

**WHAT DO
YOU NEED
TO**
#MAKEITGOOD?

Insight Topic 13:

PLEASURE

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June 2016



INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to **'About the Insight Gathering project'** also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In the initial focus groups, the topic of **PLEASURE** was raised and discussed by 10 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **PLEASURE** online survey came from 61 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	10
Dundee	37
Perth and Kinross	10
Other area	4
Total by method	61

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	33	26	2

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	12	26	14	1	3	-	5

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the **PLEASURE** survey provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of pleasure when it comes to sex or relationships*. Insight from young people points to several themes.

Pleasure as an expectation

In their focus group discussions young people identified the importance, even the assumption of pleasure when it comes to sex.

Can I say something really obvious, I expect pleasure from sex.
(Focus Group 1/Angus)

Everyone just assumes it'll be pleasurable. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

However, whether pleasure is actually experienced might be informed by whether a partner cares or understands what might give pleasure. A focus on orgasm, ignorance of women's bodies, and the influence of pornography might be problematic in real contexts.

Most guys probably don't think about the girl's pleasure – or their feelings.
(Focus Group 15/Angus)

There is definitely an expectation to climax, even if you can't or aren't in the right mood, I think guys just expect a girl to come as soon as they touch you. They don't talk about orgasm and stuff in school so unless you tell them or they ask you, which is just really awkward, how are guys meant to know about it? It's not like in the pornos.
(Focus Group 4/P&K)

Pleasure as a range of positive feelings and emotions

Respondents to the online survey discussed pleasure in terms of sexual experiences but discussion also extended to the realm of personal relationships so that pleasure is connected to *friendships, feeling good, happiness or feeling excited or satisfied* to be with someone. Responding to the prompt statement *tell us about your experience of pleasure when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

Actions that make you feel good e.g. sex. (16/Dundee/Female)

Excitement, happiness, personal feelings. (17/Dundee/Male)

Fun, enjoyment, friendship, love, lust. (16/Dundee/Male)

Someone to talk to, laugh with & do fun things with. (21+/Angus/Female)

cuddles Netflix chill (17/Angus/Male)

Excellence, true satisfaction of the mind and body, the feeling of having put worthwhile efforts into one's endeavours and a tired, smooth feeling.
(17/Dundee/Male)

Pleasure is also associated with love, intimacy, trust and being comfortable with a partner.

Pleasure to me is about making each other feel wanted and to have a nice romantic time together. Both partners should feel that sense of love and affection. (19/PK/Male)

Sharing intimacy with someone else during sex. (17/Dundee/Female)

Trust, love and passionate feelings. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Trust, happiness, security, love. (16/Dundee/Female)

Don't rush it – like maybe getting a blowjob or finger first. You have to be comfortable to be intimate and to be comfortable you need to trust the person you are with.
(Focus Group 4/P&K)

The important theme of *trust* is explored in more detail in the insight chapter on the themes of TRUST + HONESTY.

Pleasure and sex

While for one online contributor: "Pleasure should never be synonymous with sex." (21+/PK/Male) for others responses pleasure was referred to as follows:

Porn and one night stands. (19/PK/Other gender identity)

kinky, biting and clawing sexual contact (17/Angus/Male)

Other young people have reported no experience of pleasure.

I have never orgasmed. (16/PK/Female)

I have had no experience in pleasure when it comes to sex. (17/Angus/Female)

Mutual pleasure/learning what your partner wants and likes

A theme across online contributions and focus group discussions was learning about a partners wants and desires, as well as understanding the attainment of pleasure as a mutual experience. Contributors recognised that communication about sex might not be easy.

