

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

# Insight Topic 3: **COMMUNICATION**

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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](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 the initial focus groups, the topic of **COMMUNICATION** was raised and discussed by 7 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **COMMUNICATION** online survey came from 37 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	3
Dundee	29
Perth and Kinross	5
Other area	-
Total by method	37

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	12	24	1

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	8	17	6	3	1	1	1

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

### **Benefits/importance of communication in a relationship**

Young people recognise the benefits of communication in personal relationships; this is seen as essential when it comes to sharing feelings, feeling that you are understood and being closer to one's partner and learning more about them.

Communication is key in a relationship. (16/Dundee/Male)

Speaking to your partner and telling them how you feel. (>16/Dundee/Female)

The better your communication skills, the better you are understood.  
(16/Angus/Female)

Conversation is so important. Communication allows you to build relationships and show your personality. (17/Dundee/Female)

Without communication there would be no relationship, I've known couples and that that just never talk, or when they talk they are just really annoyed with each other. You need to communicate so that the other person knows how you are feeling, like if I don't know how my friends are doing I ask them. I don't see why it should be any different in a relationship. (Focus group 5/PK)

Communication can be face-to-face or via phone/social media.

Talking, texting, phoning. (16/Dundee/Female)

Communication is also linked to honesty and trust (more about these themes in another topic chapter) so that communication is:

Honesty, openness, friendliness. (17/Dundee/Female)

Giving each other advice and being honest. (Focus group 2/Angus)

Communication, trust and respect are all key parts of relationships (sexual or non-sexual) (Focus group 2/Angus)

Communication and trust are needed to make a good relationship. (Focus group 2/Angus)

### **Talking about problems**

Young people have also discussed communication in terms of dealing with problems; this is seen as averting frustrations and alienation. Responding to the prompt statement *Tell us about your experience of communication when it comes to sex or relationships* young people respond as follows:

Talking about problems, texting, caring/thinking about the other person. (16/Dundee/Female)

When you speak to your partner about life issues etc. instead of bottling it up. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Being able to talk to your partner about problems. (17/Dundee/Female)

I think communication is really important, far too often couples don't talk about their problems/feelings and just don't understand each other, which can lead to arguments and pushing each other away. When couples don't explain how they feel to each other, their problems don't get fixed and it is an endless circle. (18/PK/Female)

Not communicating in a relationship will cause arguments. (16/Dundee/Female)

Communication can also be seen in terms of being a critical friend.

Telling your friends how it is, sometimes it's important to get an outside perspective. (Focus group 2/Angus)

### **Communication about sex**

Young people have talked about communication and sex; with communication as a way to find out what your partner likes and using talking/language as part of the enjoyment of sex.

Speaking about what I enjoy and what my boyfriend enjoys makes sex much better as we are open all the time and have been since the beginning. We never feel awkward talking about anything. (20/Dundee/Female)

Talking is essential, learn what each other likes. (18/PK/Male)

Talking dirty to each other. (16/Dundee/Female)

When you talk sexual to each other to get aroused. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Communication is really important, but in different ways. When it comes to sex it is good to talk about what you like or don't like, what you're comfortable with and if the other person is okay during. When it comes to relationships it is important to talk about things that bother you or things you're worried about, because if you don't then you aren't being open and honest with each other. (16/Dundee/Female)

However, there can be risks that an ex-partner will talk about private aspects of a relationship after a split.

If a guy goes off bragging about it afterwards, or even if they tell their friends about you, it's not going to make you trust them or even want to see them again. What happens between the two of you, should stay between the two of you. (Focus group 4/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 communication and the role it plays in relationships.

This is not an exhaustive review of literature, the bulk of project resource has been put to engagement with young people, but an identification of what seems

particularly important in consideration of the sexual health and wellbeing of young people and gives insight on other work that should form part of local partners' consideration of service development and particularly the use of social marketing in relation to sexual health.

Reflecting young people's insight described above, the **Hands on Scotland<sup>i</sup>** Toolkit, promoting children and young people's wellbeing, recognises and promotes the importance of effective communication based on **trust, respect and mutual benefits**. It also emphasises the importance of building a child's skills and capacity to enter into and form good relationships from an early age having learned empathy and problem-solving.

