Teenagers' Access to Digital Technologies and Refuge Life: Balancing Safety, Risk, and Protectionism

Abstract

Refuges or shelters have been central to UK domestic violence service provision since the 1970s. In 2013, UK policy transformed teenagers into primary service users of domestic violence refuges. Digital technology is central to teenagers' lives but moving to a refuge can cause serious disruption in this respect.

The study was undertaken in 20 refuges in England. Repeat qualitative interviews with 20 young people aged 13-18 and single interviews with refuge staff explored teenagers' experiences of refuge life. Access to digital technology emerged as a central theme for this group of young people.

Teenagers described difficulties in accessing digital technology and the internet in refuges and this impacted on their education, support networks, and leisure. Restrictions concerning online access in refuges were attributed to safety concerns and resource shortfalls. This study found that restrictions on internet access lacked consistency across refuges and were underpinned by protectionist attitudes towards teenagers. Refuges need to seek a balance between risk and protectionism and identify opportunities to use digital technologies to increase the safety and support available to teenagers.

Key Words: Refuge, digital access, teenagers, digital technology, shelter

Introduction

Digital technology has become increasingly widespread but is of particular relevance to teenagers and is a key feature of their lives (Livingstone et al., 2014, Coleman 2011). The importance of digital access for young people is underlined by the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021) and Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers which together reinforce the need for Council of Europe Member States (including the UK) to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment (Richardson et al., 2017). Realising children's and young people's (CYP) digital citizenship rights

should be balanced with online protection: they need digital access and education about the benefits of internet use alongside knowledge of how to reduce online risks (Henrich et al., 2019).

For teenagers who have experienced domestic violence and abuse (DVA), refuges are important places of safety but moving to a refuge can cause serious disruption to their digital access. In 2013, a policy shift in England and Wales (Home Office, 2013) enabled teenagers to access DVA refuges independently in their own right, however, dominant conceptions of teenagers as incapable and vulnerable children continue to shape refuge practice (Bracewell et al., 2020). Recognising the impact of moving to a refuge on teenagers' digital access and understanding how to improve teenagers' experience is even more pressing in the context of the restrictions imposed during the current pandemic (Larkins, 2020).

This article presents findings on teenagers' digital access in refuge settings; the study was undertaken as part of a broader study about their experiences of refuge life (Bracewell et al, 2020). The findings suggest that refuges need to seek a balance between risk aversion/protection and embracing the opportunities digital technologies provide to increase safety and support.

Teenagers' and Refuges

As a consequence of experiencing DVA in the home, some young people move to temporary accommodation. These shelters, known as refuges in the UK, have been central to DVA service provision since the 1970s and confidentiality about their location is normal practice aimed at excluding perpetrators (Burman and Chantler, 2004). Whilst safety is paramount, there have been some challenges (in the USA) to the need for complete secrecy (Haaken and Yragui, 2003). An alternative approach, The Oranje Huis (Orange House) developed in the Netherlands, emphasises transparency and visibility; whilst security measures are in place, the refuge location and function are public knowledge (Stanley, 2015). However, this approach has yet to be widely adopted. The secrecy associated with refuge locations may exacerbate the isolation that some teenagers experience during their stay.

Early studies on DVA service provision focused on the needs of adult women, but increasingly, CYP have also become the business of refuges. Øverlien (2011) highlights a lack of recognition of CYP as service users with rights to dedicated service provision akin to those of adults. Earlier studies reporting the benefits and challenges of refuge life usually drew on the views of younger children (McGee, 2000; Mullender *et al*., 2002; Stafford *et al.*, 2007); there is little in-depth evidence about refuge interventions and approaches for CYP (Poole et al, 2008). Funding is a significant obstacle to developing such provision and there is little guidance available for refuge staff working with teenagers (Bracewell, 2017). A focus on teenagers is important given their potential for double victimisation. Teenagers can require refuge accommodation due to their mothers' experiences or, from the age of 16, as a consequence of violence in their own relationships (Home Office, 2013).