It's trial and error. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

I always get pleasure from sex and give pleasure as well. (19/Dundee/Male)

It works both ways (17/Angus/Male)

It's something that you should both enjoy. It means talking to each other and working stuff out, it's pretty unrealistic to think you will get it right first time together. (Focus Group 5/P&K)

It's dead boring if you are just doing one thing all the time, it's good to try out different things and make it a bit more exciting. (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

You need to speak, but it's difficult, embarrassing. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

You should be able to make mistakes and get your bearings. You need to want something, not just for it to be expected. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

People are different – into different stuff. (Focus Group 16/Angus)

You try different things. (Focus Group 16/Angus)

I find I'm quite open when it comes to pleasure sexually with trying other things making it more exciting, so is my partner. (21+/Angus/Male)

Masturbation

Young people have also identified the role of masturbation, that this is still somewhat of a taboo subject and there might be some need to help young men understand that masturbation is important to young women too. Responding to the prompt statement *tell us about your experience of pleasure when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

Having a wank xx (>16/Dundee/Male)

Masturbation, relaxing and being happy in myself. (16/Dundee/Male)

Parents don't want you to know that most people masturbate. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

Men explore their bodies, what they like. Are girls expected to masturbate? (Focus Group 15/Angus)

Talking about pleasure at school

Conversations about pleasure in the focus groups led to discussion about whether the topic is, or could be, addressed in school-based sex and relationship learning. It seems that pleasure is not discussed; rather young people are left with a view that school learning presents sex and sexuality somewhat negatively. There is also some uncertainty about whether school can be a place where learning about pleasure can take place.

You don't talk about this at school. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

You kind of learn with experience. Nobody tells you that though, it's not like in sex ed, they say it's bad, but it's not saying don't be embarrassed, have fun. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

Sex ed puts us off having sex. It kind of just concentrates on all the negative stuff, like STIs and getting pregnant when you don't want to. They don't talk about how it can be good...I don't think they want to tell us it can be good; in case everyone would want to do it. (Focus Group 1/Angus)

The way it's taught in schools you'd think you were going to get split in half or something, it's really not that bad and it's only really like the first couple of times. After that it's ok. But they don't talk about that in school, they just try to scare you into not doing it in the first place. I don't think scaring people works, well maybe when you are much younger, but not when you get older. And actually, I wasn't scared when I was younger, I just wasn't that interested! (Focus Group 1/Angus)

It should be talked about when you turn 16, they should. But to be honest at school? (Focus Group 14/P&K)

Influence of pornography

The insight from young people started with a comment that sex 'isn't like in the pornos'. In focus groups and online young people have discussed how access to

pornography is shaping perceptions and perspectives, including on what is or might be pleasurable. These issues are explored in more detail in the insight chapter on the topic PORNOGRAPHY.

Porn influences what people think, people might think they want something they see and then they can't say no. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

You learn from the internet. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

Consent

When responding to the prompt statement: *Tell us about your experience of pleasure when it comes to sex or relationships* two female respondents make specific reference to the issue of consent.

Consent. Safe. Legal. (16/Dundee/Female)

Happiness. Consensual. Safe. (>16/Dundee/Female)

These issues are addressed in more detail in the insight chapter on the topic PRESSURE+CONSENT.

2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding *pleasure*.

The experience of pleasure is subjective and young people's insight has highlighted that what each person wants from sex or relationships, what *makes them good*, will differ. **The notion of pleasure, or having a satisfying sex life, is of interest globally and is framed in international work as part of the agenda for sexual rights.** The United Nations (1995) 4th International Conference on Population and Developmentⁱ defined reproductive health in a positive way, acknowledging that sexual health involves the "enhancement of life and personal relations" and that "people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life." In 'Sexual Health for the Millennium'ⁱⁱⁱ the World Association for Sexual Health addresses a number of issues including sexual rights, sexual violence, gender – and also identifies sexual pleasure as a component of holistic health and wellbeing that requires universal recognition and promotion. In terms of services for young people and adults the document argues that: "Although often ignored or stigmatized, sexual pleasure cannot be an afterthought in sexual health promotion". The report concludes:

"In sum, the enjoyment of sexual pleasure plays an important role in contributing to the establishment, maintenance and stability of couple

relationships and, without doubt, the quality of couple relationships is fundamental to the health and well-being of individuals and families.... Sexual health promotion programs for all groups, including youth and people with disabilities, should embody the reality that sexual pleasure and intimacy are strong motivating factors for sexual behaviour and that sexual pleasure contributes to happiness and well-being”.