Research from Scotland recognises that communication matters: in the work of Marion Henderson<sup>ii</sup> and Daniel Wight<sup>iii</sup> there are clear messages that **young people need the skills and language to negotiate sexual encounters**, and that this needs to include negotiation of issues like condom use, contraception and pleasure.

From her qualitative research with US students Dana Lear<sup>iv</sup> also concludes that **sexual communication matters if young people are to negotiate safer sex or condom use**. She reports that negotiating for safer sex takes assertiveness and constant effort as well as confidence to talk about sexual desire that might not be easy for many young people – her research also recognises that this communication about sex comes at a time when young people might be experimenting with alcohol (see the earlier section) which makes efforts to negotiate problematic.

In their systematic review of qualitative research about factors that shape young people's sexual behaviour Cicely Marston and Eleanor King<sup>v</sup> confirm that **strong social and cultural forces shape sexual behaviour**; their review of research draws on sources from across the world but they conclude that "there are striking similarities in young people's sexual behaviour worldwide". One key theme from the research reviewed is that **social expectations hamper communication about sex**. This can mean that a young woman might not want to talk about sex or sexual desires early in a relationship for fear of being labelled (dirty/slut/easy). Avoiding discussing sex can also come from fears of being rejected or seeming too forward, this can make sex and condom use difficult to plan. On the specific point of discussing condom use the review of research concludes that being seen to have a condom with you is interpreted as an assumption that sex will happen when that discussion about sex has not actually taken place and that "avoiding talk of condom use also keeps the option of refusing intercourse open". In their discussion of the evidence the authors agree with the insight from young people earlier that factors like communication are central to the promotion of good relationships and sex, concluding that "programmes that merely provide information and condoms, without addressing the crucial social factors identified are only tackling part of the problem".

A further aspect of communication is the role of **communication with parents and carers** about relationships and sexual behaviour, including condom or contraceptive

use. In work for NHS GGC and NHS Lothian in 2015 TASC (facilitators of this insight process) conducted mixed-method research ascertaining young people’s views of their secondary school RSHP learning. In both studies a minority of young people report talking at home about relationships and sex and there are mixed responses in terms of whether they would like to do more talking at home – although a considerable number of young people ‘neither agree or disagree’ with the idea, suggesting some scope for development. Tables below report on survey questions from both studies.

<b>NHS Lothian: 731 survey responses</b> <b>Talking at home</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
I would like to talk more about sexual health and relationship topics with my parents/carers.	17.8	18.9	41.7	13.5	8.0

<b>NHS GGC: 229 survey responses</b> <b>Talking at home</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
I would like to talk more about sexual health and relationship topics with my parents/carers.	18.6	13.8	33.5	18.6	15.5

Douglas Kirby’s<sup>vi</sup> work on sexual risk and protective factors for young people is clear in concluding that family context matters and that in terms of communication: “If teens experience considerable parental support and feel connected to their parents, they are less likely to initiate sex at an early age, and they have sex less frequently”. Other research supports this assertion, for example Susan Blake<sup>vii</sup> and colleagues report:

“The extent to which parents are involved and the manner in which they are involved in their children’s lives are critical factors in the prevention of high-risk sexual activity. Children whose parents talk with them about sexual matters or provide sexuality education or contraceptive information at home are more likely than others to postpone sexual activity. And when adolescents become sexually active, they have fewer sexual partners and are more likely to use contraceptives and condoms than young people who do not discuss sexual matters with their parents...”

Finally, in terms of resources or tools which support consideration of communication, if young people want relationship/communication advice the internet abounds with tips<sup>viii</sup>. The online resource **Talking Point**<sup>ix</sup> describes itself as ‘the first stop for information on children’s communication’ with a focus on speech and language communication needs and support. It provides material that can be used to support individual and group learning about communication, and highlights the importance of considerations for young people for whom there are additional support needs or disabilities which affect communication in the context of relationships.

