



# Children's understandings of gender-based violence at home: The role school can play in child disclosure

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## ABSTRACT

Both official data and scientific evidence have shown that gender violence and the impact it has on children is an important social problem and ways of preventing it do not appear to be working. As this is an issue that affects children, it was decided to involve children in this research from the outset. To this end, six children's advisory groups were formed. Focus groups were then organised to explore children's perspectives on gender-based violence and the best ways for them to seek help and information in order to enhance early disclosure. Twelve focus groups were conducted with a total participation of 45 children aged 10–16 from Catalonia (Spain). The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed through Theoretical Thematic Analysis. The results demonstrate the importance of children's active participation in research processes. It is clear that their understanding of the term is fairly comprehensive, wide-ranging and associated with the patriarchal system. The results point out that gender-based violence occurs in many spheres of social relations and schools are highlighted as privileged spaces for disclosure. The figure of the teacher is particularly highlighted as a key agent, and seen as one of the professionals closest to the children and identified as a person of trust. Teacher training is a pending challenge in addressing the prevention and intervention on gender-based violence.

## 1. Introduction

Gender violence is a major social problem, considered a “global health problem of epidemic proportions” by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2019). Despite legislative efforts, awareness-raising campaigns, and the programmes and resources that have been developed, official statistics continue to reflect an increase in victims. Since 2013, 452 women have been killed in Spain as a result of gender violence, following an increase in recent years. Furthermore, 320 children were made orphans and 41 were killed (Government of Spain, Ministry of Equality, 2021).

According to research, gender-based violence has a negative impact not only on women but on all members of the family, especially children who are at a high risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse and neglect (Fantuzzo et al., 1997; Holt et al., 2008; Osofsky, 2003; Stanley, 2011). Accordingly, exposure to gender violence both inside and outside the home has been recognised by the Convention of Istanbul as a form of child abuse (Council of Europe, 2011) and it has been incorporated into the legal framework of child protection systems (in Spain, Organic Law

8/2015, modifying the child and adolescent protection system and Organic Law 8/2021, on the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against violence)

Many studies have warned of the potential harmful effects for children experiencing violence at home (following the term used by Øverlien and Holt, 2019) in the short- and long-term. Children speak of feelings of fear, sadness and loneliness in a long-lasting experience that ultimately leads to losses and challenges in their family relationships (Noble-Carr et al., 2020). In addition, effects can include post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, self-depreciation, problems at school and with concentration, low self-esteem, drug or alcohol abuse (in the long term), and may compromise individual growth, wellbeing and relational skills in general (e.g. Kitzmann et al., 2003; Moylan et al., 2010; Save the Children, 2011; Stanley, 2011; Tsavoussis et al., 2014). The mother–child relationship (see Katz 2019) is affected in contexts of violence and also conditions the possibility of disclosure of violence by children. According to Katz (2019), the levels of strain, distance or closeness in the relationship will be shaped by factors such as the perpetrator's behaviour towards the child and the use of violence as well as the mother's

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emotional skills and the child's perceptions of both parents. Understanding these factors will play a central role in the work of child protection services.

Detecting and responding to violence in the early stages, can help both the children and their mothers, and possibly bring about changes in the parents or the mother's intimate partner, as well as sparing children the suffering, chronicity and life-long consequences (Cleaver et al., 2011). However, retrospective studies with adults suggest that early detection is still a challenge and children can be living in a situation of violence that may last several years, sometimes their entire childhood (Osofsky, 2003).

Studies focusing on children experiencing domestic violence have shown that disclosure is one of the greatest challenges to early detection. Children do not know who to tell or who to turn to for help when they are experiencing situations of violence at home (Montserrat & Casas, 2017, 2019). Similarly, in a sample of 703 Swedish young adults, the majority of them had never confided in anyone about the violence witnessed at home when they were children due to the belief that no one could do anything about it (Howell et al., 2015). In addition, according to Gorin (2004), many children do not want to tell anyone about the situation due to several fears, such as violence against them, negative consequences for the parents and the family, and being separated from their parents. Callaghan et al. (2017) explored different strategies used by children for managing disclosure. One of them focused on children's practices of not telling anyone; another pointed out how children use strategies to disclose safely and securely; and the last one highlighted how they often speak differently according to the context. Ultimately, their manner of telling what is happening to them is complex and contextual. Studies by Noble-Carr et al. (2020) found that children felt it was important to be able to break the silence imposed by violence. However, to do this they needed to have ongoing opportunities and support once they decided to talk about their experience in both formal and informal settings. But above all they needed to feel that the environment was safe for them and their family.