A number of agencies across Scotland and the UK promote better understanding of pleasure and its part in improving sexual health outcomes for young people; focusing on the positive rather than risk/negative aspects which can characterise information or education. NHS Dumfries and Gallowayⁱⁱⁱ, NHS Choices^{iv} and LGBT Youth Scotland^v all have information available to support and inform young people. Sexual Health Sheffield^{vi} have published a booklet for workers on how to raise the issue and importance of sexual pleasure in work with young people. Online, NHS Dumfries and Galloway promote the idea that:

“Young people will be drip fed the ‘risk’ message of unplanned/unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections but few will be given the positive message that sex can be pleasurable. It is about being comfortable with yourself, feeling accepted and accepting your partner and treating each other with respect. It is having confidence to enjoy our bodies and not being forced into sex you don’t want. High Quality education and information can underpin the safer sex message so people can enjoy sex when the time is right for them. There is growing evidence that promoting pleasure beside safer sex messages can increase the consistent use of condoms and other forms of safer sex”.

In her work Julia Hirst^{vii} also proposes that a positive model of sexual health and relationship learning should include a focus on pleasure and that this “is warranted because of its potential to achieve safer sexual health outcomes and contribute to gender equality”. For her, a positive or successful sexual experience i.e. that is pleasurable and which challenges the silence around sexual enjoyment for women “is one that involves feeling in control and without subsequent regret, regarding the sex act, person or circumstances in which sex took place or post-sex worries over contracting STIs and/or conception”.

3. PLEASURE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

Pleasure as a sexual health right and part of ‘the good relationship’

There is an international framework which supports the framing of pleasure as a sexual right. Insight from young people has also highlighted the value they give to sexual relationships being pleasurable. Julia Hirst, also quoted earlier, extends the

idea of pleasure as protective, because where there is pleasure there is no coercion, worry or regret. The case is strong for information and learning about pleasure to be integrated in to sex and relationship learning programmes and to be part of discussions within the context of sexual health services. In terms of social marketing, insight from young people and other research and services would suggest that the notion of pleasure provides a broad framework from which to build on a positive and rights based agenda for young people.

Masturbation

Sexual Health for the Millennium' recognises that "addressing masturbation within sexual health promotion programming can be controversial. However, the available evidence suggests that including masturbation as a topic within comprehensive sexual health promotion is important and necessary". Promoting a better understanding of one's own body and what is pleasurable might be of some benefit to young people, and encourage them to consider that there is a need to remember that pleasure is subjective, and that mutual pleasure relies on openness, confidence and communication.

REFERENCES

ⁱ United Nations (UN, 1995) 4th International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) paragraph 96

<http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html>

ⁱⁱ Sexual Health for the Millennium: World Association for Sexual Health (2008)

<http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/resources/SEXUAL%20HEALTH%20FOR%20THE%20MILLENNIUM%20formatted%20MRCH%201%202008LD.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ NHS Dumfries and Galloway Young People and Pleasure

<http://www.c4urself.org.uk/shw13young.php>

^{iv} NHS Choices Masturbation Q&A

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodsex/Pages/masturbation.aspx>

^v LGBT Youth/NHS Lothian Good sex is...

https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/files/documents/Good_Sex_Is_-_web_use.pdf

^{vi} Sexual Health Sheffield 'Pleasure'

<http://www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk/product/pleasure>

^{vii} 'It's got to be about enjoying yourself: young people, sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education' Julia Hirst

http://shura.shu.ac.uk/6758/1/Hirst_Pleasure_paper_submitted_to_J_Sex_Education_8_JUNE_2012.pdf