

Being a Girl in Wallsend

Karen Laing from Newcastle University conducted a series of focus groups with girls at two secondary schools in Wallsend. 23 girls aged between 14 and 16 took part and this briefing presents the key topics that the girls felt were relevant to discuss about their lives.

Stereotypes

Girls talked about gender stereotypes and sexism as being a normal part of their lives, and something that they experienced daily. They explained how they felt that certain types of behaviour was expected of boys and girls and that this meant that they were punished if they did not conform to images of quiet, calm girls whereas boys were not. Adults frequently commented on the way they looked, in terms of their hair, make-up and clothes, and the girls felt that boys were not subject to such scrutiny.

Wearing make-up was seen by some girls as an important part of their identity, and made them feel good about themselves, but conversely, also attracted negative comments from others. The feeling was by some girls that *'it is better to be called a slag than ugly!'*. An active choice was often being made between the lesser of two evils, and girls felt they could be criticised for any choices they made, and that there was no 'right' choice in terms of their looks or behaviour. Having to constantly check their appearance was seen as stressful and time consuming.

Relationships

Girls described lots of different types of relationships that were important to them, including family, friends, teachers, and mentors. Nevertheless, their relationships are fraught with difficulty. Relationships with adults were often described in negative terms, with girls describing how adults shouted at them or had judgemental attitudes towards them. Girls described lives in which adults were constantly shouting at them.

Friendships with boys were described as a good thing, as boys tended to make good friends, as they were seen as less 'bitchy' than girls, less likely to hold grudges or get into arguments. However, the girls described how difficult it was to maintain a friendship with a boy, as other girls would call them 'slags' for talking to a boy, or cause arguments and fights if the boys had a girlfriend.

Friendships with other girls were seen as extremely important, as close friends were often the only person girls felt able to talk to about their lives. Nevertheless, this was often risky, as a falling out would mean that their secrets are shared, particularly on social media, and arguments were hard to resolve and could go on for days, getting larger friendship groups involved.

Aspirations

The girls expressed high aspirations for the future. Some girls had already given a lot of thought to occupations they would like in the future, including, for example, architect, vet, pilot, police, and nursing. Some girls were doing well at school and could be expected to go on to such a career. However, girls did not feel that it was likely that they would reach their aspirations. They felt that they were not in control of what happened to them. They did not know about life past their GCSE's and felt that anything could happen in the future. They felt that they did not have enough practical knowledge about how to go about achieving their aspirations, and that the focus for them, from every direction, was on achieving good grades in their GCSE's. They were not able to see the relevance of their GCSE's to their future lives and felt that the curriculum did not offer them the life skills and knowledge they needed to make a success of their lives in future.

'We don't learn about mortgages and rent and stuff, and how it all works, and colleges and stuff. We just get told 'oh you've got these days to work out what subjects you want to take'. When we leave school, we've got to figure it all out for ourselves how rent and mortgages and tax and stuff all works'

Role models

Girls described their role models in various ways. Many looked up to their mothers, or other female relatives such as aunts or grandmothers, and admired the way they had achieved in life to get a good job, a house, or a car. Others looked up to key figures who had succeeded against the odds. Celebrities were seldom seen as role models. Although celebrities resonated with the girls for different reasons, e.g. the lyrics in their music, or the way they looked, they did not want to emulate their lifestyle. Indeed they showed an awareness of the 'fakeness' of the celebrity lifestyle.



Health and wellbeing

There were few services that girls felt able to access, as they felt that adults couldn't be trusted to maintain confidentiality. They would not use GPs for sexual health services as GPs tended to know the whole family and this made the girls uncomfortable. Some girls identified a stigma with going to see a school nurse. Nevertheless, girls were able to identify some key services that they would approach such as Streetwise in Newcastle, or local sexual health services aimed specifically at young people. News of these services tended to be spread by word of mouth through friendship groups. One girl claimed that there was a pressure to be seen as sexually active, and so girls were obtaining contraceptive implants even if they had no need of them.

Some teachers were seen as a source of stress. Young people felt that they had very high expectations but often did not take the time to understand why these expectations sometimes could not be met:

'I don't think teachers realise that people have got things going on outside. I mean you can't just drop everything at the school gates, you know what I mean? There's family and that'

Families were also considered to be sources of stress at times of conflict, particularly parents and younger siblings.

The girls were aware of the school counsellors, but said that often, they simply needed to talk to someone about the 'normal stuff', as a quick confidence booster *'you can't talk to counsellors about make-up!'*.

Dealing with stress

Although friendships could be a source of stress in themselves, friendships were also an extremely important resource for girls in order to relieve their stress. Girls felt that they could talk to their friends about anything, particularly male friends, who were perceived to be more trustworthy with confidences. Nevertheless, finding spaces to be able to talk to friends was seen as quite hard. It often entailed 'hanging back' from a group. Local clubs or activities where they could meet friends were often too structured, and sometimes the adult workers 'hovered' over them, giving them no space to just be themselves.

Drinking alcohol and smoking were also considered to be ways to deal with stress. By drinking, girls were able to forget about, or not care about, the expectations and double standards of others about how they looked and behaved, and have the confidence to be themselves, talk to others and make new friends. This 'dutch courage' was also perceived to make it

easier to resolve conflicts with friends as it was easier to say what you were feeling.

'you don't care what you do when you are drunk. You speak to more people, you're just not bothered. When you're drinking you don't care what you look like, you don't care what you think, you don't care about anything around you'

Many girls used the strategy of walking away from stressful situations, which they felt could often be misconstrued by adults, who would then follow and give them attention or punishment, when they needed time to get to grips with their feelings.

What do girls want?

- Strong relationships with adults, based on mutual respect
- Someone to talk to about the normal stuff, near to their own age
- Opportunities to be themselves, without being judged, or feeling as if they were being judged
- Spaces to use that are unstructured, flexible and informal
- Opportunities to form and maintain friendships with their peers, including strong transition support for years 6 and 7
- Practical knowledge and skills for the future
- Work experience and knowledge of different career routes
- Work to be done with boys around sexism

What next?

Further consultation with young people in Wallsend will be carried out throughout 2017. This information will inform the work of the Wallsend Children's Community in providing appropriate and effective support for young people.