# Audio file

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# Transcript

**Rachel Conlon**

Hello so today's podcast, we're going to be talking about the partnership between the NSPCC and York St. John University Theatre Department. My name is Rachel Conlon. I'm senior lecturer and one of the Co-directors of the project, “it's not OK” and the new project that we're developing with the NSPCC.

**Jules Dory Richmond**

I'm Jules Dory Richmond. I'm a colleague of Rachel, senior lecturer in Theatre and Co -director of “it's not OK.”

**Helen Westerman**

And I'm Helen Westerman, head of local campaigns at the NSPCC.

**Rachel Conlon**

So, thanks everyone for joining us today. It's really an opportunity for us to talk further about our working relationship and our partnership work that we've been doing over the last six or seven years. And it's really exciting because we're just about to start working on a new initiative with the NSPCC.

And we just thought it would be a great opportunity to have a podcast to tell everybody about the work that we're doing and to place context really in, in the work that we've done before.

So Helen, would you like to start by telling us a little bit about how the partnership came about?

**Helen Westerman**

Yeah, so the NSPCC works to deliver local safeguarding campaigns on issues that have resonance for children, young people, parents, adults at a local level and way back when we came across Rachel and Jules through colleagues, and we were looking at how we could reach young people around the issue of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

And children and young people really clear with us that they didn't want the normal classroom type education around these types of issues, it felt embarrassing. They didn't always feel that teachers were the right people to be talking about the subject, and there was a kind of nervousness or embarrassment around the whole concept.

Exploitation, sexual exploitation at that time was very big and we had a number of high profile cases across the UK police forces had it as their priority and here in York, whilst sexual exploitation was a concern and the local safeguarding children partnership were also concerned about familial child sexual abuse. What was happening to children in the home.

So when we spoke with Rachel and Jules, we wanted something that could span really the spectrum of all forms of sexual abuse from stuff that was happening in the home, also for that low level inappropriate behaviour that we were seeing in schools, the sharing of images, et cetera, right through to potential grooming and sexual exploitation of children by adults.

So it was that, really, that we came to, to Rachel and Jules with a bucket full of potential things and said, what can you do?

**Rachel Conlon**

And why did you consider theatre as a tool for communicating those messages?

**Helen Westerman**

Well, we knew that you've done some work in the past around online safety and we'd seen some of that and seen the impact that it had had, but also children were firmly steering us away from typical lesson plans.

We needed to think of something that would cut through what was already out there and that would give children chance to reflect on something that they saw externally to them, but also then could think about how it worked in their in their daily lives.

Did it resonate with them? Did they see something that they'd seen, perhaps with friends or family, and theatre, we thought, provided that opportunity.

**Rachel Conlon**

So Jules, obviously you've been a theatre maker and artist for many years, what would you say is the value of using theatre as a tool for discussing really quite complex issues and really looking at issues around social justice?

**Jules Dory Richmond**

I think as Helen's just said, you know it's the immediacy of coming into school and showing a scenario, various scenarios through characters that are likeable, that are relatable, that are authentic. And we found that that's exactly what the young people really sort of gravitated to.

At the end of the play, we did workshops where young people could choose which characters they wanted to look at further. And you know, you could really see different people gravitating to different characters because of the issues they were bringing up and they were really passionate about trying to help dig into those characters lives and find solutions or find ways to change the course of that structure.

**Rachel Conlon**

Yeah, absolutely. I think our department at the university has always had a real commitment to making work that sits within the city walls of the campus, but also about taking theatre out into the community, out into the streets, out into different performance venues and for our students, we also really wanted to provide an opportunity for them to have that real world learning experience of performing theatre in real community settings to see what the impact and the efficacy was of that work where you take a performance into a school and as you were saying Jules, you know young people respond and connect with those characters and really start interrogating and exploring those complex issues around child sexual abuse, child sex exploitation, online safety.

And I think theatre is really exciting as well. I think a lot of young people don't get the opportunity to go to theatre. They might not be able to afford it or their families might not see that as something that's for them. So actually to have that opportunity to see live performance and to really engage in a meaningful way I think is hugely beneficial, not only in terms of exploring those issues and supporting schools and exploring those quite complex issues, but it gives young people an opportunity to kind of have a rehearsal for life, you know, what would I do if I was in that situation?

Or how could I support a friend if that was happening to them? And what are the safeguarding possibilities for me within my school? Who do I go and talk to if I need support, but also it was about educating the adults in those communities about what to what to look out for, how can they support young people if they see something happening that they think actually that doesn't sound OK or doesn't look OK, but also for parents you know, this is really hard, all young people might be on online, on their phones, and how do we look at safeguarding?

So I think there was lots of aims and objectives for the work, but I think theatre is a very kind of vibrant, exciting tool to use and I think you know we as theatre makers have really learned a lot by working with the experts at the NSPCC, you know, we, we know we're not experts in child safety. We've become very knowledgeable about that.

But we are experts in theatre, so it's been a hugely kind of beneficial working relationship for us as individual theatre makers, but also for our department and our university. And it's something that we even, you know, still training our students on and those students will become future teachers, future theatre makers, future decision makers. And if they've got that knowledge and understanding around child safety, and I think that's really beneficial for the community at large.

So Helen, how has it benefited your organisation and some of the staff you've been?

**Helen Westerman**

Well, hugely. And I remember being in the first seeing it's not OK for the first time with the young people present and that you know, hairs on the back of your neck as the characters came from the back of the room and ran into the hall and it was disruptive and it was chaotic.