Earlier UK research in DVA refuges was undertaken before widespread access to digital technology became the norm for young people. By 2016, 91% of young people in the EU made daily use of the internet (Eurostat, 2017) and Ofcom (2017) found that 99% of UK 12-15 year olds used the internet for almost 21 hours per week. Technology provides opportunities for educational learning and digital literacy, participation and civic engagement, creativity and self-expression, identity and social connection (Richardson et al., 2017). Among CYP in the general population, the most popular online activities have been identified as watching video clips, social networking, gaming, communicating with friends and family, and listening to music (Smahel et al., 2020). Activities which cause the most concern, such as registering geographical location or using chatrooms, are rare (Livingstone et al., 2014).

Teenagers face different challenges and opportunities to those encountered by younger children or adults owing to the distinctive characteristics of adolescence. Adolescence is a time of rapid change which requires substantial adjustment (Coleman and Hagell, 2007): it is a period of both vulnerability and opportunity (UNICEF, 2011). A refuge stay brings unique challenges since adolescence can include physical and psychological changes, and changes in relationships, in educational expectations and in social life (Coleman and Hagell, 2007). Teenagers navigate an increased need for independence, greater separation from parents,

increased reliance on peers, educational transitions, and the development of autonomy and freedom of expression (Coleman, 2011). Digital technology has become increasingly widespread but is key to social, leisure and educational aspects of teenagers' lives (Smahel et al., 2020; Henrich, 2019).

The shift to the widespread use of and advances in digital technology have transformed adolescence and brought opportunities and access to new platforms through which abuse, including DVA, can be enacted (Henrich, 2019). This can include the perpetration of coercive control and surveillance, so intensifying the impact of offline abuse (Aghtaie, 2018). Perpetrators can access private information, control online accounts, and track individuals' whereabouts. However, digital access may also provide opportunities for help seeking and protection from the impacts of abuse (ibid). This study aims to contribute towards greater understanding of the experience of teenagers living in a refuge with a specific focus on their digital environment.

Methods

The study methodology incorporated elements of the sociology of childhood and feminist research, particularly their shared epistemological values of reflexivity and participant empowerment. These values determined the research process, ethics and methods adopted (Bracewell, 2017).

Refuge organisations across the North West, East Midlands and West Midlands in England were provided with information about the study (n=70). Twenty organisations volunteered to participate. Staff were contacted by email and a recruitment poster was displayed inside refuges. Teenagers were recruited to the study by staff in the participating refuges. Telephone interviews were undertaken with staff volunteering to participate.

All participants were asked to provide informed consent and given appropriate information about the study. For teenagers under 16 years old, additional consent was required from their mother or guardian who they were residing with in the refuge. Privacy and confidentiality were assured within the limits of protection

from harm (Graham *et al.*, 2013) and teenagers chose their own pseudonyms which are used in this paper. Ethical approval was provided by the university Ethics Committee.

Pilot interviews were undertaken with four teenagers and two staff members. These teenagers helped to design the research tools (Bracewell et al., forthcoming) and added questions about digital access to the interview schedules and worksheets. Worksheets were used in various ways (Bracewell, 2017) with some teenagers using them as discussion prompts rather than activities. The research tools helped to build rapport and establish individual needs regarding participation.

A 'Refuge Life Rating Scale' was used to measure four areas: sleep, homework, worrying and family relationships for 19 participants (total=54). This scale was qualitative and participative and was developed specifically for this study. Value was placed on understanding and formulating discussion. The scales were analysed numerically, and scores compared. They provided useful insight and confirmation of interview data, but varying numbers of participants completed scales at different points during a refuge stay so limiting its use as a measure of change. A later scale was devised by teenagers (, 2017) which included digital technology.

