

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

Insight Topic 9:

FAMILY +

FRIENDS

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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 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

This section of the report on young people's insight draws on discussion of two areas: **FAMILY and FRIENDS**. In the initial focus group discussions, the topic of **FAMILY** was raised and discussed by 10 of the 16 groups and the topic of **FRIENDS** by 11 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the online surveys (34 for the **FAMILY** survey and 32 for the **FRIENDS** survey) came from young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

Family	Number of online submissions
Angus	4
Dundee	27
Perth and Kinross	3
Other area	-
Total by method	34

Friends	Number of online submissions
Angus	6
Dundee	23
Perth and Kinross	2
Other area	1
Total by method	32

Online engagement by gender:

Family	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	13	20	1

Friends	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	10	21	1

Online engagement by age:

Friends	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	7	16	7	3	-	1	-

Family	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	8	12	11	1	-	-	-

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the surveys provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of family when it comes to sex or relationships* and *Tell us about your experience of friends when it comes to sex or relationships*.

Insight from young people points to several themes but perhaps the most consistent message and point of insight is that when it comes to relationships, including sexual relationships, for young people in the age group of interest (16 to 20 year olds) **family and friends are an important source of information and support**. This is borne out by the feedback from a number of youth agencies who used prompt questions and sheets to engage young people in consideration of the question: *Where do you go for information or support when it comes to relationships?* The recording sheets captured only top line responses, and were intended to then encourage young people to go online to the Make it Good website and complete individual responses, however the responses from groups were consistent in their recognition and appreciation of the role and importance of family and friends when it comes to information seeking and support. More detail on the themes follows.

FAMILY

The importance of family relationships

Young people confirm that family relationships matter to them, and that being loved by family is important. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of family when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

Most important people. (16/Dundee/Female)

You do anything for your family regardless the situation, friends may come and go but family is forever. (16/Dundee/Female)

It is important to have a good relationship with family members.
(17/Angus/Female)

People you are around all the time. They have an interest in your personal wellbeing. Love. (17/Dundee/Female)

The people that you are surrounded by that love you. (16/Dundee/Female)

Communication

When relationships are positive, young people feel able to share thoughts and feelings with family members; young people stress the importance of communication and talking with someone in their family.

You can have a good relationship with your family and be close with a family member. (17/Dundee/Female)

Advice, always there for you. (16/Dundee/Female)

Telling them anything you want. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Families can be easily upset if there's a lack of communication. No family needs to be perfect to be strong. (16/PK/Female)

Difficult situations

But family relationships can also be complex or stressful, so that while there may be a need or a desire to talk with and get support from family, they might not be capable of offering what the young person needs.

People to talk to, not always understanding. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Stressful. Upsetting. Fine. (>16/Dundee/Female)

If you're gay and not out to your family, you can't go to them. (Focus group 15/Angus)

Particular problems can occur when family try to influence or are not happy with the choice of a partner. From young people's responses to the prompt question *tell us about your experience of family when it comes to sex or relationships* it is clear that family approval and subsequent support are important. This is particularly so when a young person lives at home with family and does not have an independent/personal space to meet a partner.

Family have certain expectations of what they see as your ideal partner. (18/PK/Male)

If your mum and dad really don't approve – or they don't like your family – it's awkward or reduces options of how you see each other. (Focus group 14/PK)

Living with family can make things difficult. (Focus group 8/PK)

If your family don't like them, it's a problem – or if they like them too much they take their side! (Focus group 12/Dundee)

If your family aren't wanting you to bring her round yours then where are you supposed to go, just makes it really difficult. Friends I'm not so bothered about, like I care about what my family think so that makes me want to respect them

more, but my friends like they'll say whatever anyway, so it doesn't really matter. But family is important so I care about them, they know me. (Focus group 7/PK)

Your family can be stressed if they think they're not good enough for you. But if they get on with him it can strengthen it. (Focus group 13/Dundee)

If your family don't approve, then it makes your life hell! (Focus group 6/Dundee)

When a young person has worries about reactions of a family member to a relationship they may then feel this has to be conducted in secret.

Secrets can make it hard to be with people. (Focus group 1/Angus)

If I was to have a girlfriend my Mum wouldn't understand, I would have to hide it. (Focus group 1/Angus)

Families might also have a view on young people having sex.

Family can be good or bad when it comes to sex and relationships. If one person's family doesn't like the other then it puts a huge strain on the relationship. Also, if one person's family is uncomfortable with them having sex or being sexual then they can interfere with the relationship and how it progresses. (16/Dundee/Female)

My dad would let me have drink and let boys stay over but then he would judge me. It feels like he is encouraging it sometimes. My mum knows who and how many people I have slept with; I can speak to my mum about things. She would rather I was honest with her. I love speaking to my mum and I trust her. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Because of such difficulties it may be that young people need and seek out professional support; as this contribution from a focus group identifies: "I think our generation is more likely to get professional help." (Focus group 15/Angus)

FRIENDS

The importance of friends

Responses to the prompt statement *tell us about your experience of friends when it comes to sex or relationships* give insight from young people on the value of friendship, particularly the unconditional support, fun and happiness that friendships offer.

