

Good Measure Project



Adolescent sexuality development and mental health and wellbeing: Research priorities for mental health surveys



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What did we do and why did we do it?

Survey research on young people's mental health often asks limited or no questions about sex, sexuality and gender identity, despite the importance of these subjects to young people. This may be because researchers are unsure of what or how to ask, worry about causing offence, or do not see these topics as a priority.

The Good Measure project aims to strengthen research on the links between adolescent sexuality development and mental health and wellbeing. We are doing this by engaging with young people, parents/carers, mental health professionals and policymakers to understand their views on the key priorities and challenges for research in this area. Taking these into account, we'll create new tools, resources and guidance for researchers.

To understand stakeholders' views on priorities for future research in this area, we carried out 7 agenda-setting workshops with the following groups:

- 28 young people (aged 14 to 23). We ran 1 pilot workshop with 6 young people from our Youth Advisory Group (aged 19 to 23), and 3 workshops with young people aged 14 to 19 from various UK-based youth organisations. Young people who participated in the workshops were a mix of genders¹ and sexual identities², from multiple ethnic backgrounds³ and included young people with disabilities⁴.
- 4 parents/carers (2 women and 2 men) of adolescent boys aged 13 to 18. Parents/carers were aged from 35 to 64, and from multiple ethnic backgrounds⁵.
- 11 mental health researchers and practitioners.

The workshops were co-designed with 8 young people from the Good Measure Youth Advisory Group (YAG) and facilitated by researchers from the University of Glasgow. 6 of the agenda-setting workshops were conducted online and 1 in person.

1 13 women, 9 men, 2 non-binary, 1 gender fluid, 3 who preferred not to disclose. 20 identified as cisgender, 5 transgender, 1 not sure and 2 who chose not to disclose.

2 12 bisexual, 1 asexual, 3 gay/lesbian, 2 heterosexual, 5 pansexual, 2 queer, 1 not sure, 2 who preferred not to disclose.

3 4 African/Caribbean/Black Scottish/Black British, 4 Asian/Asian Scottish/Asian British, 3 Mixed, 1 Other, 13 White Scottish/White British, 1 not sure and 1 who chose not to disclose.

4 9 no disabilities, 5 learning disabilities, 12 neurodiverse, 6 physical, 3 hearing impairment, 2 visual impairment, 3 not reported.

5 1 Asian/Asian Scottish/Asian British, 1 African/Caribbean/Black Scottish/Black British, 2 White Scottish/White British.

At the beginning of each workshop, we discussed definitions of ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’, ‘sexual identity’ and ‘gender identity’ with participants. The table below explains what *we mean* when we use these terms.

Sex	Sexuality	Sexual identity	Gender identity
Any sexual activities carried out on one’s own or with other people e.g. masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal sex, etc.	Sexuality is more than sexual identity/ orientation. Sexuality is experienced in sexual thoughts, desires, fantasies, sex-related beliefs and values, sexual behaviours, practices, roles and relationships.	A person’s own sense of their sexuality, including their sexual orientation (attraction to others).	A person’s own sense of their gender which may or may not correspond to their physiology or assigned sex at birth.

What did we learn?

We sought participants’ views on the most important topics related to sex, sexuality and gender identity to ask young people about in surveys on adolescent mental health. The table below shows the priority topics chosen by young people and parents/carers.

Topics	Young people	Parents/ carers
Self-confidence and self-esteem	✓	✓
Body confidence	✓	✓
Sexual pressure and expectations (e.g. from peers, partners, porn, social media)	✓	✓
Ability to form healthy, trusting relationships with romantic/ sexual partners	✓	✓
Confidence in sexuality/sexual identity/gender identity	✓	
Access to community and support around sexuality/sexual identity/gender identity (e.g. LGBT+ networks)	✓	
Sexual shame (e.g. from family, peers, religion, culture)	✓	
Sexual knowledge and experience	✓	
Emotional impact of first/previous sexual experiences	✓	
Sexual communication (e.g. ability to express sexual desires and boundaries)	✓	

In the workshop discussions, we asked participants:

1. How do young people's experiences of mental health positively and negatively impact experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity?
2. How do young people's experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity positively and negatively impact experiences of mental health?

