

DiVa

For young women experiencing difficult relationships

DiVa is a confidential space for young women who are experiencing difficult relationships, or who have experienced difficult relationships in the past, to talk and get advice. **Women only.**



DiVa 2007 – 2016

a continuing project with young mothers in Lambeth affected by domestic abuse

a woman is assaulted on average 35 times before her first call to the police

domestic abuse is a significant risk factor for child abuse

40 of 44 young mothers we worked with around domestic abuse over 12 months had children on a Child Protection Plan

“I have a better understanding of how it affects a child and myself. I would now call the police and get out of it because it can affect my child. Anything can happen, I could get killed.”

“At first I did not know what the Diva group was for. There was domestic violence in my family with my parents and later with the father of my child I didn’t really know what domestic violence was. I thought that it was just physical abuse, now I know that there are many more forms of domestic abuse including financial and emotional. I know how domestic violence builds up; it doesn’t start with a slap but usually insults and name calling first and emotional abuse. “

The DiVa project

DiVa is a project within our young parents outreach programme in Lambeth. St Michael’s has worked with young mothers affected by domestic abuse since 2000 and DiVa has been running since 2007.

DiVa aims to support women to leave, permanently, abusive relationships, improving their lives and those of their children.

DiVa consists of a weekly facilitated peer support group for mothers aged up to 25 who are affected by domestic abuse, additional one to one support work around issues raised, and training modules for children’s centre staff on domestic abuse indicators and response.

Why DiVa – the need for this project

Today the incidence of domestic abuse particularly in young people’s relationships is alarmingly high. We know it involves three quarters of the young mothers we work with one to one.

Persistent abuse affects a mother’s wellbeing, her self-confidence and her self-esteem; it can lead to depression and isolation. On average a woman is assaulted 35 times before her first call to the police. Women tend to return to the abuser a number of times believing that things will be different and from our experience leave one abusive relationship only to end up in another, at least initially.

The impact on young mothers is profound, affecting them at a time when they are learning to be a parent and grappling with very different demands as well as making the transition from adolescent to parent.

DiVa is the only domestic abuse group for young mothers in Lambeth (other groups are for mixed ages) and was developed at the request of young mothers. It continues to evolve in consultation with group members past and present.

DiVa is an early intervention for the children of these relationships who, because of the age of their mother, are younger themselves and less likely to have other siblings.

The Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children

St Michael's exists to safeguard children and we know that domestic abuse is a significant risk factor for child abuse. The risk of child abuse to a child under 5 years is 23 times more likely where there is already domestic abuse (Journal Public Health 2013). In our work, we find children under one year and pre-verbal in domestic abuse households withdrawn and fearful, with delayed developmental milestones.

In 2015, 40 of the 44 young mothers we worked with around domestic abuse had children on a Child Protection Plan.

Effects are long term. Children exposed to domestic abuse are more likely to have behavioural and emotional problems (CAADA 2014); boys to engage in domestic abuse as adults, girls to become victims (Cross Currents 2003).

Attendance at the DiVa group may be part of a Child Protection Plan.

Retention is high and we also find that mothers return to the group because they appreciate the sisterhood that has developed.

Who are the DiVas?

DiVas are young mothers in Lambeth. For eight years, the upper age limit was 22. This is currently extended to 25. We may identify young parents through our one to one work. The project is publicised with children's centres, Children's Social Care, various health services, housing agencies, and voluntary and community groups supporting women.

Mothers may not recognise the abusive nature of their relationship, or do not wish to because they want their children to have a relationship with their father, something denied to many of these young women.

Some feel guilty and believe that domestic abuse is their fault.

Some are anxious about what will happen if they leave the relationship, (we know the risks to women are highest at this point), where will they live, how will they manage financially, and what family and friends will say.

Some young parents refer themselves to our outreach (11% of all referrals) and in this category, the highest number is mothers experiencing domestic abuse issues. Group members also recommend the project to friends.

"I lost my daughter, she got removed from my care. I know that it was the right thing to happen but I can't stop crying, so I travelled all the way from West London to come back to the DiVa group because the other mothers can understand me and not judge me."