Data was collected for 12 months with 20 teenagers participating in up to six repeat face-to-face interviews across the period of their refuge stay and sometimes into their new homes (n=5). The interviews used participatory methods to explore teenagers' perceptions and experiences of refuge life and capture their views on how refuges might be more responsive to their needs. Single telephone interviews were undertaken with 25 members of staff. In total, 89 semi-structured interviews were completed.

Teenagers used email or texts to arrange the next interview or communicate about particular issues when they arose, suggesting control over their research participation and successful ongoing engagement. This, together with the repeated nature of the interviews, provided a fuller picture of the experience of refuge life as it occurred. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and entered into NVivo software to organise, manually code, and analyse the data collected. Interview

data was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of analysis began early in data collection and continued throughout the study with subsequent interviews allowing further explanation and clarification of teenagers' accounts. Three teenagers assisted with formal data analysis (Bracewell et al., 2020).

This study had some limitations. Staff interviewed were not necessarily from the same refuge as teenage participants, therefore direct comparisons cannot be made. Teenagers were recruited at various points in their refuge journey due to moving refuges or gatekeeping obstacles and they had differing numbers of refuge stays. These factors made it impossible to make comparisons at fixed points in their refuge stay.

Data analysis identified access to computers and the internet as the second most important priority for 'what teenagers need', with increased space as their first priority. However, these themes overlap as the need for space included 'virtual space' which provided a form of escape and privacy, as well as physical and emotional space. These themes are discussed in depth below.

Findings

One teenager was in the refuge independently, having fled DVA from an intimate partner; nineteen teenagers had fled DVA from biological fathers, step-fathers, mothers' partners and older siblings' partners and were accommodated with their mother/guardian. The length of these relationships (all heterosexual) varied from under three years to over 18 years. Table 1 details teenagers' demographic information. Ages are those at the beginning of their research participation and the mean age of teenagers was 15 years. The total length of the current refuge stay varied from four to 15 months at the time of their first interview, and ten teenagers had prior experience of staying in another refuge.

Table 1. Overview of Teenage Participant Characteristics

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Nineteen of the 20 teenage participants reported a need for increased access to computers and the internet. Digital access was usually something that had been left behind when fleeing DVA: '…we left everything…it was like a pair of clothes each, basically that's it' (Amy, interview 1). Only three participants reported sufficient access to the internet and computers in the refuge, although they commented on restrictions in respect of time and content.

Digital access promoted happiness. Digital technology has become increasingly widespread, but it is of direct relevance to teenagers, as noted by Aamir (interview 1): '…when you're a teenager, you expect the internet…' The two participants who reported being the happiest, were both aged 13 and had not yet embarked on GCSE study, were in the same refuge and the quality of their refuge experience can be associated with the availability of resources. They had greater access to different spaces (physical, emotional and virtual) in comparison to other participants. They had a refuge support worker, attended a refuge youth club, had access to a computer room, and participated in refuge trips and activities. Their refuge was staffed 24 hours a day.

Although digital access was not a prominent feature in staff interviews, resource shortfalls and inappropriate rules were identified as detrimental to teenagers' experience of refuge:

> 'they find it really, really hard...if you've got a 13/14-year-old lad or girl who's used to perhaps having freedom, they now have to be quite closely observed by their mum…because of limited resources, they perhaps want to be on Facebook or accessing the computer, and we don't really have those sorts of facilities...hanging out with your friends, well, they can't bring them back and hang out with them here, so it's tough.' (S17)

Practical obstacles for all teenagers included limited availability of computers: sometimes there was a single computer for the whole refuge or devices were permanently in disrepair. This was mentioned by teenagers repeatedly and there was little change between interviews: 'They said they were getting internet access, but they didn't' (Ruby, interview 3). There were few resources refuges could access to address these issues. Where teenagers had personal devices such as laptops,

they were unable to access the internet as Wi-Fi did not extend across the refuge and purchasing temporary data packages was costly. Teenagers explained that they had the internet at home before moving to the refuge. All five teenagers interviewed at home (after their refuge stay) had obtained internet access once rehoused, reinforcing the disparity between home and refuge life.