Positive relationships between adolescent sexuality development and mental health

<p>Young people discussed how good mental health can positively impact experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity by:</p>	<p>Young people discussed how positive experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity can positively impact mental health by:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem • Increasing sexual desire, sexual pleasure, and sexual exploration (with self and partner(s)) • Improving sexual performance, sexual communication, and connection with partner(s) • Reducing risky sexual behaviour • Reducing stress and improving physical health • In some cases, accessing mental health support (e.g. therapy, medication) can improve a person's experience of sex/sexuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing self-acceptance and improving body image • Increasing feelings of sexual empowerment i.e., ability to negotiate boundaries and safely explore sex with partner(s) • Increasing feelings of intimacy, connection and passion with sexual partner(s) • Experiencing pleasure and enjoyment from sex • Reducing stress, improving general mood and physical health • Forming a sexual identity/gender identity can enable young people to find community and support (e.g. LGBTQ+ networks)
<p>Parents/carers discussed how good mental health can positively impact young people's experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity by:</p>	<p>Parents/carers discussed how positive experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity can benefit young people's mental health by:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem • Enabling them to form happy, healthy, and trusting relationships with partner(s) • Enabling them to form good friendship groups/communities where they can discuss experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem • Enabling them to feel loved and accepted by partner(s) • Teaching them to trust others • Experiencing enjoyment and pleasure (improves physical and mental health) • Helping them find community and support around sex/sexuality/gender identity (e.g. LGBTQ+ networks)

Negative relationships between adolescent sexuality development and mental health

<p>Young people discussed how poor mental health can result in feelings of anxiety, insecurity, low self-worth, poor body image, fear, confusion and inadequacy in relation to sex, sexuality and gender identity. These include:</p>	<p>Young people spoke about how experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity that were negative, traumatic, non-consensual, or discriminatory can lead to:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling inadequate/inexperienced when discussing sex and sexuality • Experiencing decreased sexual desire • Inability to experience pleasure and enjoyment from sexual experiences (low mood, low energy, distracted) • Feeling pressured to engage in unwanted sex • Increased impulsivity and participation in risky sexual activities • Struggling to maintain physical hygiene • Fear of sexuality/gender identity not being accepted by friends/family • For some people, taking mental health medication can reduce energy, sexual desire and sexual function 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not feeling accepted and developing feelings of shame, stress and fear about sex/sexuality/gender identity • Feeling sexually undesirable and unable to perform sexually • Feeling they are only valued by partner(s) for their sexuality • Feeling pressured to engage in unwanted sexual activities • Fear of STIs and unwanted pregnancy • Feeling unable to access support around sex/sexuality/gender identity • Feeling left out due to lack of sexual experience
<p>Parents/carers discussed how poor mental health can negatively impact a young person's experiences of sex and sexuality by:</p>	<p>Parents/carers discussed how negative experiences of sex and sexuality can worsen young people's mental health. For example:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreasing self-confidence and self-esteem • Increasing social awkwardness, making it difficult to form relationships with others • Increasing susceptibility to peer pressure around sex/sexuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual inexperience can cause anxiety • Risk of unplanned pregnancies or STIs can cause fear and anxiety • Accessing sexual media content (e.g. social media, porn) can lead to unrealistic expectations of sex and feelings of inadequacy • Sexual desires or fantasies can lead to feelings of shame



Agenda-setting workshops with mental health researchers and practitioners

We asked researchers and practitioners working in the field of adolescent mental health about some of the challenges they may face when including questions on sex, sexuality and gender identity in adolescent mental health surveys.

Key challenges raised by participants:

Political challenges:

- Participants described how parents, funding bodies, and ethics boards often view topics related to sex, sexuality, and gender identity as contentious and potentially risky, even though young people are often open to discussing these subjects. For example, they described how some ethics boards consider questions on sex as risky as discussing suicidal thoughts.
- In some countries, research funding is denied when questions on sex, sexuality and gender identity are included in surveys.
- Participants described how many funders, researchers and professionals who are not working in this field do not recognise the importance of including questions on sex, sexuality and gender identity in mental health surveys.
- Limited time for survey development often leads researchers to choose 'easier' and less controversial topics to avoid delays in ethics approval.
- Survey researchers are concerned that including questions about sex, sexuality and gender identity may lead parents/carers to withdraw their children from the survey, resulting in a low response rate that affects data quality.
- Practitioners working with young people are concerned about collecting data on sex, sexuality and gender identity as this information can be requested by parents/carers, potentially revealing information that the child does not want to share.



Challenges for research design

- Finding the right language and categories for describing sex, sexuality and gender identity in a survey is challenging. Terms can vary widely depending on the context, country and time period, which makes it hard to compare data.
- Sex, sexuality, gender identity and mental health status can change over a person's lifetime, but researchers find it challenging to create questions that capture this fluidity effectively.
- Researchers must strike a balance when including questions about sociodemographic characteristics in surveys. They want to make sure they represent minority groups without risking their identification, while ensuring the survey data can be used in analysis. Closed response options may not accurately reflect people's experiences, but open-text responses require significant resources for reclassification during data analysis.

Needs highlighted by this work

- Researchers and practitioners carrying out surveys need clear evidence-based guidance on how to address topics related to sex, sexuality and gender identity. They also need advice on the suitability of such questions for different age groups.
- Further opportunities are needed to discuss with key stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers) why it is important to ask adolescents about their experiences of sex, sexuality and gender identity and how these aspects can affect mental health.

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To find out more, visit the [Good Measures website](#).

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