



# Preventing violence to secure brighter futures

**Professor Erica Bowen** conducts investigations motivated by a desire to understand and prevent violence in intimate relationships. Here, she discusses what inspired her research interests, the unique techniques she employs and her plans for future activities

## Could you begin with a brief introduction to your overall research?

My research interests broadly encompass violence in intimate relationships across the lifespan. Currently, I examine how pre-school children develop resilience after exposure to violence between parents, how professionals respond to partner violence among populations aged 55 and above and, in another project, I scope out the extent of partner violence in incarcerated samples. I have also developed interventions for adolescent dating violence and adult partner violence.

## What inspired you to embark on a career in domestic violence research?

I have always had a keen interest in forensic psychology and had applied – unsuccessfully – for a number of PhD opportunities at the end of my undergraduate degree in 2000. One of these applications was at the University of Birmingham and, although they did not have the funding to support the proposal I had written, I was later contacted by Professor Liz Gilchrist regarding a studentship funded by West Midlands Probation, to evaluate an intervention they were running for domestic violence perpetrators. The moment I read the advert I got goose bumps! I felt I simply had to apply, and that the research area meant I could perhaps conduct research that would have a genuine impact on victim safety.

## Can you tell us about some of the methodologies and techniques you have employed in your work?

I have a group-based intervention for adults who have been violent or abusive in intimate relationships running across Coventry and Sandwell, delivered by staff at Fry Housing Trust. It is called Brighter Futures and draws upon solution-focused brief therapy techniques, in combination with cognitive behavioural techniques, and provides a different approach to intervention than has traditionally been used.

Historically, these kinds of interventions have suffered from high dropout rates, with as much as 60 per cent not completing. It is therefore encouraging that the review of the first operational year has found that 70 per cent of the people referred onto it complete it. We have had positive feedback from social services and from the clients themselves, although a formal evaluation is being undertaken by the University of Birmingham, which will be reported on in around two years.

## What have been some of your most interesting findings to date?

Some of our findings from European adolescents concerning their attitudes towards dating violence stand out. Although when asked directly about problematic relationship behaviours, young people identified acts that would constitute dating violence, but they also identified a range of mitigating circumstances in which even physically violent behaviours were allowable, and in some instances should be expected. These included cheating. In fact, cheating was the one situation in which the adolescents thought you should expect to experience physically violent retaliation. It is important to understand this from an intervention design perspective, as it shows that young people's attitudes towards dating violence are complex, and that interventions need to respond to the complexities that allow opposing attitudes to be held at the same time.

## Finally, how do you see your research developing in the future?

I want to understand the role and function of partner violence in populations with learning difficulties, expand my current work on professional responses to partner violence in elderly populations, and understand the intervention needs of prisoners in relation to partner violence. I'm also looking forward to developing a line of research with Dr Christine Wekerle on the use of arts as a mechanism of knowledge translation and research impact.



# Understanding as a step towards preventing

A researcher based at **Coventry University** has a broad range of interests relating to investigating and preventing domestic violence. One recent project involves the development of Green Acres High, a serious game-based intervention to combat adolescent dating violence

**INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE** is one of the most common forms of violence against women by a male partner. While it is true that women can be violent towards men (and other women) in relationships, statistics show that in the majority of cases, women suffer at the hands of men. According to a report by the World Health Organization, the extent to which intimate partner violence occurs has led to it being increasingly seen as an important public health problem. Indeed, over 48 population-based surveys around the world, 10–69 per cent of women were physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point.

There are a range of risk factors for intimate partner violence, including young age, low income and low academic achievement. Importantly, a history of violence is seen as a leading factor, whether that manifests as the male having experienced violence as a child, or witnessing his own mother being beaten. Thus, it is crucial that any potential solutions developed take such risk factors into account to ensure a degree of efficacy.

## ALTERING ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDES

Professor Erica Bowen is Professor in the Psychology of Violence and Interpersonal aggression and Director of the Violence and Interpersonal Aggression research group at Coventry University. She has a keen interest in understanding and preventing violence in intimate relationships. The interventions Bowen helps develop take a clear evidence-based approach; getting to the root of the problem has the effect of weeding out the potential for violence before it occurs.

A key example of Bowen's approach can be found in the game-based primary intervention she developed in her project 'Changing Attitudes towards dating Violence in Adolescents'. In understanding that aggression and violence in intimate relationships often begins during adolescence, Bowen worked on

raising awareness of and changing attitudes towards dating violence in adolescents. Alongside this, Bowen and her team employed a process of analysing the ways in which adolescents described their experiences playing the game.

## IMMERSIVE INTERACTIVE INTERVENTIONS

Funded through the EU Daphne-III Transnational Action Grant scheme, the game is called 'Green Acres

High' and was designed through collaboration with researchers across Europe. "The game comprises five computer-based lessons to be delivered in a classroom of adolescents aged 12–16," explains Bowen. "The lessons were designed to incorporate small interactive games and media scenarios in combination with guided questions and feedback, with a view to increasing knowledge and understanding of the risk factors for dating violence to improve conflict resolution and help-seeking skills."

The data the team acquired from the initial study indicated that the adolescents supported the use of a game to deliver these forms of education. Indeed, many of them felt they were able to control the ways they learned, that the game was personal, and the scenarios they were presented with were both realistic and immersive.

## CHANGING BEHAVIOURS, IMPROVING LIVES

In addition to her focus on developing ways for adolescents to change their way of thinking about dating violence, Bowen has considered ways to improve the outcomes of behaviour change programmes that seek to alter the actions of the perpetrators of intimate partner violence. The so-called 'expert' perpetrators of such violence are not only at the highest risk of offending, they are also the most difficult to treat.

Bowen has identified that they are more likely to hold entrenched attitudes and use intimidating behaviour to avoid detection. Ultimately, her study has determined that using specific considerations of these characteristics to inform intervention programmes can positively impact on the success of the measures put in place. Through gathering and considering the evidence before her, Bowen's findings can influence the development of future programmes, reducing incidences of reoffending and drastically improving the lives of women who suffer at the hand of abusive partners.

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## CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS DATING VIOLENCE IN ADOLESCENTS (CAVA)

### OBJECTIVE

To educate adolescents about the nature and risks of violence in their relationships.

### COLLABORATORS

**Dr Emma Sorbring**, University West, Sweden

**Mr Paul Held; Dr Eline Leen**, Institute for Learning Innovation, Friedrich Alexander University, Erlangen, Nuremberg, Germany

**Mr Valere Awouters**, Limbourg Catholic University College, Belgium

**Serious Games Institute**, Coventry University

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**DR ERICA BOWEN** has been researching violence in intimate relationships since 2000. Her research has examined the efficacy of probation-based interventions for adult male offenders, and she has also written innovative brief interventions for adult offender groups for Wiltshire Probation Trust and Coventry City Council. More recently she has led an EC Daphne III funded project CAVA in which a serious game-based primary intervention was developed and piloted with partners in Belgium, Sweden and Germany.

