

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

# Insight Topic 15:

# **PRESSURE +**

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# **CONSENT**

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Report authors:  
Dr Colin Morrison/Ross Robertson  
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## 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](http://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](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org)

## 1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In this insight chapter the topic of **PRESSURE** is used as an overarching theme which also includes young people's perspectives on *consent, pressures to have sex in a relationship, sexual assault and feeling safe in a relationship*.

In the initial focus groups, the topic of **PRESSURE** was raised and discussed by 12 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **PRESSURE** online survey came from 29 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

|                   | Number of online submissions |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Angus             | 4                            |
| Dundee            | 23                           |
| Perth and Kinross | 2                            |
| Other area        | -                            |
| Total by method   | 29                           |

Online engagement by gender:

|                        | Male | Female | Other gender identity |
|------------------------|------|--------|-----------------------|
| Number of participants | 9    | 20     | -                     |

Online engagement by age:

|                        | Under 16 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21+ |
|------------------------|----------|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| Number of participants | 9        | 13 | 4  | 1  | -  | 1  | 1   |

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

### Pressure to be in a relationship

Young people identify a pressure to be in a relationship, and to somehow model these relationships on some ideal, or to be like those represented in reality TV shows. These pressures can lead to young people being caught in relationships they do not actually want.

Pressure from peers to get into a relationship is high. (18/PK/Male)

It's linked a bit to what I was saying before about not trying to keep up with other people's relationships. You have to go at a pace that is right for you in

your relationship. You have to work that out between you, and not put pressure on, or talk about what you want. It can be hard though, 'cos if they say no or don't agree then it can make it difficult to continue. A lot of the time I think people just don't want to face the fact that some people just aren't right together. (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

You need to know that it's not the same, even things like money. Like expecting your relationship to be like what you see on telly can put a lot of pressure and you can totally miss what's actually good or even just what's going on. I think people need to be better at seeing what's real and what's not and what can work for them and what's totally, never going to be for them. (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

### **Doing things you don't want to do**

In their comments and discussions about *pressure* young people have talked about finding themselves in a relationship whereby a partner expects them to *do something they do not want to do*, this can include sending explicit photographs or pressure to have sex. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of pressure when it comes to sex or relationships* young people have said:

Pressure is bad when it comes to relationships, and one person should never pressure the other to do anything they are uncomfortable with, sexual or otherwise. (16/Dundee/Female)

Where people force another to do something they might not necessarily want to do. (16/Dundee/Male)

Being forced into something that you don't want. (17/Dundee/Female)

Your partner may be pressuring you into doing things you don't want to do. (16/Dundee/Female)

Feeling like there is no other option but to do something your conscience tells you is wrong. (16/Dundee/Female)

If I ever felt pressurised into having sex, I don't think I'd have a good time, or respect the person for pressuring me very much. (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

As this young woman describes, it is difficult to resist such pressures.

I have felt under pressure a lot, and most of the times I am too scared to say no. When it comes to sending pictures I say no, but I'm scared to because they might fall out with me. (>16/Dundee/Female)

### **Pressure to have sex in a relationship**

As identified earlier, a particular pressure can be to have sex in a relationship. This can be about 'losing your virginity' and not being the only person (you believe) not to have had sex.

There's peer pressure into losing your virginity – you don't want to be the only one that hasn't done it. (Focus Group 10/Dundee)

Under 16s get pressure from pals – whether it's true or not that they're having sex. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

There's always a pressure, but if you have a partner that agrees not to then it's easier. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

This can also be expressed by young men as sex being a requirement within a relationship, and young women understanding that if they do not have sex the relationship will end. The first quote below is from a young man; the second from a young woman.

Like no sex, no relationship. I don't understand why somebody would be in a relationship with a girl if she's not wanting to have sex with him. Like what's the point in hanging around, it would be like what, she doesn't trust him not to give her the clap or that. You have to have sex, and good sex, to have a relationship. (Focus Group 7/P&K)

It depends, but a guy might leave you if you don't have sex. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

### **Abusive relationships**

For some young people the insight given on the topic of *pressure* is concerned with rape and sexual assault. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of pressure when it comes to sex or relationships* young people have said:

Pressured into having sex with someone I didn't want to but being drunk made me vulnerable. (16/Angus/Female)

Rape, stress and uncaring. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Stress, fear, crushed. (16/Dundee/Female)

As well as sexual assault, young people also used the space created by the topic of *pressure* to raise issues of emotional abuse within relationships. Where a young person feels such pressures this is in contrast to their desire for relationships where they *feel safe*.