You can have a close relationship with a friend and this can make you feel happy. (17/Dundee/Female)

Always supportive no matter what. Understanding. Good to talk to. (>16/PK/Female)

Friends are supportive. (>16/Dundee/Female)

People who are there for you no matter what. (17/Dundee/Female)

People who you have fun with. People who you share personal information with. Ask for advice when in need. (17/Dundee/Female)

Laughter, happiness, care, trust. (16/Dundee/Female)

Love, companionship, life-changing, worry, empathy. (16/Dundee/Male)

Protection, trust, good laughs, lots of memories. (16/Dundee/Female)

Got your back, there to talk to, happiness. (16/Dundee/Female)

Friends you really like and can chat well with are really important. (17/Angus/Female)

Finding and having friends is not always easy

Some young people have also identified that it can be difficult to find, establish or sustain friendships.

Dunno, don't have any. (16/Dundee/Male)

You need them in your life but you can't always find them. (17/Dundee/Female)

Awkward, confusing, uneasy. (17/Angus/Female)

People that you put up with when they're annoying you just to not be on your own. (17/Angus/Male)

It may also be the case that friends are not seen as a positive influence.

Friends can add pressure. (18/PK/Male)

Friends can say things at the wrong time. (Focus group 1/Angus)

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

What are some of the things that get in the way of the kind of relationship you want? Friends stirring shit. (Focus group 16/Angus)

Relationships that come out of friendships

Young people have recognised that romantic/sexual relationships can emerge from friendships, this is seen positively by young people.

What do you need to make a relationship good? Mutual friends
(Focus group 12/Dundee)

People in friend groups then start to go out because you've built up trust.
(Focus group 15/Angus)

Sex with friends

Young people have also shared insight on other sexual relationships that emerge out of friendships; some have mentioned the term 'friends with benefits' meaning a casual or 'no-strings-attached' sexual relationship - this has been much discussed online and the subject of film and TV dramas. From the views expressed in the insight gathering process it would seem preference for such a scenario is influenced by gender.

When you or your friends start to have sex in a relationship.
(>16/Dundee/Female)

Friends with benefits ;) (16/Dundee/Male)

Threesome x x (>16/Dundee/Male)

Majority girls want relationships, majority boys want a shag, friends with benefits
(Focus group 4/PK)

What do other people expect from sex? Friends with benefits.
(Focus group 5/PK)

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 family and friends.

FAMILY

Research points to the centrality of family in supporting positive outcomes for young people in terms of relationships and sexual health.

In work for the Health Education Board Scotland in 2000 Elizabeth Burtneyⁱ stated that "Whether or not they want it, parents have a role in educating their children about sex and relationships". In 2003 'Enhancing Sexual Wellbeing in Scotland: A Sexual Health Relationship Strategy'ⁱⁱ stated the Government's view that "**From an early age, parents and carers are key to the development of sexual values and skills of their children as well as influencing their sexual behaviour**". NHS Boards have continued to promote the role of parents. In 2014 NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde published work exploring the parental role as co-educators in the project Ask Parentsⁱⁱⁱ.

While NHS agencies and services may be keen to promote and support the parental role, looking back over results from the past 3 National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) Clare Tanton^{iv} and colleagues report that **a diminishing number of young people report their parents as their main source of information about sex and relationships**. In 2012 parents were reported as a main source by only 7.1% of men and 14.1% of women while increasing numbers of people cite school as their main source of information. School is now the most common main source for both men (39.4%) and women (41.3%). However, when asked *who they would like to have known more from*, while school remains the most identified source 40% of women and 14.6% of men would have liked more information from their mother and 22.7% of men from their fathers. While school-based learning is of increasing importance the researchers conclude that there is a **“need for additional support for parents in helping them to take an active role in teaching their children about sex and relationships”**.

Alison Parkes^v and colleagues have explored Scottish data in terms of **parenting and teenagers’ sexual risk-taking, autonomy and relationship with sexual partners**. The work is based on young people’s responses rather than parents (who might be overly optimistic about their influence or importance). They report that young people who have parents who encourage positive dialogue with children about relationships can support teenagers to delay having sex, to have sex in the context of relationships (rather than casual sex) and use condoms when they do. They find that parents can play an important role in supporting young people, from an early age, and with some degree of complexity that is more than just telling a teenager to delay sex:

“While our study represents only a first step toward understanding the wider aspects of the relationship between parenting and teenage sexual behavior and cannot confirm causality, it supports the view that both sex-focused and generic parenting may indirectly promote more positive, as well as safer, early sexual experiences. It suggests that parenting may be important in helping teenagers, even those who have sex at an early age, to develop values and skills for managing relationships. It also suggests that educators and health professionals should not frame the parental role solely in terms of advocating delayed sex.”

