We’re 8 ‘young experts’ called Voice Against Violence who have had the privilege of working alongside Scottish Government Ministers and CoSLA (local councils) to tackle domestic abuse and improve children’s lives. We believe that for young people with experience of domestic abuse to have such a loud and powerful voice we need to make sure they’re safe and happy. So we developed our own participation standards to help and empower children and young people to participate and break down barriers for children who have experienced domestic abuse. Please use and adapt! 😊
What are standards? Standards are a set of basic rules and regulations that help protect members of Voice Against Violence (VAV), they say how our group should operate and make sure we work efficiently as a team. They are also criteria for good participation and we make sure others that work with us (especially adults) keep to the standards too.

We base our standards on the idea that everyone should feel safe and happy whilst being a part of VAV, so every rule helps this in some way. Even though we are a positive group, we all come from backgrounds of domestic abuse so there are always going to be issues of safety and things that are dangerous to us. Standards are important as they give structure to the group as well as making it clear that if you break these rules you could jeopardise your place in the group. Safe and happy are together as one as each contributes to the other; it’s practically impossible to be only one or the other. Most of all, we want VAV to be a fun place for everyone involved, which is why these rules exist 😊

We want to be a role model for children’s participation so please feel free to use and adapt these standards; our message to children and young people experiencing domestic abuse is that you CAN participate in a fun and safe way and these standards could help break down some barriers to participation.

1. Safety first, information and consent

Your safety is the most important thing, it comes before anything else. Being in VAV mustn’t pose any threats to you or your family. When you initially become involved, your manager will check with you and your parent/guardian (your ‘named adult’) about risks. If circumstances change, you must inform your manager. If your manager or a VAV staff member is concerned that you are in current danger/risk then they will try to talk with you and your named adult first but will alert other agencies if needed. All young people and staff will have enhanced disclosure checks, so will most other professionals you work with – the manager will let you know. Prior to residential and meetings both you and your named adult (usually your mum) will be given clear information about where about and what you are doing so your risk can be considered. Your consent is asked for the recording of your views and how they are used. For public events your mum’s consent is also asked for and you are both asked to consider and chat to any other members of your family who may be affected (like brothers and sisters).
2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

This is the most important thing to us and our families, our biggest concern is that adults/strangers do not understand the severity of our experiences, that we may not want to be identified as survivors of domestic abuse or members of VAV, that if we’re identified our families are too and of course so is the perpetrator - our dads and maybe their new families.

Due to the sensitive experiences of Voice Against Violence members, confidentiality and anonymity for all members is strictly adhered to at all times within the group. All professionals that work with the group must sign and agree the standards. Aliases are used when working with outside people involved in VAV work. There should be no identifying photographs in photos or film. In most of VAV’s work – like residential and regular meetings we can maintain our confidentiality in a small circle.

In VAV public productions/participation projects we adopt a one for all, all for one methodology where if one member needs an actor to play him/her so does the remainder of the group e.g. for our film we checked with those most at risk about the dangers of voice recognition but all families agreed to do it.

Any public or media work must be properly risk assessed with the individual, mum and manager to uphold confidentiality and anonymity as far as possible. Creative methods can be used to prevent identification like written anonymous statements/photos, artwork, to promote the good of the group not the individuals.

At times certain members at least risk have taken a well informed step into the media, with training, but there are always consequences you don’t think of.

Here are some things to think about

☀ “being able to get involved in the work and still remain anonymous with no fear of that causing a problem means you really want to get involved and not feel bad about it”

☀ “VAV is a role model for other children who are in danger and for whom being identified would be a massive barrier to participate.”

☀ “It’s my personal stuff.. it’s me that’s doing it... it’s up to me who I tell what to”

☀ We can all do this “so long as we stay safe and aren’t identified”

☁ “we could be in major trouble if found”

☁ “I don’t think my dad would react well to me being involved in anti-domestic abuse stuff” “He’d go off his nut”

☁ “people don’t want it broadcast that they’re part of this group. They don’t want people to know that they have experienced domestic abuse and the stigma that comes with it...”

☁ “let’s face it, the media want the gore” “tabloids will try and get you to spill your guts about everything personal that happened to you, not the project”

☁ being anonymous - “some members felt that nobody should tell them what to do and others felt angry that it seemed the perpetrator was still controlling them, was still making them live their lives like they were constantly ‘at risk’”
3. Privacy, Distress and Opting Out

You have the right to keep your private life private but at the same time you know that it remains private within the group. There is a limit to what people feel comfortable saying and sometimes we have a lot going on in our lives. If something is being spoken about, watched or you feel uncomfortable for any reason, feel free to leave the room. You should never feel like you have to sit there. You can opt out on anything that you aren’t comfortable doing or saying/talking about.

