

Young people are part of the answer to preventing and reducing violence – we just need to believe in them



Chair of trustees for StreetDoctors, Sophie Clissold-Lesser, introduces us to the – sometimes lifesaving – work that they are doing to guide young people away from violence



Aleesha¹ saved someone’s life. ‘I was at a friend’s birthday party, and I heard a bang coming from the back of the garden. Everyone started screaming and they all started to run. I saw a young boy on the floor by himself, his leg covered in blood... I asked a friend to put pressure on his leg while I put pressure on his hand.

‘He had also been stabbed in the hand. I then got someone’s jacket to cover him so he stayed warm. I just kept talking to him. I just kept telling him to stay awake and to let me know if he feels tired as I didn’t want him to close his eyes, kept reassuring him that everything was going to be OK. I stayed with him until the ambulance arrived. I managed to get hold of his mum. He was 16 years old as well. He is still alive.’

Aleesha saved the boy’s life because she had been to a StreetDoctors session. Earlier that week she had been taught what to do in a medical emergency by StreetDoctors volunteers. If Aleesha had not known what to do or been unwilling to act, that boy might not now be alive. How many other young people might have died or been seriously injured because people around them did not know how to help?

At StreetDoctors we believe knowledge is power, and that young people like Aleesha are part of the solution to violence, rather than just ‘part of the problem’.

Empowering young people

So how does our work empower young people like Aleesha? StreetDoctors teaches emergency first aid to young people affected by violence across the UK, so they know what to do if someone is bleeding or unconscious. We do this through our movement of young healthcare volunteers (nurses, paramedics and medical students) who train 11- to 25-year-olds to understand the true medical consequences of violence and empower them to become lifesavers in their communities. Currently we have 22 teams of 550 volunteers in 17 cities across the UK. Last year we taught 5,205 young people lifesaving skills and worked with 319 delivery partners. Since 2013 we have empowered over 18,000 young people with the knowledge to become young lifesavers, to both prevent violence from happening and reduce the impact when it does.

The effect of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted us all, but its effect on vulnerable young people has been particularly profound. It has left young people further isolated, limited the already scant opportunities they previously had, decreased their access to education and skills, affected their mental health and made many young people more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. To respond to this StreetDoctors has adapted all our work to digital platforms, so we can continue to be there for all the young people who need our lifesaving, skills-based interventions.

How StreetDoctors’ training works

Our movement of healthcare volunteers train young people in two sessions, usually face-to-face, but currently through remote methods. Our ‘bleeding’ session covers how to call an ambulance and deliver immediate first aid to someone who is bleeding before professional help arrives. Visual props are used to explain the science behind blood loss, including misconceptions about carrying a knife, with a focus on whether there are safe places to stab people. The session is practical, using role play scenarios to prepare young people to act in an emergency.

In our ‘knocked unconscious’ session young people learn why someone might become unconscious and how to assess if someone is. It covers how the heart, blood and lungs work together and the consequences of injury. Young people practise putting someone in the recovery position and delivering chest compressions (CPR) with resus dolls.

As we train young people in how to administer emergency first aid, it illuminates the true medical consequences of violence. We use this to support young people to explore their own thought processes and norms about violence, with the aim of preventing it from happening in the first place. Our volunteers are reactive to any questions or concerns that the young people bring to the sessions, allowing time for the issues that matter to them to be discussed.

All our training is facilitated by our delivery partners who include criminal justice services such as youth offending teams and services, educational services such as schools and alternative provisions

(PRUs), and youth, sports, religious and community groups. It is through this national network of volunteers and partners that we are able to reach the most disadvantaged and most at-risk young people in the UK.

Our approach

We begin our approach by asking what is right with young people, what do they have the potential to learn, understand and become? Thinking about what they can achieve, rather than focusing on what young people have done wrong, is one of the reasons our intervention is so successful: after StreetDoctors sessions 94% of young people say they now understand the medical consequences of violence, 93% say they would know what to do if they see someone bleeding or unconscious, and 85% say they are willing and able to help in a medical emergency.

It is an absolute privilege to volunteer my time with StreetDoctors – every time I meet with our volunteers I am floored by their level of commitment and passion. Since I first encountered StreetDoctors in 2013 the growth of the organisation has been incredible. The commitment of the volunteers and their drive to want to make a difference to the lives of young people persists at the core of what we do. As chair of trustees, I feel responsible to both our volunteers, to sustain an organisation that enables them to continue to deliver this training to the young people affected by violence, and to young people to offer them this opportunity.