Therefore, children's disclosure of gender-based violence at home could help, on the one hand, to bring an end to the situation of violence since their mothers are often trapped (emotionally, economically, judicially, etc.). On the other, talking about it would improve their wellbeing and the sense of control over their lives if they can find the right space where they can talk to someone and ask for help, such as the school context (Di Napoli et al., 2019; Howell et al., 2015). Furthermore, as revealed by recent studies (e.g. Lorente-Acosta, 2020; UN-Women, 2020), a pandemic like COVID-19 can aggravate this situation, making children more vulnerable and hindering their possibilities of asking for help.

The present study contributes to increasing understanding of the complexities of child disclosure from the child's perspective, focusing on how it can be done more safely and what role schools can play in this process: This study focuses on children's understanding of gender-based violence and asks them what the best options are for seeking information and help. The participatory approach and methodology promoted by the European project 'Participation for Protection' (Queen's University Belfast, 2018) has been taken as a reference.

### 1.1. Gender-based violence from a child-centred approach

Traditionally, in research, the phenomenon of gender violence has been approached only from the standpoint of adults, especially practitioners and women, but the child's perspective has not been included to a significant degree. In the past, many studies were conducted on children, but very few with children (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Mullender, 2006).

In the same way, in the practice field, intervention has too often been focused on adults - mainly on women but also on perpetrators - and children are often considered as mere appendages of their mothers (Montserrat & Casas, 2017; Cater, 2014; Di Napoli et al., 2019). Some

services are reluctant to engage children, appealing to issues of vulnerability as well as their limited capacity to deal with such situations, but this reticence may be related to a lack of appropriate professional training (Montserrat & Casas, 2017; Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Gorin, 2004; Vanner & Almansori, 2021; Vara-Horna et al., 2021).

Either way, in terms of gender violence as happens with other problems affecting children's lives, children have the need and the right to be protected (Øverlien and Holt, 2019); not only are they victims but also rights-holders. According to these authors, this approach may influence the increasing inclusion of children as key informants in research. In line with the sociology of childhood (e.g. Gaitán Muñoz, 2006; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009), and as stated in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2013), children should be recognised as active social agents and not merely as passive subjects. We should avoid assuming that research and decision-making affecting children must be carried out without them because we do not consider them capable enough. On the contrary, children can be key informers for policy-making and scientific research (Casas, 2017; González-Carrasco et al., 2021; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

To adopt a child-centred approach in dealing with gender-based violence would empower children to understand the problems they are experiencing at home and enable them to explain their situation and seek help (Gorin, 2004). Besides, knowing how children perceive gender-based violence and who they can turn to would inform adults about when and how to act to help them deal with such a situation (Mullender et al., 2002). Indeed, dealing with the issue of gender violence from the children's rather than from the mothers' standpoint makes sense, not only from the perspective of children's rights, but also with regard to effectiveness.

### 1.2. The role of school in early detection

According to the World Health Organization, gender violence is a multifactorial problem that needs to be understood based on the ecological model (World Health Organization & Pan American Health Organization, 2012). That is, gender-based violence is an interactive or multi-causal phenomenon in which a variety of factors contribute at different levels and needs to be approached from different angles (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015). Based on this approach, community systems, in which the school occupies a central space par excellence, gain particular relevance in the prevention, detection and treatment of gender-based violence (Admon Livny & Katz, 2018; Bonal et al., 2016; Di Napoli et al., 2019; Münger & Markström, 2019). According to Farrelly (2020), opting for a whole school approach through the involvement and commitment of all members of the school community would be a good way to develop effective school-based prevention work.

The focus of our study is on the gender violence that children experience at home, not at school, and the question is whether children can perceive school as a safe space where they can disclose what happens at home. Di Napoli et al. (2019) stated that there is a need for a solid and integrated network of positive and trusting relationships for children, which the school could provide and play an important part in. Indeed, Chanmugam and Teasley (2014) discussed the important role of school social workers and school teachers as privileged actors who can help children in developing different ways to perform and make help-seeking attempts. Predictable routines and 'safe' adults might make schools a place preferred by some children for disclosing gender-based violence, as well as other forms of abuse.

However, there is a lack of scientific literature on this issue and the role of the school in early detection processes of gender-based violence at home is still an unexplored terrain, both in the research and practice fields. The review of programmes carried out by Farrelly (2020) showed that most of the evaluations conducted have focused on adolescents in secondary education, while very little evidence exists with primary-school-aged children. Münger et al. (2019) carried out a study with the participation of school teachers and concluded that the social

mission of school is not always assumed and teachers do not feel responsible for dealing with domestic violence and do not take any action. On the other hand, in a study carried out from a children's perspective, the results showed that children preferred to report a situation of domestic violence to the police rather than to teachers at school, and teachers were not always seen as gender-based violence experts who could help (Mullender et al., 2002). It is also sometimes a question of lack of trust when, on the one hand, children are afraid that if they say something, their case will be referred to child protection services, and on the other, teachers feel they have an obligation to report.