And you could see the children excited about this, and then very quickly the mood changed. And I think that's what theatre does, it gives you kind of highs and lows and takes you on a bit of a journey in the space of 25 minutes, that you couldn't hope to do in a lesson or a series of lessons. So yeah, I think it was, it's given us a new way of reaching audiences that we wouldn't necessarily reach with campaign messaging through social media through our normal comms channels, through workshops.

It's just a different way of bringing a really difficult topic to an audience that potentially we have to be very careful about because some of these children may have experienced abuse in the home, abuse outside of the home and I think we, you know, we talked to Rachel and Jules about the characters, about the things that we want to bring into the characters and they go away and make some magic happen.

And those characters are built around a set of situations or types of issues, but that's where the creative magic happens and that I think that's what's special about this project.

**Jules Dory Richmond**

And of course our our collaboration all the way through. So we didn't just go into the schools with the play and you saw it, we made work, and you came into the rehearsal room. You told us that characters were working. That characters are not really quite right. Or these messages are clear, that it's not OK.

That make sure that when you leave the school, the young people know that as well. They know it's not just a question, they know it's not OK.

And part of how we work together. Having somebody from the NSPCC in the schools with us meant there was a safeguarding presence in school that could help the school pick up on issues when there were disclosures. And of course there were disclosures, it worked.

**Helen Westerman**

Yeah, it worked. It did work. And and children did come forward and talk about the abuse that they were experiencing at home.

And and that's very, very powerful. And I think you're right. I mean it was a a joint process and we were able to tweak - make suggestions.

And I remember having a teacher come along to one of the the pre sessions who was concerned about what this would be like for their school or we do we really need it in our school and watching it and then saying, absolutely.

So yeah, bit by bit we managed to reach all of the schools in York with the “It's not OK” resource and then go on to well, you went on to tour almost nationwide, didn't you?

**Rachel Conlon**

We did, we did. And I suppose that nicely leads on to talking about the the online digital resource.

I mean, obviously we we couldn't tour nationally forever more. So do you want to tell us, Helen, a little bit about how you managed to make the opportunity of an online digital resource available nationwide for working families and schools?

**Helen Westerman**

Yeah, we were getting asked on the back of the launch in York, then it moving to Sheffield.

You then performed at or talked about it at our annual House Safe Conference and people really wanted it. They wanted it for their school or their youth group or etc.

And as Rachel said, you know there's only a finite amount of time that you could be touring. So we found some budget internally to look at making “It's not OK” into a set of films, and that's worked really well. I mean, I think always the live production is the gold standard, but having a set of films and accompanying teaching resources that can be used both in the classroom and outside of the classroom with groups or individuals has been so useful, and given the piece a real legacy.

So it's still used now it's still referred to by the NSPCC. It's still on our NSPCC learning platform and still gets downloaded and used all the time.

**Rachel Conlon**

And we know Jules, don't we from people who've worked with young people across the tour and over the last few years that young people are using, it's not OK. Tagline. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

**Jules Dory Richmond**

Yeah. In New York, we're we're still being told by teachers that young people are saying to them it's not OK as a code for letting them know that they need to speak because something's not right.

**Rachel Conlon**

Which is fantastic, isn't it? That young people are still using that, and actually I was in a school not long ago in York, and the posters are still up in the corridors, you know, with the images. And I think that's fantastic, that schools are not taking them down, feeling that that that project's just finished, actually, they're still talking about it and using that resource.

And actually one of the original actors in the it's not OK. Tour is now one of the practitioners working with Jules and I on various community projects in the city and in the region. And she now trains up teachers on the it's not OK, so that's fantastic to kind of empower and to inform teachers to feel confident that they can deliver these tools, these messages for young people and that enables the legacy to continue the work to continue beyond which is really exciting so.

**Jules Dory Richmond**

And also in terms of what we do with our students using the, it's not OK resource online resource.

We train up our students and then they go into schools as part of their assessments and work with young people and make theatre with them based on the, the characters and the scenarios in “It's not OK”.

So it continues to be vibrant and is part of the conversation in York and part of I suppose our commitment to do something that's meaningful.

**Rachel Conlon**

And part of the Institute for Social Justice and this obviously is a podcast that will go out on the Institute for the Social Justice Web page, but it it's really important for our students, we're making a commitment at university wide to look at issues around social justice and how can some of the research that's happening in the university, how can that benefit not just only our students, but our other partners and our community at large?

So it's very much part of the mission statement, the university to the about issues of social concern and really what's the benefit for our community for, for rich partnerships like we have with the NSPCC, do you think there's a benefit for you in Helen in terms of partnering with the university as well?

**Helen Westerman**

Oh yeah. I mean, it gives us huge credibility that we're partnering with an organisation that really knows what.

Doing it's it's got a a legacy, a track record of working in this area. You know, it's not us at the NSPCC coming up with four characters and trying to write a play, you know, we don't have that skill set.

We are made-up of social workers and youth workers, et cetera, that know the lived experiences of children, but you help shape that into something that's then attractive and entertaining, but also hugely thought provoking for audiences.

**Rachel Conlon**

In in terms of, obviously, we're coming to the end of this short podcast and we're in the second podcast.

We'll be looking at the new production that we're currently developing, so thank you very much for that today and we will speak again on our next podcast. Thank you.