Unfortunately, Aleesha's story of witnessing violence among her peers is not uncommon and violence is a leading cause of death among young people in the UK. It is not a new phenomenon, but the rise in violence we have witnessed between young people on our streets in the last few years, fuelled by the increasing use of weapons, has had hugely traumatic effects not just on those who are victims and perpetrators but the communities in which these tragic events take place, which are left wounded and scarred by the long-lasting impacts of violence.

Understanding the causes of violence affecting young people

Understanding the myriad causes of violence affecting young people is complex, which makes tackling it particularly challenging. In March last year StreetDoctors released a research report showing

Why is StreetDoctors needed?

In 2019 there were 45,627 knife or sharp instrument offences, 7% more than the previous year and the highest number ever recorded.ⁱ

The cost of this violence to the NHS in England and Wales is estimated to be £2.9 billion every year.ⁱⁱ

Young people involved in violence are not only more likely to be physically harmed, but 95% more likely to have social, emotional and mental health issues, and eight times more likely to be misusing substances.ⁱⁱⁱ

Young people exposed to violence within their family or community are more likely to perpetrate violence themselves. If a person has a sibling who has been charged with a violent crime, they are four times more likely to commit a violent crime themselves.^{iv}

According to the Early Intervention Foundation the acquisition of skills based learning is one of the most effective channels for changing behaviour.

ⁱ *Crime in England and Wales: year ending December 2019, 2020*

ⁱⁱ *A public health approach to violence prevention for England, 2012*

ⁱⁱⁱ *The characteristics of gang-associated children and young people*, Children's Commissioner, 2019

^{iv} *Preventing youth violence: an overview of the evidence, 2015*

that the risk of high levels of violence is increasing in smaller towns and cities; young people and communities are not just affected in our major urban centres such as London, Manchester and Birmingham but across the country in the smaller cities of Southampton, Blackpool and Hull to name a few.² Our research also highlights some of the main causes of increasing levels of violence in an area: a high percentage of young people not in education, employment or training, high numbers of school exclusions, high levels of deprivation and poverty, existing violence in adults and high numbers of young people in the criminal justice system. But there are many other growing risk factors, such as county lines drug dealing and exploitation, and a poverty of hope among vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in communities across the country. Covid-19 has only made this situation worse. Late last year we launched the research report – *Living through a lockdown*³ – which provides reflections and recommendations from young people at risk of serious violence, with partners MAC-UK and Redthread. The research highlights the effect lockdown has had on young people affected by violence, and how to ensure further lockdown restrictions do not cause more harm to vulnerable young people.

Finding solutions

There is no 'one-fix' solution to violence affecting young people, which is why we advocate for a public health approach in dealing with it effectively, one where every section of society needs to play its part. It is not just a problem for one sector, but for healthcare, education, the welfare system, public services, employment, the criminal justice system, the local environment, and communities themselves. Without being checked violence can spread, causing harm to generations of families and communities. We are proud to be part of this approach.

Another example of one of our young lifesavers is Tommy.⁴ Last year this 15-year-old, who had received an order to undergo rehabilitation with the Bristol youth offending team (YOT), was with his friends when he witnessed a stabbing. He saw a boy staggering from injury and two men run off into a car. One of his friends started filming on their phone, but Tommy went over to the boy, offered to help and called an ambulance as soon as he saw blood. He started to apply pressure to the victim's wound and kept reassuring him he would be OK. Tommy followed the first aid steps he had learnt at a StreetDoctors session, and the police and paramedics said this might be why the boy is still alive today. Tommy's parents would not believe he had been able to save someone's life until shown the video footage. Afterwards, he told his YOT worker 'I really like helping people'.

Changing lives

StreetDoctors does something different and absolutely essential. I feel incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to be part of it. Our vice chair is a magistrate and a medic and so it feels like a fitting way to end with a quote from her: 'As a magistrate and a doctor, I see the effects of knife crime. Young people carry knives for complex reasons. StreetDoctors' sessions give young people the tools to act in an emergency but also the confidence to call the ambulance. Follow-up shows they reflect on how violence impacts on their communities. This charity is changing lives.'

For more information go to www.streetdoctors.org

References

1 Name changed

2 StreetDoctors Expansion Report, Chantal Rees, 2020, <http://bit.ly/magistrate2121>

3 <http://bit.ly/magistrate2122>

4 Name changed