Digital access was important for three key reasons: completion of homework/revision, maintaining support networks, and entertainment, such as gaming or music. Within each of these themes, recurrent barriers as described below restricted digital access.

Homework

Teenagers described various difficulties in timely completion of homework, including a lack of appropriate digital equipment in refuges, a desire not to disclose refuge accommodation to teachers, distance from libraries, lack of separate physical space, lack of equipment, difference in approaches between staff, lack of recognition of importance of digital equipment or internet access for teenagers. These difficulties had direct relevance for their education. Emma (interview 2) explained that she and another teenage resident used 'top up cards' to pay for their internet use but this was insufficient:

> '…we were trying to do [our] AQA course and finish off our unit. We had no internet. My internet finished, her internet finished…most of the coursework, like, all the questions are on the internet…if you don't have any internet, we can't do it.'

> '…it's a bit slow. Not a bit slow, really slow…My mum has a laptop that I can use. But at the moment, I think the Wi-Fi has gone down, like it just keeps on going on and off …I can't do my homework.' (James, interview 2)

Large amounts of their homework was submitted online, and many teenagers did not want teachers to know they were living in a refuge, particularly where they had started a new school.

> ‘your teacher sends you homework on there and basically you’re meant to go online…to do it…I’ve got exams next week, and I need a computer to revise and…to do homeworks, like it’s really hard…I’m not even sure if I’m going to be able to use it because you heard [staff], she doesn’t know if she’s got time ’ (Mohammed, interview 4)

Teenagers residing in refuges some distance from school were unable to access digital resources via libraries, or more often, were afraid to travel home alone from these, especially in winter. Participants attending Pupil Referral Units (PRUs; which provide education for those unable to attend a mainstream school - usually due to exclusion) reported that there was no library and it was not possible to access computers after school hours.

None of the refuges had separate spaces where teenagers could complete homework, although three refuges had computer rooms. Shared computer rooms in refuges could be distracting if other residents were using the computers for entertainment purposes. Sharing with others also meant that computer use was time limited:

> ‘…because I’m at A-level I have a lot of homework and stuff…there are like 21 rooms and two [computers] is not enough for all of them’ (Amy, interview 1)

Amy explained that her school was due to organise a temporary laptop but if she needed WI-FI she would need to study in the computer room as WI-FI did not extend across the refuge. She suggested it would be helpful for teenagers needing to complete homework to have set times where only they could access the computer room. However, where this had happened in another refuge, teenagers felt that adults got more time despite, in their view, computers being less of a necessity for adults.

In a small number of instances, there was confusion around accessibility - some staff allowed teenagers to use computer rooms and other staff did not. One teenager was allocated 30 minutes to use a staff computer to complete her homework which caused conflict with staff. She felt that staff did not care about her or understand the importance of her schoolwork. Teenagers expected refuge staff to understand the importance of digital technology for schoolwork and were

disappointed when this was not the case: ‘I need the computer, but they don’t help us for the computer. They said, ‘Oh we’re working. Busy, busy’.’ (Eliza, interview 2)

There was generally little acknowledgment of the importance of digital access for teenagers from the staff interviewed, although one staff member reported acquiring funding for a laptop via a school. This enabled a teenager who had been out of school for a significant period to access schoolwork and build a relationship with a teacher in preparation for her return to education.

The practical obstacles outlined resulted in a disparity between the academic expectations of teenagers and what they could realistically achieve. When completing the homework section of the ‘Refuge Life Rating Scale’, those reporting difficulties often attributed this to a lack of computer and/or internet access, with this reported as worse than before moving to a refuge (n=9). The independent teenager wanted to use the internet to locate college courses and information about children’s centres.

Support Networks

Teenagers described practical difficulties in maintaining contact with family and friends or developing new peer networks as well as insufficient support whilst living in refuges. Limited digital access in refuges exacerbated isolation and teenagers had little knowledge of or access to digital support services.