### **3. COMMUNICATION: 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.

#### **Promoting the benefits of communication**

Insight from young people affirms that they understand that good communication in a relationship has benefits – you get to know each other better, understand what your partner likes and misunderstandings and arguments are avoided. However, we also know that in adolescence young people might not have the skills and confidence to talk with a partner. If young people feel that communication is difficult they need support to practice and perhaps change how they relate to a partner – in social marketing terms this points to the need to help more young people *exchange* current ways of behaving which are non-communicative and understand the benefits of behaving differently.

#### **Communicating about sex**

Young people need the skills and language to negotiate sexual encounters and relationships; this might involve communicating about boundaries, wants, desires, condoms and contraception. Again this might be difficult when being open about sex might be seen as someone being inappropriate, too forward or sexually promiscuous. It seems that in order to foster young people's communication about sex (and see this as a positive attribute) they need the language, self-awareness and confidence to talk. But more than this, the young man or woman who is able to talk about what they want, needs to be perceived differently as someone who is sexy, empathic and powerful.

#### **Communicating across mediums**

The commissioning partners already understand the need to be more aware of the impact of new media on young people's friendships and relationships. As with many aspects of the topics discussed in this report it is important to be positive and succinct about key messages rather than focused on pitfalls and dangers (particularly when working creatively in online environments). In the emerging area of social media young people need support to develop media literacy and appropriate ways of behaving.

#### **Talking at home**

If talking at home is protective when it comes to young people's sexual behaviours and use of contraception, this suggests that not only young people but also parents and carers might benefit from hearing this, and then be able to access information and support to help build these connections.

#### **Respect and privacy**

The Hands on Scotland resource highlights what young people also report, that effective communication is based on trust, respect and mutual benefits. Several of the topic chapters published as part of this insight gathering process highlight that there are points in relationships, particularly when they end, that young people feel



vulnerable to an 'ex' being mean or partners revealing things about them. Notions of respect and privacy could be usefully explored in how young people talk about relationships and partners, particularly what should be considered as appropriate (netiquette<sup>x</sup>) on line.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> HandsonScotland Toolkit

[http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/flourishing\\_and\\_wellbeing\\_in\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people/good\\_relationships/good\\_relationships.html](http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/flourishing_and_wellbeing_in_children_and_young_people/good_relationships/good_relationships.html)

<sup>ii</sup> 'Impact of theoretically based sex education programme (SHARE) delivered by teachers on NHS registered conceptions and terminations: final results of cluster randomised trial' M. Henderson et al BMJ 334 (2007)

<http://www.bmj.com/content/334/7585/133>

<sup>iii</sup> 'Towards a psycho-social theoretical framework for sexual health promotion' D. Wight et al Health Education Research Vol 13 No 3 p317-330 (1998)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242254402\\_Towards\\_a\\_PsychoSocial\\_Theoretical\\_Framework\\_for\\_Sexual\\_Health\\_Promotion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242254402_Towards_a_PsychoSocial_Theoretical_Framework_for_Sexual_Health_Promotion)

<sup>iv</sup> 'Sexual communication in the age of AIDS: The construction of risk and trust among young adults' Dana Lear Social Science and Medicine Vol 41 Issue 9 November 1995 pages 1311-1323

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0277953695000105>

<sup>v</sup> 'Factors that shape young people's sexual behaviour: a systematic review' Cicely Marston and Eleanor King The Lancet volume 368 issue 9547 p1581-1586 November 2006

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(06\)69662-1/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(06)69662-1/abstract)

<sup>vi</sup> 'Sexual Risk and Protective Factors: Factors Affecting Teen Sexual Behavior, Pregnancy, Childbearing And Sexually Transmitted Disease: Which Are Important? Which Can You Change?' (2007) Douglas Kirby and Gina Lepore

<http://recapp.etr.org/recapp/documents/theories/RiskProtectiveFactors200712.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup>

'Effects of a parent-child communications intervention on Young Adolescents' Risk for Early Onset of Sexual Intercourse' Susan M. Blake et al Family Planning Perspectives 2001 Vol. 33, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 2001), pp. 52-61

<sup>viii</sup> For example <http://www.lovepanky.com/love-couch/better-love/effective-communication-in-a-relationship> and

<http://health.howstuffworks.com/relationships/advice/communication-skills-for-lifelong-relationships1.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> Talking Point <http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/young-people>

<sup>x</sup> Netiquette defined at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/netiquette>