4. Family/Guardian involvement & support

During VAV you may be talking about stuff that not only affected you but your family as well. It’s important that you keep them up to date with what you’re doing, not only so they know you’re safe but so they are too. They may even want to go to events and support you through them. Remember to check that they’re happy with what you say and do as it will affect them as well. For example, if talking about a specific incident that also included your siblings or parent, you should check they’re happy talking about it and their identity is protected as well as yours. Your named adult (usually your mum) is your emergency contact in case you’re sick etc., is trusted with VAV information and also they get to see any photos or information usually restricted by the confidentiality agreement.

5. Supportive manager and team

New members must have a supportive manager and team (VAV and people behind the manager) because to have your own manager that knows your background and the ins and outs of what the group are trying to achieve is essential, also having a consistent manager is a must. The manager is there to support all young people through their journey in VAV and to keep us safe and listen to our concerns. To have a supportive team means a lot also, not just VAV colleagues but the people behind the scenes that help the manager as it makes it happy and comfortable to be involved.

6. Adults who work with VAV

Adults who work with VAV must ensure they adhere to minimum standards of privacy, respect and disclosure. They must keep our identity safe and not do anything outside the meeting room that would identify us as VAV—like saying hello when we’re with others. They must tell us who they are and why they’re working with us. They must respect us and our past - don’t ask for unnecessary info, understand that we are experts and don’t belittle us. They must respect our time - they should actually be helpful to us by being experts in their own areas, they should give us time to prepare and combat anxiety. Remember, young people need time to be educated before doing something new.
7. Location and comfort: home away from home!

Find the right location for the team, somewhere comfortable, safe and a location suitable for all members - like a home away from home, a ‘VAV environment’ that is permanent and comfortable (like your own room, nice food and breakfast away from other guests). Have safety rules like an alcohol and drug free environment and no sexual activities so it doesn’t soil VAV’s good name. Research all the trips to places so you can feel safe knowing the location, you can let someone know if you don’t wish to participate and have fun as a group whilst feeling comfortable.

8. Supporting young experts

We are not a “support group” but we support each other within the team especially when speaking of our experiences (like when we’re trying to make our issues ‘real’ to get our point across). Some form of support outside VAV is strongly encouraged, in particular in the beginning. Support outside of friends and family is highly recommended to ensure you are supported and are in a good place personally and emotionally. Support can be from a support service (a professional), family or friend, for as long as you choose or feel necessary, as each person ‘moves on’ differently.

9. Young people speaking for themselves

One of the reasons that Voice Against Violence is unique is that fact that we, as young people, can speak for ourselves. We are the experts as we have been through domestic abuse and know what needs to change. Speaking directly to Ministers and CoSLA has worked really well as they listen to us like we are the experts. It is vital that we speak for ourselves as if it was to go through adults the wording would probably be changed and as young people we have the knack of saying things like they are which is what the Government and CoSLA should hear.

10. Direct access to people in power

Young people have the right to direct access to people in power! Young people have the right to express their opinions and to use their voices to influence future government decisions.

We know what we are talking about so why shouldn’t we be able to influence our government? We should have equal status to the adults involved, we’re equally important, there should be recognition that we’re experts. We should have the right to regular meetings, dialogue, good communication and feedback. Getting political can be exciting! Being part of the action means that you can make a difference to something you believe in!
11. Equal Participation and Respect for Each Other: All for one, one for all

VAV should always be fair. For any workforce to work well you need to respect them, their ideals, opinions, even if they oppose yours. VAV should be a democracy, an open box where everyone can pass an opinion as long as it doesn’t purposely offend or discriminate against anyone.

All members should take part equally which means everyone having a say, everyone listening – if we make sure of that we bring out the best skill and talent we each can offer. All members should be made aware of choices VAV need to make so all can agree on decisions. Also it’s good to have equal say when there is peer led and co-facilitated meetings so everyone can pass on knowledge, information and opinions.

12. Breaking the Barriers: No discrimination

The new VAV should stand tall as a beacon to other groups as it doesn’t matter what our differences in life are but to have the same compassion in our hearts to proudly stand together against domestic abuse and help the people of Scotland.

In VAV there should be zero tolerance on racism, sexism, homophobia, everything but sometimes people just don’t know, so VAV should be fair and help teach each other about certain political correctness when needed, so everyone can be and feel happy in a non discriminatory environment and also feel safe. VAV should be open to everyone, we want everyone to feel safe and happy, within this we want it’s members to respect others no matter background, gender, sexuality or race as we see discrimination makes the group unequal and not as strong as it can be.

13. Having fun, teambuilding, friendships

A core part of VAV is having fun. Having fun stops us young people turning into the adults we’re trying to influence. It helps us bond as a group and keeps us motivated to turn up and work hard. Just as VAV members work hard at everything we do, we also play hard. In addition to the creative and fun methods we use to produce work we take time at each residential to wind down and socialise through various activities, such as going to the cinema, performing karaoke, or having a meal together. Through these interactions we build up friendships based on trust, which bolster our confidence and help us achieve our aims.