Moving to a refuge often meant moving away from the area where they previously lived. Teenagers had moved between two and 220 miles to refuges. The average move was 57.4 miles. Refuge restrictions and the need for secrecy regarding their whereabouts meant that friends and family could not visit and in some refuges teenagers were not allowed out by themselves, without their mother/carer. Teenagers reported having little privacy or personal space, away from their mother and siblings. Staff acknowledged the difficulties refuge rules could present but were unable to remedy this:

> ‘…they get bored very easily. And things like we haven't got any internet access. So, things that your typical teenagers would do, they haven't got...we can’t have certain things on the TV.’ (S21)

For some teenagers, being out of education also removed daily contact with their peers. These circumstances made maintaining relationships and friendships particularly difficult. Consequently, for teenagers located in new areas access to social media was important for maintaining contact with friends and family:

> ‘…they try and make you get rid of Facebook…No. Not a chance....That's how I keep in touch with my friends...’ (Georgia, interview 1)

> ‘I’m not from here…if I didn’t top up my phone, then I won’t even be able to say ‘hi’ or anything…to any of them. I’d just be sat in with people I don’t know in a flat, doing nothing…I top up loads’. (Rebecca, interview 2)

The cost of accessing the internet using temporary data packages was mentioned frequently and this was a source of frustration where teenagers wanted to continue to talk with friends and family online:

> ‘I top up my phone, but I'm going through like £20 in a week…Just for the internet…Bit beyond a joke.’ (Georgia, interview 2)

Teenagers explained that they needed someone to talk to about their experiences of DVA and refuge life. They expected formal support to be available, especially since they were unable to access existing informal support networks. However, formal support was uncommon and so too was the ability to access any online support to help them deal with their experiences. Teenagers reported little digital support/advice from refuge staff. None of the teenagers knew about potential sources of online support, including the Women’s Aid support site ‘The Hideout’ which provides advice and helps CYP to understand DVA. When discussing the possibility of this form of support, Bob (interview 3) explained that internet access was heavily restricted: ‘That’s probably banned on our computer...Most stuff is banned’. Restrictions surrounding digital technology are discussed in more detail below.

Entertainment and Leisure

Teenagers described restrictions on leisure activities, including a lack of age-appropriate equipment and activities in refuges. These restrictions were aggravated by limited access to online sources of entertainment, inconsistency of rules and access between and within refuges, a lack of clarity or trust from refuge staff, and an absence of discussions around digital access and safety.

Teenagers, like adults, used digital technology for entertainment purposes. They described participation in gaming, listening to music, online shopping, and watching TV, films or video clips. It gave them something to do and was a feature of their everyday life before they came to the refuge. Accessing refuge computers for entertainment purposes was not permitted:

> 'Because you need them for like entertainment, say like somebody came in without a phone or nothing like me and couldn't get hold of their friends…I don't know what they'd do.' (Rebecca, interview 4)

The need to use digital technology to alleviate feelings of boredom was understandable given that refuge spaces and activities were not adapted to the interests of young people (any provision focused on young children). Recognition of the importance of digital access for entertainment varied between staff, with greater understanding amongst staff undertaking direct working with CYP, as compared to managers or generic adult support workers. For example:

> '…We've currently got a couple of teenagers at the minute who do come in with the younger kids and they go on the laptop and play music…' (S3)

Restrictions on and provision of internet access lacked consistency both between and within refuges. It was understood that residents were unable to access the internet throughout the refuge owing to safety concerns, predominantly protecting their location from the perpetrator, but also to protect them from inappropriate online content. Participants were unclear why restrictions had been imposed on refuge devices when they could still access sites using mobile phones, although this proved costly and there were often problems in obtaining reception:

> ‘We don't have internet…it's really hard…I’ve got internet on my phone but the reception is really low here so you can't connect. Like you can't connect to anything…’ (Jordan, interview 2)