Although set up for young women in Lambeth, the group is also open to mothers from our residential centres and welcomes back mothers who have moved out of the area.

In the first six months of 2016 we worked with 25 mothers, 14 of whom were new to the group. There was an average attendance of eight per session.

Kim the film



Because of our work with young parents and our knowledge of the scale of the problem, in 2010, we commissioned Latimer Creative to produce with, by and for young people a film about young domestic violence, which was then only beginning to be realised as a problem of scale.

Child Abuse Review said,

"unlike some other resources on this topic, the film accurately reflects the culture and pressures of teenage life, as well as the abuse that so many young people face. But you are not left alone to deal with the issues that the film throws at you. Alongside the DVD is a toolkit comprising five two-hour workshops with activities based around the characters in the film."

Domestic Abuse in Lambeth

Lambeth has specific DA issues. Violence against women and girls is intricately linked to gang activity, disproportionately high in the borough.

In consultations, Lambeth teenage parents tell us that for many rape is the norm and not reported, because 'you're more at risk from the gang for reporting'. They describe sexual exploitation as rife in schools and teachers/mentors unable to protect.

Activities

Facilitated peer support

The group meets weekly in a confidential space that can accommodate up to 12 people. Each group session is scheduled to last for two hours whilst children attend the crèche. The emotions displayed are not suitable for young children to experience and there is real value in enabling children to play and socialise.

Sessions focus on topics related to domestic abuse, and may also emotionally and practically support a group member's particular presenting crisis. The facilitator introduces a range of resources including the Freedom programme, the Power and Control Wheel, domestic abuse & the law, the impact on children, safeguarding and leaving an abusive relationship. Sessions are flexible and may build around a participant's urgent issues. There may be additional one to one work during the session in a separate space.

"I have a lot in common with the other DiVas. The role plays were hard to do as it was upsetting to

show myself and the other DiVas how I behaved with my ex-boyfriend. It is a friendly and safe group, I felt safe enough to discuss the rapes I experienced when I was much younger. I also spoke about the harm that I did to myself as a result of the rapes and being put into care. I'm dyslexic but I could understand the exercises which were changed to fit my learning needs."

One to one support

Facilitators follow up, managing issues that arise from the session. These might be reporting to a Child Protection conference, helping a mother take out a non-molestation order or organising additional emotional or practical support.

Some mothers need a visit from a facilitator to feel able to engage with the group. We encourage other professionals to accompany a young mother to her first group. We check in with participants to find out how they are, particularly when there is an important event or they have missed a group. Missing a group is often a warning sign.

Sharing best practice with other professionals

We debrief children's centre staff following every DiVa group, an opportunity to share particular concerns and celebrate positive changes in both parents and children. This provides a space for centre staff to raise any issues about the delivery model. We have developed good professional relationships with centre managers to air and resolve any concerns. We share the results through networks in Lambeth which are extensive and longstanding – we currently chair the Voluntary & Community Services Forum.

Facilitators also run training sessions for children's centre staff aimed at 1) improving practice by sensitising them to the needs of young women in abusive relationships and 2) identifying young women at risk who may be 'under the radar' of agencies, by encouraging children's centre staff to introduce mothers to the group .

Evaluation

We collect both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the effectiveness of the DiVa project.

Hard data includes:

- number of non-molestation orders in place
- numbers leaving a violent relationship
- children removed from a Child Protection Plan
- attendance at counselling and other groups
- take up of training courses or employment

- children reaching their developmental milestones (as reported by crèche workers)
- safe contact arrangements in place

We evidence increased confidence around domestic abuse issues amongst children's centre staff by the number of parents they introduce to DiVa.

We also ask the DiVas to self-report through feedback forms at each session. We use part of the CAADA dash inventory, WEMWBS wellbeing scales and short questionnaires on knowledge of domestic abuse.

Mothers' self-care and presentation is another accurate measure of their wellbeing and we will raise concerns with other professionals having informed the mother first.