14. Keeping work interesting

As a way of keeping the work we do interesting and fresh, we often use different methods like powerpoint, presentations, clipart, improv acting, graphs, and discussions amongst many others. Using creative methods sometimes makes us think differently and helps us learn even more. This is when having committed and fun staff really helps. They prep each session beforehand and try to think of creative ways to present information, a little bit of laughter goes a long way.

We build our skills as the group progresses and by the end we’re practically running it ourselves. The staff support and train us on how to lead sessions, do public speaking or even become project leads. It’s a slow process but the end result is a group of mostly independent contributors.
15. Working as a team

It is important for the group to work as an effective team and have good communication; everyone has their own areas that they would like to cover so prioritising is key. Having a group that works together is very good as it makes everyone feel relaxed and know what they are doing. They have to take on a realistic number of projects as members have their own lives (school, college, and working).

Voice Against Violence will offer plenty of time to prepare for sessions that you have as it is vital you are comfortable with what you are learning about. The team has to respect each other in what they are doing, as well as having fun, also they need to remain focused. Good communication is really important also so that we know what each other are doing and are there to lend a hand if need be. There has to be a close eye kept on the progress also so that projects can be ticked off. A message to a young person would be to only commit to what is humanly possible, don’t bite off more than you can chew, projects can be very in depth and you should fit in round your life as you have to live your life as well!

16. Good communication

For VAV to work young experts need to communicate well with each other, update and inform each other and be supported to do that. Communication between young people and their manager and team is crucial and so we’ll need to make it easy and not too overwhelming. Different methods will be used according to what suits the young people but you will be expected to use private web space, email and text/phone contact, snail mail (hard copies of stuff in the post). VAV young experts will be expected to regularly blog on VAV’s website to keep the public informed about what VAV is up to and will be given training on this.

Two-way communication with adults and people in power is what VAV’s all about. Young experts will be trained to do this and build skills and confidence. VAV ask the adults we work with and the Government to keep VAV up to date by maintaining regular contact and ensuring communication is: concise, to the point, short- not overwhelming, not too much paperwork, plain language, no jargon, says it like it is – is honest and is received in plenty of time for residential/meetings so can be read in advance. Remember to ‘be creative’ as young people are bored by paperwork and we also prefer face to face contact (e.g. with staff to prepare stuff, with experts, with trusted contacts in the government).
17. Recognition and building skills

Even though being a VAV member is on a voluntary basis it is essential for young people to gain recognition for the hard work they put in in their own time. Young people should be supported to transfer the skills they build through participation into their personal lives in areas which are important to them.

This should include:

- working towards a Youth Achievement Award
- training to be provided to equip young people for their role in VAV – evidenced by certificates
- strong references to help in careers and further education
- developing communication skills and confidence
- building a CV

"My CV is great now and I've built loads of new skills"

Participation fees really help us young people but none of us want anyone to think we are doing this for the money. Organising travel and expenses is recognising that their expertise is worth the money; a participation fee can help young people and also recognises their worth and in turn promotes confidence.

18. Commitment to our cause and VAV

Being part of VAV we need to have an interest in ending domestic abuse and raising awareness – letting others know so we can hopefully reduce domestic abuse. We do know that you have a life outside of VAV but we ask for a good form of commitment from the young people in the group such as attending meetings and residential. We expect a similar commitment from the adults we work with. We each bring a value to being part of the group, with our own knowledge and experience, so we can talk to allies in order to reduce abuse, raise awareness and in time hopefully end domestic abuse.

"to know it's a group, all close, same domestic abuse and goal... taking off, knowing what we're doing... it's brilliant"
19. Success and making an impact

When we started off we focussed on what did and didn’t help us and what needed to change to improve children’s lives – you can all do that. We still think that the biggest success for us would be that children experiencing domestic abuse all over Scotland know that they’re not alone, there is help out there and they get support in every aspect of their lives. That we exist at all, and the team has worked so well together is a success in itself and we’re proud that we’ve helped improve support for children.

We’ve created our own resources - help us to continue to make an impact by using them:

- [www.voiceagainstviolence.org.uk](http://www.voiceagainstviolence.org.uk)
- [www.vimeo.com/29908502](http://www.vimeo.com/29908502)
- [www.safehubscotland.org](http://www.safehubscotland.org)

VAV got the ball rolling but there’s a lot of work for children to do ... if you’ve got the drive and the will to change something, you can do it. We’ve proved it. We hope the spirit of VAV lives on.

You can have a wider impact too....

- Make a political impact - show people in power children should be heard at the highest level
- Improve children’s lives - you know the help they need, build your evidence with other young and older experts
- Educate adults to respond better - help train professionals and create resources yourselves
- Change society’s attitudes - show the reality, it’s everyone’s problem
- Promote young people’s participation - build a team using and adapting our standards - inspire others

You can make a difference...

Stand together against domestic abuse!