Teenagers were confused about refuge restrictions on online activity. In one example, a teenager used an iPad to complete her homework; afterwards she took a ‘selfie’ (photograph of herself) to entertain herself which resulted in her no longer being allowed to use the device. She explained that she had been reprimanded and had felt unable to explain her account of what happened:

> ‘…apparently, they gave me trust and basically that trust is broken. I don’t understand. I haven’t been to any inappropriate sites. I didn’t even use the internet…I was bored...[Staff] said, ‘If you have been taking photos, we don’t know what else you’ve been doing’…I don’t get it.’ (Mohammed, interview 5)

Mohammed was advised that she could use a staff computer for 30 minutes with supervision, staff time permitting, but she felt that this requirement for supervision indicated her lack of status and staff’s failure to trust her:

> ‘I don’t feel comfortable...I’m mature enough. I’m responsible enough. I’ve lived here for a year...I should at least have that trust from them, which I don’t...’ (Mohammed, interview 5)

She explained that the situation had made her so angry she preferred not to use the computer at all. Staff did not appear to have provided her with explanations for these restrictions. However, in contrast to the more widespread lack of discussion about digital access, one CYP worker explained that playing on the computer with teenagers could assist in building their relationships with staff:

> ‘We start off a bit slowly, building up that good relationship…you know just playing on the computer or talking about their day that sort of thing, so they become more trusting and more willing to engage’ (S4)

None of the teenagers reported accessing child-friendly and age-appropriate information about privacy tools, settings and remedies available to them. However, during interviews, participants demonstrated good understanding of online safety.

For example, Emma was aware that people online are not always who they say they are:

> '...I don't know if I add someone that's [not] my dad and my brother [or someone they know pretending to be someone else]….with fake names. So, I don't have Facebook. I have [other social media]…but I have to be careful.' (Emma, interview 1)

Emma removed her Facebook profile due to her own fears about her father using it to locate her but used alternative social media sites or applications she thought he was unlikely to be aware of. Other teenagers distinguished safety precautions such as using privacy controls and monitoring their own posts. None of the teenagers reported receiving advice from refuge staff about digital safely and this was not raised in staff interviews.

Discussion

Since early research on children's experiences of refuge life was undertaken, the widespread use of technology has transformed the experience of adolescence. In earlier studies, the internet, mobile phones and other forms of technology were notably absent. In the present study, teenage participants reported the importance of digital technology for educational purposes, entertainment and for social networking and highlighted significant restrictions on access. These contributed to their isolation, impacted on their relationships with refuge staff and were likely to have undermined their educational achievement with potential long-term consequences.

Computers and internet access were usually something that had been left behind but were considered a normal teenage activity. Research indicates that the time CYP spend online each day is increasing (Smahel et al., 2020). Lack of digital access could cause resentment as it represented something else that had been lost yet staff were seen to access the internet for their work. Teenagers appeared to be treated as vulnerable and justifications for such restrictions centred on safety concerns related to their age rather than their circumstances. Ongoing challenges were related to the lack of consistency across refuge provision; inappropriate rules;

staff attitudes, limited funding and promised improvements that were slow or did not happen. Teenagers understood funding restrictions but also noted the differences between refuges or staff within the same refuge with regards to digital access. This lack of internet access might be seen as a violation of teenagers' rights (UNComRC 2016).

The profound shift to the widespread use of digital technology for homework has specific relevance for teenagers (Smahel et al., 2020; Henrich 2019) whose educational achievement is crucial for their self-esteem and future opportunities. Staff fears concerning digital access predominated over concerns about educational failure. Restrictive policies on internet use and inadequate access to technology currently hamper teenagers' ability to study in refuge settings. This further prevents teenagers from catching up or improving schoolwork and reinforces their perceptions that education is not prioritised in the refuge. We have previously argued that the co-ordinated approach provided to Looked After Children, if replicated for teenagers living in DVA refuges, could deliver significant improvement in respect of their current education and future prospects (Bracewell et al., 2020). This is consistent with Council of Europe guidelines which propose that States should ensure that access to the digital environment is provided in educational and other care settings for children (Henrich, 2019).