## 2. Objectives

The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers and facilitators for children's gender-violence disclosure in the school context. To this end, the study aims to explore children's perspective of gender-based violence and the best ways for them to seek information and help. The specific objectives are:

- (1) To analyse children's understandings of gender-based violence and the contexts in which they recognise these situations of violence.
- (2) To determine the best sources of information and help according to their perspective, identifying the role they attribute to school.

## 3. Method

This study was carried out within the framework of the research project "WeAreHere!" (<https://www.udg.edu/ca/grupsrecerca/LIBERI/Projectes-de-recerca/WeAreHere>) aimed at creating an early detection model of gender violence applicable in schools, giving children an active role in order to boost support that would be useful for them in bringing the violence to an end.

This participatory and applied research was carried out in Catalonia (Spain) and had a qualitative design based on the participation of children's advisory groups, set up from the outset. As Moore et al (2016) stated, the use of reference groups from the research population, in this case children, promotes a space for joint reflection with the researchers to reconsider both methodological and content aspects. In our study the advisory groups have taken the role of the expert and were formed as focus groups to discuss the two objectives described above in the first phase of the research.

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

The six advisory groups created specifically for this research project were from six different locations in the four Catalan provinces (Table 1). They were made up of a maximum of 12 members (between 7 and 8 on average). A total of 45 children aged 10–16 years old (Mean = 12.63, SD = 1.49) participated in the study; 46.7% were primary-school children (aged 10–12) and 53.3% were in secondary school (aged 12–16). Among them, 31.1% were boys and 68.9% girls and the majority (89.5%) were from state schools. Two groups were formed in a rural location, three in

**Table 1**  
Composition of the advisory groups.

Advisory group	Rural/urban	N° participants	Age range	Gender	
				Male	Female
1	Urban	6	11–13	1	5
2	Urban	7	12–13	4	3
3	Rural	9	10–12	4	5
4	Rural	3	13–16	1	2
5	Urban	8	10–12	3	5
6	Urban	12	14–15	1	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>45</b>	<b>10–16</b>	<b>14</b> (31.1%)	<b>31</b> (68.9%)

towns and one in a city of over 100,000 inhabitants.

**Table 1.** Composition of the advisory groups

The research team contacted six town councils which had active 'Children's Councils' and obtained their agreement and willingness to participate in the research. These councils were selected for their diversity in terms of rural/urban municipalities and sex and age of children (from 10 to 16). The advisory groups were organised by the council staff, who asked if any members of the Children's Councils were interested in participating in the research on a voluntary basis. Some members from each of the Children's Councils volunteered to take part in the study. Thus, the children came from different schools in each of the municipalities, except in the rural municipalities where all the children came from the same school. It was not known whether the children had experienced gender-based violence beforehand.

### 3.2. Ethical considerations

Children participated on a voluntary basis and gave their informed consent and, if they were under 14 years old, their parents also gave informed consent. The participants did not receive any financial incentive. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data were respected throughout the entire process according to Organic Law 3/2018 on Data Protection and Guarantee of Digital Rights and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council. Besides, the study was conducted according to the guidelines and with the approval of the Ethical Committee of the University (CEBRU0009-21). The Department of Education and the Secretary of Childhood, Adolescence and Youth (Catalan Government) approved the procedure and reviewed the instruments.

The advisory groups were conducted in a respectful atmosphere that invited participation, reflection and debate. The authors of this paper were responsible for moderating the group and stopping it if any situation occurred that threatened the dignity or freedom of any of the participants. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their participation at any point throughout the meetings. Children were not asked to report personal experiences of gender-based violence. However, they were informed that, if a serious incident related to gender-based violence was disclosed during the meetings, it would be reported in accordance with the established protocols. Also, personal attendance, support and accompaniment would be provided by the group facilitators and the representative of their city council or school (depending on the composition of each advisory group).

### 3.3. Instrument

Twelve focus groups were conducted with the children in the advisory groups (1–1.5-hour duration each), two with each group, within a period of two months. Thus, the focus groups were formed in the first phase of the research and the results of these groups are presented here. All of them took place on-line due to the social restrictions and limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Children participated from their homes and two groups from school. Two members of the research team participated in each group, one of them leading the session and the other taking notes. Besides, one or two adults of reference for the group were present (local council youth worker or teacher). All the sessions were recorded (video and audio).