SUMMARY OF INDICATORS AGAINST DESIRED OUTCOMES	
Young Mother	
Desired Outcome	Indicators
Improved mental health & wellbeing	Insights, self-evaluation; now off or now on medication; take up of counselling; access to general health services GP, dentist etc; staff observations on general health and fitness, grooming, group engagement, social engagement
Improved confidence and independence	Insights, self-evaluation; engagement with family and friends; staff observations on engagement in groups; children's centre & other professionals' observations; appropriate housing, benefits; financially stable, lack of debt; engaging with move into education & employment, longer term planning
Improved skills & knowledge around domestic abuse	Non-molestation orders in place, numbers accessing generic services; evidence of stability as above; QQ 'What is domestic abuse?' pre and post; staff and professionals' observations
Decrease in risky behaviours	Insights; incidence of police / A&E /child protection involvement; self-reporting reduction in involvement with partner & associates, substance misuse, self-harm; project workers reports through home visits; no repeating cycle

Children (likely to be pre-verbal)	
Desired Outcome	Indicators
Improved life chances - Improved physical, mental and emotional wellbeing & Improved self-confidence	Changes in child's behaviour at crèche, children's centre; feedback from other professionals; numbers removed from child protection; child reaching developmental milestones; mother's reporting pre and post; staff home observations

Outcomes

The outcomes we seek for young mothers in abusive relationships are:

- improved mental and health wellbeing; around depression, anxiety, self-harm, personal care, general health and fitness, substance misuse as self-medication
- increased confidence and independence
- improved skills and knowledge; to develop a full understanding of what domestic abuse is and skills to keep herself and her child safe from domestic abuse in the short and long term
- decrease in risky behaviours; involvement with violent (ex)partners and associates, self-harm, substance misuse

For children of violent relationships, the desired outcome is:

- improved life chances

In the last six months:

5 mothers have taken up counselling

5 children have been deregistered from Child Protection plans

2 mothers have obtained non-molestation orders

13 mothers have attended other groups

2 mothers joined training courses

3 mothers found employment



Conclusion

“Outside of the group I reflected on my life and my past relationships. I’m learning not to be so trusting of people as I can’t let my child see her mother get abused.”

At the end of 12 months, we expect all the women we engage with to show improvement in each area. The level of change depends on individual circumstances but will be evidenced, as described above.

We support progression by encouraging parents to join other groups, we encourage them to look to the future and aspire to new goals. This progression is protective for this group of women - rather than being isolated they are engaging with the wider world, forming friendships, taking control and improving their health and wellbeing which impacts positively on their children.

However, these young women have complex issues, usually rooted in their own childhood, and progression is non-linear and sometimes painfully slow. Having apparently moved away from an abusive relationship, a young mother may return to the group to talk through their new relationship and the signs of it becoming abusive. Or they may have returned to the previous partner and now realise this was the wrong decision. Group members challenge each other but offer unconditional support.

Mothers also return to share their achievements; a child returned to their care without any form of order, a qualification, a stable home. We see DiVa as an essential project because of

- 1) its importance in child protection,
- 2) its potential to achieve earlier intervention in safeguarding the child, and
- 3) the potential to secure permanent behavioural change in young mothers who will go on to subsequent relationships and children.

We thank all the young mothers, past and present, who have taken part in the DiVa project and helped in its continuing development.

Young Parents Outreach at St Michael's

We have worked with young parents in Lambeth since 2001. Commissioners in 2014-15 rated this service highly giving the maximum score of 50/50. We offer one to one support for young parents under 25 and run weekly open and closed groups at different children's centres on themes from expectant mums and dads, healthy meals on a budget, child development, improving self-confidence, moving back to education and on to employment. DiVa, a women-only group, is complemented by Caring Dads, a men-only 17-week programme for young fathers to explore the impacts of domestic abuse on children. All young parents receiving one to one support say they improve knowledge, awareness and intention to change behaviour at end of contact.

St Michael's Fellowship Services



Parenting Assessment & Support, residential & community



Family Contact Centre SW16



Young Parent Outreach Lambeth



registered charity 1035820

For further information, contact
St Michael's Fellowship
136 Streatham High Road,
London SW16 1BW
020 8835 9570

admin@stmichaelsfellowship.org.uk
www.stmichaelsfellowship.org.uk
[@stmfellows](https://www.instagram.com/stmfellows)

Working together to keep families together

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