Teenagers described feeling lonely and isolated from their peers whilst living in refuges. The length of time teenagers are resident in refuges means that this issue can affect them for a substantial period. Haaken and Yragui (2003) argue that, since isolation is a tactic used by many perpetrators, refuges may inadvertently perpetuate that process by cutting residents off from supportive contact with friends and family. They suggest that, in this sense, refuges are colluding with the conception of DVA as something which should be hidden. Refuge staff need to be aware of this possibility and consider how best to address this. The Oranje Huis may provide a useful model (Stanley, 2015). It aims to prioritise safety without hiding women and children and cutting them off from their social environment (de Jong, undated). However, teenagers may be uncomfortable with their home circumstances being public knowledge due to the stigma which currently surrounds DVA and living in a refuge. Flexibility and participation in decision-making might be more appropriate.

Teenagers would benefit from conversations with refuge staff aimed at developing a response to questions about where they live. The Oranje Huis provides a different perspective on safety in that guests are allowed to visit, and every CYP receives their own programme of support, including personalised safety plan (Ibid). This safety plan could be developed with teenagers to include digital safety, enabling them to maintain social networks and utilise digital technology for educational and entertainment purposes.

Whilst teenagers in this study stressed their need for access to communication channels such as social media, most refuge staff did not recognise the importance of this. Social media is central to adolescents' participation in social life as it enables connections to existing friends and helps to establish new friendships (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). Online communication can also provide control over the management of intimacy with peers, which might be relevant for teenagers in this study who reported being asked difficult questions face-to-face about where they were living. Online participation provides opportunities for teenagers in refuges to maintain and enhance their supportive network from a distance in ways where they can exercise choices and control. This may be especially useful for those who rely on their friends as a source of support.

This study highlights that teenagers should be involved in developing service provision to meet their needs. Teenagers should be given visibility and recognition as service users. Refuges need to provide them with more than just a place of physical safety. This has implications for refuge spending and resources. Improving digital access would require more equipment, software, adequate bandwidth or WI-FI and training for refuge and school staff. The 'Listen Louder!' campaign in Scotland (2002-2005) secured funding that ensured that every CYP in Scottish refuges had access to a computer for homework purposes (Houghton, 2006). This did not extend beyond Scotland and, at the time of this study, refuge services for CYP had reduced or stagnated. However, during the current Covid-19 crisis, at least two of the participating refuges provided all CYP in their refuges with a tablet to complete schoolwork online using local authority funding; the lockdown may have highlighted the importance of digital access for teenagers' education.

Digital technology can be used to provide support for victims of DVA, especially when victims are isolated and unable to access formal support. While the pandemic provides a widespread example of increased reliance on digital technology, a rapid evidence review found that, for some CYP, access to technology became problematic (Larkins, 2020). They experienced ‘digital overload’, with excessive demands that they engage with digital tools for their education, care, support, friendship and entertainment. This emphasises that face-to-face offline support cannot be replaced with digital support but the two can complement each other. For example, in this research, teenagers emailed the lead author when something had happened that they wished to report, and a face-to-face visit was arranged as soon as practicable.

Refuge staff may not understand the importance of online access for teenagers but there may also be a belief that imposing blanket restrictions automatically increases safety, so reducing the need to discuss online safety and minimising potential risks. This is not a sustainable solution or compatible with the needs of teenagers and overlooks their abilities to develop strategies to keep themselves safe. It also creates risks in that teenagers can access the internet elsewhere having received little or no safety advice. This contravenes the Council of Europe guidelines which state that provision of digital devices must be ‘accessible, fair, transparent, intelligible, available in the child’s language and formulated in clear, child-friendly and age-appropriate language’ (Henrich, 2019: 14). Consistent with these guidelines, any restrictions to their right to freedom of expression and information in the digital environment should comply with international and European human rights conventions and standards. CYP should be informed of any restrictions in place according to their age and evolving capacities and be provided with guidance on suitable remedies, including on how to make a complaint, report abuse or request help and support (Henrich, 2019).