The sessions were conducted in screen share mode and divided in two parts: (a) a brief description of the research (research team, collaborators, funding, objectives, methodology), the focus groups' tasks and organisation throughout the research; and (b) a discussion on children's understandings of gender-based violence and the best sources of information and help from their perspective, following the focus groups' script:

- How would you define gender-based violence in your own words?

- What situations could be considered gender-based violence? (give examples)
- Where have you heard about gender-based violence or who has spoken to you about it?
- What would you do in a situation of gender-based violence at home?
- Why do you think there are so many children and adolescents who don't ask for help when they suffer gender-based violence at home?
- How would you like to receive information about gender-based violence?
- If you had to ask for help, what would you prefer to do?
- Who would you ask for help?
- How would you like the person who can help you to be?

The answers to the questions were written down directly during the sessions, sharing the screen and, therefore, in consensus with the focus group participants. Later, all the focus group discussions were also transcribed verbatim.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Interview tapescripts were analysed sequentially following an inductive strategy. Theoretical Thematic Analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This procedure entailed incident-by-incident coding followed by a focused coding process in which each code was re-read and analysed to identify broader themes (Charmaz, 2006). The process was reviewed by the researchers and co-authors of this article following an inter-rater reliability procedure. Finally, the themes were organised following the structure of the focus group script and themes in line with the article's objectives were selected. The data analysis was performed using Atlas.ti software.

## 4. Results

The results are presented according to the two specific objectives.

### 4.1. Children's understandings of gender-based violence.

Regarding children's conceptualization of gender-based violence, results are organised in relation to the terms used, the nuances and doubts to their definition and the contexts in which they identified situation of gender violence (Table 2).

Insert Table 2. Definition of the concept of gender violence and the contexts in which it was identified according to the children.

Participants gave a broad and complete definition of gender-based

**Table 2**  
Definition of the concept of gender violence and the contexts in which it was identified according to the children.

Theme	N° of mentions
(a) Aspects included in the definition	
Superiority of men/inferiority of women	12
Control and restriction of women's personal freedoms	10
Abuse of power, coercing women	10
Lack of respect, disregard/ low regard for women	6
(b) Controversies and nuances when defining the term	
Visibility	13
Degree or intensity	8
Context and intentions	7
Perpetrator and/or indirect victims	4
(c) Contexts in which situations of gender-based violence are identified	
Primary school/ high school	16
Workplace	8
Music	7
Family	5
Fashion	4
Sports	4
Social networks and the media	4
The street	3

violence, not restricted only to direct and physical violence. Most of them linked the more evident and extreme forms of violence to those more inconspicuous or socially 'tolerated' forms, identifying the patriarchal-based society as the basis of violence against women. Indeed, we can highlight four recurring key components in the children's definitions of gender-based violence, which included different degrees of violence (disrespect, control, abuse) as well as the societal basis of gender-based violence (inequality, patriarchal society):

(1) Inequality in the position of men and women in society, with men's position being identified as *superior* and women's as *inferior*, or more vulnerable and weaker:

*'I'd say that gender violence is when a man, in a position of superiority, uses violence against a woman'* (Boy, 13)

(2) The control and restriction of women's freedoms in terms of what they do, where they go and what clothes they wear:

*'[gender violence] could also be when the father exercises control over the mother, like, for example: "what have you been up to, where have you been...?"'* (Girl, 13)

(3) The abuse of power consisting of forcing a woman to do something without her consent:

*'Men make women do things that women don't want to do, for example, they hit them, they want to grope them ...'* (Girl, 12)

(4) Lack of respect for women or a low regard for them:

*'They're everyday situations that make you feel diminished or make you feel more afraid. Like walking along the street or... during the day you have to put up with comments that aren't... that aren't respectful at all, [...]'* (Girl, 14)

Secondly, we were able to identify a series of aspects that, in the children's opinion, either clarified or generated doubts about the concept of gender-based violence. On the one hand, all the participants agreed that violence which was 'not seen' or did not cause physical or obvious harm should be included within the concept of gender-based violence. Older girls also highlighted that situations of inequality or discrimination against women should be considered as gender-based violence. In this sense, sexist jokes or comments were not considered innocent for them.

*'We started at the beginning of the school year with comments like "shut up, because you're a woman", "wash the dishes, cause you're a woman", "don't worry, God doesn't punish twice, he's already punished you once because you're a woman", things like that freak you out a lot [...] but they [the boys] say it's just a joke, or they say "I like black humour" but it seems like the whole thing is being covered up, doesn't it?'* (Girl, 14)

In contrast, there were doubts and disagreement as to whether or not violence could be considered violence when it was not inflicted directly but witnessed inadvertently, or when it was not directed against the woman but against a loved one or a beloved object such as her children.