Further, in terms of the work of health or education services it is suggested that:

“Interventions also should focus on the importance of a supportive parent-teenager relationship, which factors into teenagers’ lives several years before they are likely to start sexual activity”.

Dr Douglas Kirby^{vi} and associates have studied adolescent sexual and reproductive behaviours, work which has included a review of US programmes which help identify what factors might be considered *protective* and which might lead to *risk* when it comes to young people’s sexual choices and behaviours. Kirby and team assert that **“family characteristics are very important in determining risk”**, so that young people in their teens who live with both parents and have a close relationship

are more likely to delay first sex and less likely to have sex without a condom or an unplanned pregnancy. Parental educational attainment and income also impact and act as protective factors; this could result from parents emphasising the importance of education or career and the extra resources which a family might have to support a teenage child with choices about study or work aspirations.

Further family factors which Kirby and team have identified as important include:

- Parental drug or alcohol use may influence young people's use of alcohol or drugs and so risk taking, or may be part of a wider issue of family dysfunction and lack of support or supervision for a child.
- Communication and a clear explanation and understanding of parental expectations about delaying sex or using contraception or condoms is protective for young people; this of course needs parents to be confident and open to discuss such issues.

FRIENDS

The earlier insight from young people evidenced the value and importance of friends. When it comes to sexual norms and behaviours it might be expected that peers have some influence. Of course adults might worry about peer influence and see it as likely to be largely negative; with this in mind Kimberley Maxwell^{vii} reminds us that while peers might often be blamed for the risky behaviour, it is more the case that **friends play a role in both harmful and positive activities**. She reminds us that with adolescence comes the need to separate from parents and draw on peer groups and role models to which the young person can compare themselves, so that "in essence, peer norms help determine whether a behaviour is 'hip', safe and desirable".

In her work Eryl Powell^{viii} confirms the role and importance of friends and peers. She reports that **young people often see friends as the first person to go to for support and advice**; this is because they are seen as having **common experiences and shared values**. She reports that if friends have had specific experiences, for example they have had sex, their legitimacy as a source of learning increases. Powell reports that this dependency on friends (and partners) increases as young people get older and so sources such as family and school diminish in importance.

The work of Dr Douglas Kirby and associates on *protective* and *risk* factors when it comes to young people's sexual choices and behaviours has already been mentioned in terms of family influence. When it comes to friends/peers Kirby and team assert that teenagers are more likely to have sex if their friends are older than them or if they use alcohol and drugs. Kirby's work also identifies that when a teenager has an older partner, so someone who is not also a teenager, they are less likely to use condoms/contraception, unless that older partner is clearly committed to their use. Looking to protective factors, **if a young person believes their friends are supportive of condom or contraceptive use they too are more likely to do so**.

3. FAMILY + FRIENDS: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources, several 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.

Having someone to talk to

While the late teenage years might be seen as a time of growing autonomy for young people, including in the realm of personal relationships, young people remind us that those people close to them are an important source of information and support. However, some young people have also recognised that family and friends might not be available to them, or in reality the best support. With this in mind young people might benefit from some emphasis on seeking information and support from trusted sources *as a positive behaviour*, this would include building knowledge and confidence in identifying those helping professionals they can access when family or friends are not an option (or indeed the best option).

Communication matters

A consistent theme across the insight gathering project, is the issue of communication. Young people want to be able to talk, reflect and find support and respect from both family and friends. Being able to talk about one's feelings is protective, but not always easy. Research has also highlighted that parental communication about relationships and sexual health is most effective, in terms of being protective, when it starts early (before young people have sex) and is focused on supporting the child to understand and build values and behaviours which will protect them. In terms of social marketing (which promotes and supports behaviours linked to positive sexual health choices) emphasising and encouraging communication behaviours might need to be segmented so that different populations (including parents) are addressed in different ways.

Relationships built on friendship/Friends with benefits

Young people have highlighted that relationships can come out of friendships and friendship groups; their insight says that this is positive because it is based on knowing someone and trust. A different matter is the insight young people have given on the notion of 'friends with benefits' or sex with friends which is not connected to any romantic or emotional commitment. There is some indication from young people that this has a gendered perspective, that perhaps the friends with benefits idea is favoured by young men. In terms of social marketing there may be some scope in working in the space between what young people want from relationships – trust, communication – and what might be presented as an option - the idea of 'sex with friends'; the purpose being to help young people to construct positive/affirmative experiences rather than those which feel unsatisfactory or exploitative.

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