It's the most important thing for me in a relationship, I need to feel safe; to express myself, to share stuff, to be comfortable. If a guy doesn't make me feel safe, then it gets me really down. I went out with a guy – my only real boyfriend – for 3 ½ years but he was so mentally abusive, he wore me down. At the time I didn't realise it, but when the relationship eventually ended I was like 'wow, what was that all about?' He would just tell me stuff, like I think he was actually quite depressed, but he took it out on me. I guess 'cos I was close to him. So safety isn't just physical, you need to know you are in a safe place in your head as well. (Focus Group 5/P&K)

You can kind of tell if you are in a physically abusive relationship, I mean it's pretty obvious if someone is hitting you or whatever, but when someone is being mentally abusive and you are really close to them then it can be difficult to see that. It's like what (*other young person named*) was saying, sometimes it has to end before you realise. Like distance can be important sometimes.  
(Focus Group 5/P&K)

### **Being willing, feeling comfortable, ensuring consent**

Young people's contributions also point to an understanding of the need for mutual consent in many aspects of relationships, including sex. A common way to think about relationships where consent is achieved is to think of a relationship being *comfortable*.

Relationships should never be pressured and no one should feel like they need to do something because their friends have done it or their partner wants it. Both people should want the same thing. (20/PK/Male)

Always make sure you are comfortable. (Focus Group 5/P&K)

Taking your time and not rushing is the most important thing, you have to feel comfortable. (Focus Group 4/P&K)

You have to both be willing, you have to both be in the right place for it to be good. Half assed sex is just not worth it. You end up just feeling a bit, 'meh'.  
(Focus Group 5/P&K)

I'd expect sex to be something that we both agree on and want to make the connection and further our relationship. (Focus Group 2/Angus)

You both have to be willing. (Focus Group 3/Angus)

### **Pressure and pornography**

Young people have reflected on the pressure they feel from the pornography, this can influence how they see their bodies, how they feel they should behave or what they should do regarding sexual behaviour. This is explored further in the insight chapter PORNOGRAPHY.

I always think that girls expect me to last for ages, and like I never do, like a couple of minutes most. I think I just get really nervous about it and feel like really intimidated that they know what they are doing, but I really don't know.  
(Focus Group 8/P&K)

## **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 *pressure*. In this insight chapter the topic of *pressure* is used as an overarching theme which also includes young people's perspectives on *consent*, *pressures to have sex in a relationship*, *sexual assault* and *feeling safe in a relationship*.

In terms of sexual assault, we know from analysis of the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles<sup>i</sup> that **9.8% of women and 1.4% of men report non-volitional sex: with a median age of most recent occurrence for women as 18 years old and for men 16 years old**. A range of factors are associated with these experiences; in most cases the perpetrator is known to the individual. This locates this key issue strongly in the realm of the population of interest to this insight gathering process.

The issue of **consent** has been given much attention recently, through social media the animation using the metaphor of asking some one if they want a cup of tea<sup>ii</sup> has fostered a lot of discussion and debate. There are many sources of information and support for young people around the issues of pressure and consent. NHS Choices provides information entitled 'Are you ready for sex?'<sup>iii</sup> and 'It's ok to say no'<sup>iv</sup>. In 2007 the FPA published 'Are you ready'<sup>v</sup> which identified the pressures both young women and young men face from peers, family and the media. In terms of gender and experience the report states:

"For the majority of young women, sexual activity and relationships are inextricably linked, and there is a high association between emotional attachment and sexual activity. In contrast, many young men focus on the physical triggers for sexual activity, and articulate a competitive 'need' for sexual experience which is distinct from any overt association with emotions and relationships... However, more in-depth discussion reveals that, under the surface, the differences between young men and young women may not be as stark as they first appear. Many young men clearly feel under pressure to display a certain sexual confidence and experience, which they feel confers status upon them within their peer group. In reality, it is apparent that this macho exterior often hides inexperience and nervousness within".

In the report 'He's the stud and she's the slut'<sup>vi</sup> Zero Tolerance explored **young people's attitudes to pornography, sex and relationships**. Specific issues for young women were identified as "pressure to engage and not to engage in sexual and/or sexualised behaviour, with a range of negative consequences for failing to negotiate the 'appropriate' balance and pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and resulting negative body image". For young men the report identifies "pressure to conform to heterosexual male 'norms' of watching and approving of pornography, sexualising women and girls, and pursuing sex". And that for young men the "consequences of not fulfilling these include being labelled 'gay' or not adequately masculine". Young men also face "pressure to appear sexually experienced".