*'It's not violence, but it's as if you're on the side of the attacker because you don't do anything [...] but then you're also as bad as the one who's doing wrong'* (Boy, 10)

On the other hand, few of the participants noted that the concept of violence was influenced by context – the way and intention with which things are done or the degree of trust you have with the person. Similarly, the degree or intensity with which a given situation occurs could determine whether or not it could be considered violence.

*'For me, looking at someone's mobile phone is being a toxic person, but asking where you've been and looking at someone's phone goes against their privacy, but it wouldn't be violence...'* (Boy, 13)



Thirdly, the participants stressed that violence against women takes place in the wider society, not only within the family. Older girls, repeatedly mentioned school, where they identified situations of gender-based violence that were tolerated by both children and teachers, and which they linked to a lack of awareness or education on this issue.

*‘A lot of teachers have made sexist comments, teachers, who’ve often implied that women were the ones who had to cover up or keep quiet or do things, and they haven’t taught the boys, or even the girls, that they should learn to show respect and not make others feel bad because of a comment that just crossed their mind and they said because they thought it was funny! [...]’* (Girl, 14)

*‘But also, when teachers hear a boy making a joke for example ... a macho joke, they don’t interfere... they let them do it... otherwise it would start a lot of problems, I guess, but I don’t think it’s right either’.* (Girl, 14)

These sexist attitudes were identified by most of the children as a foundation for potentially cruder forms of violence and were linked, therefore, to a certain cause for future concern. However, few of them felt there had been a positive change compared to previous generations and, as such, a positive change in society.

*‘Comparing generations, adults are much less aware today than the boys in our class on the issue of ‘machismo’ and respect among us.’* (Girl, 14).

Finally, some participants also mentioned examples of gender-based violence in the workplace, in groups and their song lyrics, fashion, sports, on the streets in general, and on social networks and the media. This violence was associated by the children with traditional gender roles and negative role models.

Some differences by sex and age were seen in the participants. Older children focused more on narrating personal experiences of sexism and discrimination, especially girls. Younger children showed a greater inclination to invent creative ways to report the violence and seek help (often closer to detective stories than to reality). For example:

*‘I would take a rubber gun that I’ve got to play with and I would shoot him [the aggressor], it hurts, not a lot, but it hurts’.* (Boy, 11)

*‘I would pretend to call for a pizza, but I would call the police [...] so I could tell them the address and things that are happening, in code....’.* (Boy, 10)

#### 4.2. Preferred sources of information and help from the children’s perspective. The role of school

The results of this section are classified into five areas (Table 3): key agents and institutions for information; preferred sources of help; characteristics of the person who could help; preferred ways of seeking help; and possible barriers that could lead them to choose not to seek help if faced with a hypothetical situation of gender-based violence at home.

**Table 3.** Sources of information and help according to children.

Firstly, when asked how they would like to be informed, most of the proposals put forward by the children in the focus groups were linked to school: having a subject on gender violence and other issues; having more debates in class; inviting experts to come and give talks; having an “expert” on the subject available in the school; putting up posters, or handing out leaflets and brochures on the subject. In short, the participants called for a greater visibility of the problem in schools – not just on an occasional basis – with the aim of making it normal to talk about it in class and with teachers.

*‘I think one of the simplest networks for us would be, well, the school itself. I mean, it’s a place where we spend most of our days and a lot of hours and we’re in a group and we talk to each other more or less about things and the teachers are really the people who have a big impact on our lives’* (Girl, 14)

**Table 3**  
Sources of information and help according to children.

Theme	N° of times mentioned
(a) Preferred sources of information	
School	13
Audio-visual platforms, digital and media environments	10
Others (family, leisure activities, professionals, friends)	8
(b) Preferred sources of help	
Teachers	22
Friends and classmates	20
The police	14
Family	13
Psychologists or other professionals or leisure instructors	11
Neighbours	9
(c) Characteristics of the person who can help	
Expertise, knowledge, experience	18
Someone who believes me, who trusts me	16
Someone who is easy to get along with and a good person	11
Someone who knows how to handle a situation of violence	11
An adult	6
A woman	2
Someone who can keep a secret	1
(d) Ways of seeking help	
Phone call	11
Message via social media, email, website or school mailbox	7
Talking to someone in private	3
Asking for help through another person	2
Signalling for help in the street	2
(e) Obstacles to seeking help	
Fear of the aggressor and the consequences	13
Rationalising, justifying the situation of violence	8
Feeling/being incapable	7
Fear of the victim’s reaction, wanting to avoid awkward situations	7
Acting to ‘defend’ the family	5

Older participants stated that media channels also had a significant impact and influence on them. They proposed talking about this issue on television, social networks, websites and video games, using celebrities or professional football players, whether through advertisements, news items, or more indirectly, through the subject matter of certain programmes, cartoons or video games.