The increasingly privatised, pervasive and mobile use of the internet has not been considered in depth by refuge providers (Social Tech, Snook, and SafeLives 2019) which can mean that refuge staff are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of life lived online. It may be that the technological pace of change has been too fast for refuge staff to continually implement adequate policies to address safe internet use,

particularly as it is likely to be out of their realm of expertise. It may be easier, in the current climate of limited resources, to attempt to restrict usage, specifically with regards to refuge equipment for which they are responsible. However, a refuge stay provides an opportunity to provide guidance for teenagers as well as to support parents/guardians in engaging with teenagers about digital safety.

Refuge rules and regulations about communication technology rested on outdated notions about online access and safety. Restricting digital access was described as meeting requirements for ‘safety’ and ‘protection’. The teenagers interviewed noted that this restriction was ineffective, as they could still access the internet, albeit in a limited and expensive way, using mobile phones. Smahel et al.’s (2020:18), large-scale survey of 19 countries found that smartphones mean that CYP have ‘anywhere, anytime’ connectivity. The majority report using their smartphones daily or almost all the time, with the rate being higher for teenagers than for younger children. This constant use makes supervision difficult and reinforces the argument that it would be more beneficial to support teenagers to become skilled and resilient digital citizens. The increasingly privatised and mobile use of the internet has not been considered in refuges. It is both impractical and inappropriate to seek to restrict access to digital technology due to its pervasive nature. Instead, risk policies should identify opportunities to increase coping mechanisms, and safety could be promoted through strategies and support mechanisms that build teenagers’ capacities to protect themselves.

There is a requirement for refuge interventions to move beyond simply eliminating risk; they must also challenge conceptions of which risks are important and when. Physical safety may be more important initially but, once addressed, safety planning should include management of wider risks. Teenagers could be engaged in their own protection by identifying and developing ways to mitigate potential risks. Not only would this support a balance between risk and safety, it might assist in building capacity for making positive life choices. Advances in technology could be used to increase the safety of teenagers, for example, to keep mothers or staff informed of their whereabouts and to provide access to resources such as the Hideout website. Useful reports concerning internet safety have been produced by the EU Kids Online Project (Smahel et al., 2020) and the Internet

Literacy handbook (Richardson et al., 2017) is a tool for CYP, parents, professionals and policy makers. These resources could be used to increase staff awareness and develop practical ways of providing safe internet use, thus enabling teenagers to access the internet safely and confidently, aware of both opportunities and risks.

Conclusion

Refuges still play a vital role in terms of securing the physical safety of those experiencing DVA. However, safety and recovery from DVA require more than this. This research found that, in respect of teenagers' digital access, refuge policy and practice was underpinned by a restricted focus on risk mitigation and protectionism over maximising opportunities. We recommend the implementation of a more collaborative and empowering approach which builds on teenagers' existing digital skills and knowledge.

Our findings demonstrate lengthy periods of multiple exclusion from digital technology for teenagers living in DVA refuges. Refuge policy and practice need to acknowledge the extent to which social/digital media are increasingly the primary means teenagers use to communicate and receive, create and disseminate formal and informal information. Teenagers in refuges require access to different forms of media and to be able to utilise the internet as a means of communicating and engaging with friends and family, for educational purposes and for receiving support. They should also be educated to understand and manage online risks. Teenagers aged 16 and over are now defined as primary service users for refuges and providers need to give more priority to the complexities of working with this group for whom digital technology is central to their lives.

Key Messages

1. Refuge policies need to recognise the importance of meeting teenagers' rights to digital access.
2. A balance is required between empowerment, participation and protection when considering digital access for young people.

3. Monitoring and safeguarding rather than outright prohibition or restricted access to the internet should be considered.

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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