In their 2015 report '**Sexualisation and LGBT Young People in Scotland**'<sup>vii</sup> LGBT Youth Scotland consulted 13 to 25 year olds on the impact of sexual images and sexualisation. While on the one hand young people often felt there was a lack of representation in general terms when LGBT people were shown, including in LGBT media, they were often stereotyped and sexualised. Young people also identified that they needed to find information from pornography because this was missing from other sources of sex and relationship learning.

The Zero Tolerance work, highlighted earlier, also identifies that “significant numbers of participants thought that the information available to them on sex and relationships is inadequate”. In recent work by TASC (Scotland<sup>viii</sup>) for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lothian, in which young people identified the impact of their school-based sex and relationship learning, a majority of young people of secondary school age reported that lessons help them understand what consent means when it comes to sex, that they learned they can say no if they do not want to have sex, that they have the right to be safe in a relationship. A majority of young people also agreed that school is the place where they learn most about sex and relationship topics.

The Edinburgh Women’s Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre<sup>ix</sup> undertakes preventative work with young people and the TESSA<sup>x</sup> project facilitated by Argyll and Bute Rape Crisis Youth Project aims to raise awareness of issues surrounding internet safety, cyber-bullying, grooming and seeks to challenge inappropriate behaviour.

### **3. PRESSURE: 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.

#### **Pressures to ‘lose your virginity’**

An early pressure young people face is to have sex for the first time, this can be based on an assumption that other people are doing it and/or that having sex is the norm. In social marketing terms (thinking about the importance of focusing on identifiable behaviours that can be changed) those benchmarks concerned with *exchange* and *competition* might inform any approach. To start, there is a need to compete with the idea that everybody is indeed ‘doing it’ or that ‘doing it’ is the norm in first relationships, as this misconception informs the young person’s inclination to behave in a certain way. Further, any messages to delay sex must be supported by a better understanding of what benefits there would be from adopting new behaviours (such as delay).

#### **Trusting and acting on your own sense of ‘not wanting to do something’**

Whether it is a request to send a sexually explicit photograph or pressure to have sex, young people have identified an internal feeling, a sense that they do not want to do what is being hinted at, suggested or demanded. The message ‘if it doesn’t feel right it probably isn’t’ is essentially concerned with listening to this intuition, and might offer some insight into how to develop clear messages and opportunities for learning which build confidence, resilience and capacity to recognise and resist negative pressures.

## Using 'being comfortable' and 'feeling safe' as a lens through which to focus on 'the good relationship'

The insight topic chapters HAPPINESS and LOVE/ROMANCE (also published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org)) identify positive attributes of the good relationship. Like these, feelings of *being comfortable* and *feeling safe* might be seen as a positive way to engage young people in reflecting on their relationships. When considering the use of social marketing this *insight* and the *customer orientation* it provides means that communication with young people (and service provision which targets them) should be informed by the positive and aspirational aspects of young people's personal and sexual relationships, and not just focus on worries, anxieties or deficits as a way to frame young people's sexual health outcomes.

## Clear messages about consent and rape

Identified earlier, the 'tea and consent' animation has proved that communicating ideas simply and creatively via social media can capture attention and create discussion. Young people's insight has also evidenced that there remains an important job to be done when it comes to addressing and changing both attitudes and behaviours regarding gender-based violence.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>i</sup> Lifetime prevalence, associated factors, and circumstances of non-volitional sex in women and men in Britain: findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3) Macdowall W. et al Lancet Volume 382 No 9907 p1845 (November 2013)

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<sup>ii</sup> Tea and consent: Emmeline May and Blue Seat Studios

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8>

<sup>iii</sup> NHS Choices: Are you ready for sex'

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexandyoungpeople/Pages/Readytogoalltheway.aspx>

<sup>iv</sup> NHS Choices: Its ok to say no

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexandyoungpeople/Pages/Itsoktosayno.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> 'Are you ready?' FPA <http://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/are-you-ready-young-peoples-views-sex-relationships.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> 'He's the stud and she's the slut' Zero Tolerance

[http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/sites/zt2.mccwel.com/files/Peer%20Research\\_0.pdf](http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/sites/zt2.mccwel.com/files/Peer%20Research_0.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> LGBT Youth Scotland 'Sexualisation and LGBT Young People in Scotland'

[https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/files/documents/Sexualisation\\_of\\_LGBT\\_Young\\_People\\_-\\_Report\\_4.pdf](https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/files/documents/Sexualisation_of_LGBT_Young_People_-_Report_4.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Evaluations of school-based RSHP learning for NHS GGC and NHS Lothian by TASC Scotland published here: <http://www.tascagency.co.uk/rshp-learning.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Edinburgh Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre

<http://www.ewrasac.org.uk/Prevention-work/>

<sup>x</sup> TESSA <http://www.tessaproject.co.uk>