*‘[...] a lot of kids also like to follow their idol, their favourite influencer, their favourite singer, and so on... I don’t know, let the celebrities who get so many followers pass on these values to them as well.’* (Girl, 16)

Secondly, when asked who they would turn to for help in the event of a hypothetical situation of gender violence at home, most of the children participating in the study expressed a preference for a person they knew and trusted. The role played by school teachers is specifically mentioned much more frequently than that of other agents. However, some participants felt that, depending on the teacher, there might not be enough trust.

*‘I think it depends on the trust you have in the teacher. Maybe you don’t trust them so much, and it’s more of a teacher-student relationship, and it’s more awkward for you that they know what’s going on in your life....’* (Boy, 15)

Within the circle of those they trusted, children also referred to friends or both the nuclear and the extended family. Some said they would prefer to tell friends rather than family, feeling that their friends would be more likely to believe them.

*‘I think it would be better to tell friends. Because the family already know the person who’s doing that to you and might not believe you because they know what that person is like and say “he doesn’t do that” and friends who don’t know the person who’s doing it, well, they might trust you and help.’* (Girl, 12)

Outside the circle of trusted people, many of the children looked to

the police as a guide for help on this issue. To a lesser extent, the children also mentioned their neighbours, psychologists or other specialised professionals at school, such as the director or head of studies. A few also mentioned leisure instructors or extracurricular activity teachers, or local councillors, doctors or other professionals.

The most frequently mentioned qualities that the person/s who could help might have were 'expertise', 'knowledge' or 'experience'. For children, this meant people who knew about the issue, had helped other people before and also, most importantly, had experienced first-hand a situation of gender-based violence.

*'I think the person I would feel most confident talking to would be someone who's actually been in this situation. Someone who's been in this situation but has been able to overcome it because you think «well, this person really understands me, he or she knows what I'm going through...». If it's someone who's been through it, you think «well, this person's been able to overcome it, so maybe I can too».* (Girl, 14)

Also important for the children was how this person would deal with their disclosure, not with suspicion, disbelief, or a lack of trust but, on the contrary, believing and trusting them, showing an interest in them and taking them seriously, showing understanding and empathy, and not judging them. Along the same lines, the children mentioned a series of personal qualities in the person they would talk to, such as being 'kind' and 'attentive', 'a good person', 'friendly' and 'approachable' and, in short, 'trustworthy'.

There were also a series of qualities highlighted by some of the children that had more to do with knowing how to manage and deal with situations of aggressiveness and violence. These included daring and courage, and physical and mental strength; the latter in the sense of knowing how to handle a critical situation with control, intelligence and patience and, ultimately, transmitting self-assurance.

*'[...] I'd look for a person who's strong and in control.'* (Boy, 10)

Similarly, most of the participants preferred the person to be an adult rather than someone of their own age, while gender did not seem to make much difference to them, although some children mentioned that they would prefer to talk to a woman. Finally, on one occasion it was mentioned that the person should be able to 'keep a secret'.

The concern for privacy and discretion was a recurring theme when the children were asked how they would prefer to seek help. Accordingly, the majority considered making a phone call was safer, more private and more immediate than writing a message via social networks, websites or email. Some of the participants specified that they would like to talk to a person face to face as long as it was in private, while others said they would even prefer to ask for help through another person to protect their own identity. Similarly, a participant mentioned the possibility of using a mailbox at school to which only the teacher would have access.

With the aim of seeking greater privacy, one of the participants commented that she had preferred to seek anonymous channels of communication in a first-hand experience she had had in the past:

*'I was in a situation like that a while ago and you really don't want to talk about it, no matter how much trust you have [...]. And what my sister and I did was to look for an anonymous solution, right? Searching on the internet... places where you don't have to give your name and all because you don't want people to know, do you?' (Girl, 14)*

Finally, some participants considered the possibility of 'signalling for help' in the street, which was again related to discretion and the possibility of asking for help in a safe way, without the aggressor knowing about it.

In line with these results, the children discussed the possibility of not asking for help and identified some barriers that they thought might prevent them from doing so. Firstly, the main reason mentioned by the participants was fear of the aggressor and his threats or intimidation, or

fear that the situation might get worse if they reported it, provoking more violence.

*'Well, the people who are being hurt are really afraid and sometimes it's really difficult to ask for help; I mean it's difficult for them because they're terrified and fear just gets the better of them...'* (Girl, 12)

Secondly, some of the participants felt that there were children and adolescents who did not ask for help because they had reached the point where they had 'normalised' the situation or they even tried to justify it.

