadequately covered in many schools, as was information about consent. The development of issue-based SEL is essential. The positive impact on the participants of 'up2talk' suggests that such an intervention approach could be more widely studied and developed.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Trinity College Dublin in June 2014.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

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### Appendix A

The feelings chart. Figure A1. The amateur appearance produced laughter and a relaxed approach to sharing emotional states with graphics-aided understanding.

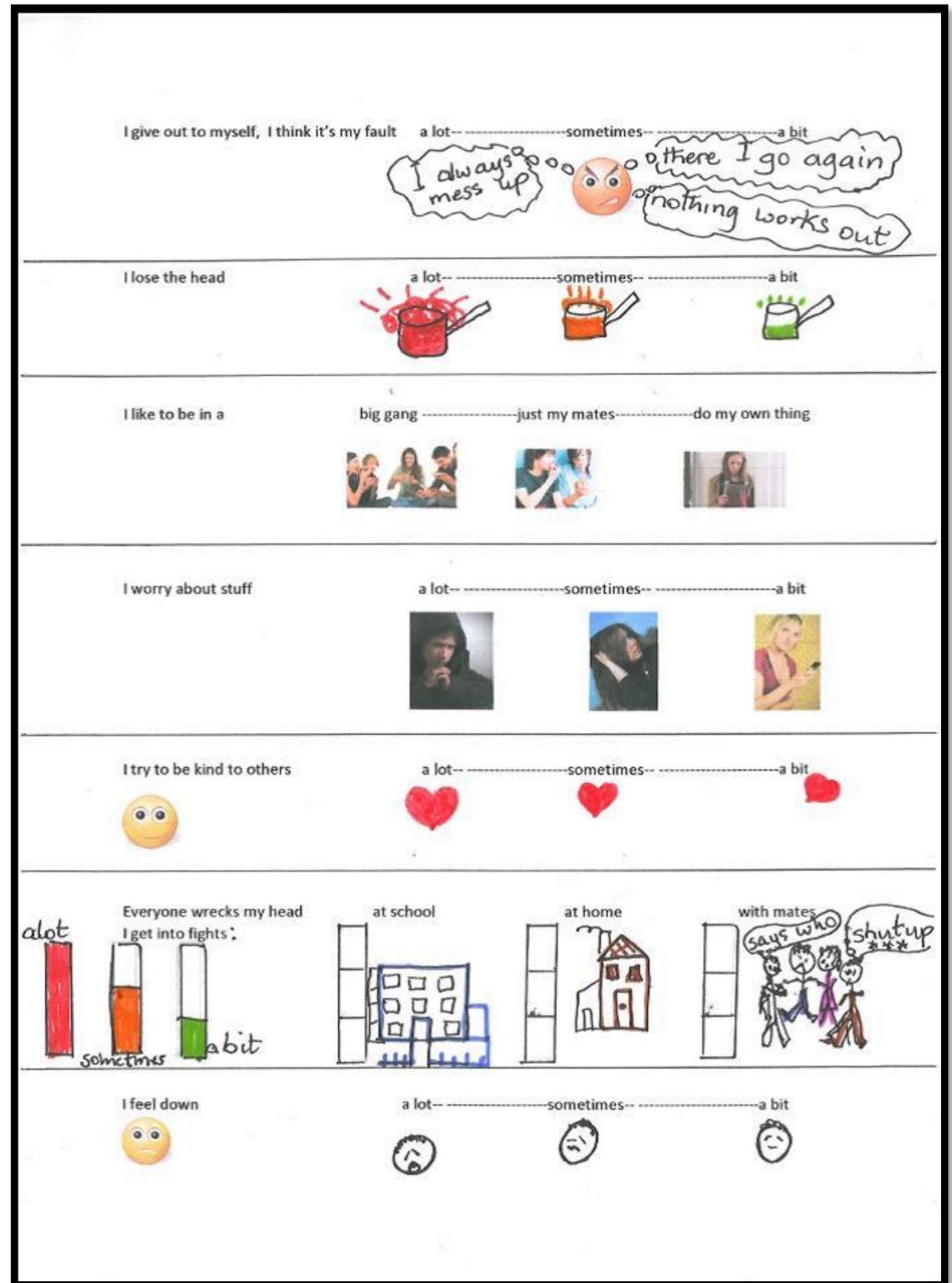


Figure A1. The feelings chart.

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