*'[...] I guess sometimes some people try to justify it, don't they? They say: «well, he's my dad and there's a reason why he's doing it, isn't there»? [...] «well, it's normal».... Trying to find excuses for the person who's doing it and thinking «that's the way it must be done» and it kind of changes the way you think and you start thinking it's the right thing to do'* (Girl, 14)

Thirdly, in the opinion of the participants, there were a number of obstacles related to the feeling of helplessness that children and adolescents may have; they might not know what to do, or understand what is going on, especially the younger ones. Or, more specifically, they might find themselves unable to do anything if there was more than one aggressor or if they were locked up at home.

Several reasons for not telling anyone were linked to fear of how the people to whom they explained the situation might react, including: fear of being treated differently, talked down to or rejected, not being believed or thought to be exaggerating, being laughed at, or that the person who they explained it to would not keep it a secret and their situation would become public knowledge.

Finally, some of the participants felt that children and adolescents may act 'in defence' of their family and this may lead them not to tell anyone about the situation at home. They pointed out that children may 'feel sorry' for the father and have a certain empathy for him, or feel that by speaking out they are betraying the family and they would rather preserve the family integrity. A participant also raised the point that their own mother might ask them not to tell anyone. In this regard, some of the children participating in the study showed a willingness to deal with the situation with the family behind closed doors, talking it over and trying to maintain the privacy and integrity of the family.

*'First of all, I would have confidence in myself and say a few words to him to see if he could stop [...].'* (Boy, 10)

## 5. Discussion

This research work and its findings have deepened the understanding of the children's perspective on gender-based violence as well as the best ways, from the children's point of view, to seek information and help, identifying the role they attribute to school. With regard to the first objective of this study, the children and adolescents participating in the focus groups interpreted gender-based violence in a broad sense, associated with the patriarchal system, in line with authors who consider gender-based violence to be a problem of sociocultural origin (e.g. Corsi & Dohmen, 1995; Walby, 2013). In their accounts, they identified the importance of violence that was not visible, but which also did harm (Sánchez-Morago Hernanz & Becerril Ruiz, 2019). In this case, it was clearly more difficult for them to specify the degree or intensity of violence. The same occurred when they considered situations of indirect violence, by way of jokes, or as bystanders in cases of violence perpetrated by others. In these cases, the complexity of boundaries to delimit the violence and the different subjective evaluations of each child were acknowledged.

The participants in the study pointed out that gender-based violence occurs in many different areas of society besides partner and/or family life, such as school, leisure, social networks, the workplace, fashion, sports, on the street, etc. Girl participants highlighted the existence of

situations of sexism in the school context, especially among peers, corroborating the data collected by the Spanish study carried out by The Women's Foundation and the National University of Distance Education (Fundación Mujeres & UNED, 2004), which demonstrated the existing internalisation of sexist roles, models and beliefs that legitimise the authority, dominance and control of men over women among young people, especially among boys. The fact that some of them felt there had been a positive change in this regard in new generations, in contradiction to the statistics, could be related to their particular sociocultural background, since alternative gender relation trends exist in particular contexts (Carabí & Armengol, 2014).

In relation to the second objective, the study participants identified school as the place where gender-based violence should be detected, treated, and prevented, but above all, school was mentioned more in terms of calling for what should be done there, rather than describing what is actually being done. This is line with the literature in the field, which reports shortcomings in the social role of the school in the areas of detection, treatment and prevention of gender-based violence (Montserrat & Casas, 2017; Mullender et al., 2002; Münger & Markström, 2019). In fact, the participants felt that little attention was paid to the daily situations of violence occurring within the school itself and perceived that no clear educational guidelines existed regarding this issue. Some proposals were made with this in mind: introducing the subject of gender differences and gender violence as part of the curriculum; creating "groups of experts" (peers) on the subject within the school; setting up private and personal spaces or channels of communication between students and teachers, etc.

On the other hand, contrary to the findings of Mullender et al. (2002) indicating that children preferred to talk to the police rather than to a teacher, in our study the school teacher stood out as the person children could trust when asking for support. Yet, at the same time, participants pointed to the lack of experience of teachers in this area and children claimed that teachers may allow or legitimise sexist attitudes that occur in schools. A common compulsory prevention program regarding gender violence does not exist in Spanish schools. Each school must decide whether this kind of program is implemented or not. It is important, thus, to explore teachers' own perceptions and beliefs about gender, intimate partner relationships and gender-based violence, as they themselves may engage in sexist or potentially violent behavior. In this regard, the work of Vara-Horna et al (2021) concluded that domestic gender-based violence experienced by teachers affects school violence between teachers and students in the classroom. Therefore, they argue that it is also key to reduce violence experienced by teachers at the hands of their partners.

Research on teachers' perceptions and beliefs in relation to gender, intimate partner relationships and gender-based violence is a field yet to be explored in the scientific literature. The results of this study also highlighted the importance of reviewing teacher-training curricula in order to enhance and broaden the way in which gender-based violence is addressed (Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Fariña et al., 2021; Münger & Markström, 2019; Vanner & Almansori, 2021). Findings also showed that in order to seek help, children in the study would rely first on someone knowledgeable (either through first-hand experience or expertise), and who knew how to handle disclosures of concerns. Therefore, the emotional, political and pedagogical work carried out by teachers should be further developed. It is also necessary to know how to take advantage of the educational potential of the peer group, the class group, when it comes to detecting and accompanying situations of violence. This is why Vanner & Almansori (2021) have emphasized the value that pupils themselves place on establishing good relationships not only between teachers and pupils, but also among pupils themselves. All of this is aimed at providing safe and caring learning environments.

The issue of privacy and discretion when asking for help was another concern expressed by children and young people. It was associated with the fear of suffering negative consequences (for the children themselves and/or for other family members) and the fear of how the person/people

they turn to would react (not keeping a secret, not believing them, laughing at them, etc.). In line with the findings of other studies, these fears were identified as the main barriers to asking for help (Gorin, 2004), while Callaghan et al. (2017) explored children's strategies to disclose safely and securely and Noble-Carr et al. (2020), the need to feel that the environment was safe for the children and their family. As far as schools are concerned, it is clearly a challenge to provide spaces that are private and safe so that children or adolescents can go there without being discriminated against or feeling afraid (Mullender et al., 2002; Münger & Markström, 2019). However, this is an important issue because, according to the laws in most countries, confidentiality and anonymity cannot always be guaranteed due to the obligation of adults to report such events. And this is at the heart of the debate on how to handle disclosures. In Spain the law refers to the obligation to notify the 'competent authorities', and this includes talking it over with social services, thus giving a margin of time and space without having to go directly to the police.

To conclude, according to the children and youngsters themselves, the encouragement, support and actions that can be provided by the school could be a determining factor for the disclosure of gender-based violence. However, much remains to be done and the children participating in the study have identified many aspects that need to be improved to achieve this. The role of the school has become even more relevant with the restrictions on mobility and social interaction resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This new scenario has led to an increase in conflict and situations of suffering, with a rise in cases of intra-family violence that have often gone unreported (Lorente-Acosta, 2020; UN-Women, 2020). The school must be able to respond and pay attention to the needs of children living in situations of conflict, and become a key point of reference in their lives, even in situations of household lockdowns (Fariña et al., 2021; Reif et al., 2020).

At the methodological level, the results obtained have shown the importance of counting on the active participation of the children and adolescents themselves, and the opportunity that this represents. The participation of these children and young people has been highly satisfactory, both in terms of their willingness to participate and their involvement in the advisory groups, as well as with regard to their input and reasoning in the discussions that were held (as also pointed out Moore et al, 2016). This confirms, therefore, the wisdom of considering an approach to cases of gender-based violence also from the children's perspective (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Woodman et al., 2018), and as stated by Overlin and Holt (2019), children not only have the need but also the right to be protected, and should be considered as rights-holders.

Finally, although this study has focused on gender-based violence in schools, it is worth noting that the findings can be of use in other type of violence against children, both within and outside the family. Thus, the inputs presented here can be useful in defining new interventions at the educational, social and psychological levels to address the different forms of violence affecting children.

As for the limitations of the study, the frequency that a category was mentioned was included in the presentation of the results. However, as outlined in the analysis of the results, the number of times a category is mentioned is less important than its value and its contribution to the research, which inevitably entails interpretation on the part of the authors of the article. Secondly, it must be noted that the researchers did not know whether the boys/girls participating in these focus groups had suffered gender violence at home, or whether they were highly motivated and well informed on this issue. Whatever the case, their voices have been heard and this study contributes in terms of both methodology and content in the design of policies focusing on children's disclosure. More research is needed in order to know how professionals in the school context can be trained to help children experiencing these situations and how the time and space children need for disclosure can be provided for in the legal framework of each country. This is key for implementing detection and treatment programs and also opens up



future lines of research.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Carme Montserrat:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Marta Garcia-Molsosa:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Anna Planas-Lladó:** Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Pere Soler-Masó:** Investigation, Writing – original draft.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on CSUC repository "CORA" (<https://doi.org/10.34810/data155> accessed on 20/2/2022).

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#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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