Growing up in a rapidly changing digital world brings opportunities and pressures that older generations have not faced. While some do this in a secure and supportive context, some young men’s experience of family relationships is more bruising. None have a clear route map to follow or examples from previous generations in how best to build healthy relationships in a digital age.

It has been proven and is now widely accepted that one of the most important factors for sustaining a long and happy life is to be in a long term relationship and that this is the bedrock of a successful and sustainable family. Although young men are not necessarily looking to establish long term partnerships, the foundations for this in terms of skills and values are clearly established at this early age.

We at FASTN are working across the generations to promote sustainable relationships and have started by seeking to understand more about the relationship experiences, concerns and aspirations of 16 to 19 year old men. Although it may appear to be a daunting task to influence people’s behaviour there is a strong feeling in society that change is required across all generations in order to sustain healthy and stable relationships.

We have seen profound changes in attitudes and behaviour in other areas, most recently with regard to mental health. Young people are not simply the flotsam of social trends and technological change, to be washed up on whatever shore they take them. If we can galvanise both the aspiration for strong relationships and the positive potential of technology, then society can achieve some very real and positive results.
KEY FINDINGS

The following findings are based on a survey of 500 males aged 16-19 across the UK supported by in-depth interviews, looking at how they experience relationships: their hopes, their fears, what they do and where they find information and advice.

Relationship goals

• 87% eventually want to end up in a long term relationship.
• 93% expect to marry at some point and 86% expect to have children.
• 41% like the idea of a relationship but can't see themselves being with one person long term.
• The average age at which they expect to start a relationship that was serious and for the long term is 21.
• Asked about how they would expect relationships to progress, median responses suggested holding hands after 3 days into a relationship, a first kiss (6 days), becoming ‘exclusive’ (35 days), sex (37 days), updating social media status (41 days) and saying ‘I love you’ (70 days).
• These goals are set in a context of a fear of loneliness: 64% worry about being alone and 47% said they feel lonely a lot of the time.

Understanding of healthy relationships

• 84% of the young men think they have a good idea of what a healthy relationship looks like.
• 75% of the young men cited their parent's relationship as one they admired, with even more (81%) admiring their grandparents’ relationship.
• Asked to choose the three most important factors in a happy relationship, communication was ranked as the most important factor (46%), closely followed by love (45%) and honesty (43%).
• Only one in five of the young men cited “great sex” as one of the most important factors to achieve a happy relationship.
• While communication and honesty are prized, these are not things that always come easily to the young men. 41% of them said that they were not comfortable talking about their feelings and 55% worried that if they're open with someone they will laugh at them.
Porn

- Watching porn comes fifth in the list of high frequency activities, with 28% doing this five or more times a week and 63% at least once a week.
- 41% of the young men think watching porn makes it harder to maintain a long term relationship and 41% think it improves a relationship.
- 43% worried that they watched too much porn, with a third expecting sex in real life to be like it is in porn.

Relationship Concerns

- Most of the young men we surveyed generally feel confident (71%) and are happy with how they look (66%).
- 61% are scared they’ll be a disappointment in a relationship.
- 46% have carried on a relationship they wanted to finish while 43% have finished a relationship they wanted to carry on with.
- 45% have felt ashamed of the way they’ve treated a partner.
- 30% said they had had sex when they didn’t particularly want to.
- 55% said they worry about being laughed at if they’re open about how they feel.

Seeking Support

- Eight out of ten of the young men surveyed cited at least one concern or problem in a relationship they had experienced where they would have valued better advice or support. The most common were:
  - Argument with partner (25%)
  - Lack of trust in their relationship (24%)
  - Not being sure about relationship status (23%)
  - Not being able to talk about relationship issues with partner (20%)
  - Wanting to end a relationship but not being sure (16%)
- Despite the prevalence of digital media, over half preferred to talk about relationship concerns face to face.
- 38% of young men discuss concerns about sex and relationships in online chat rooms or forums at least once every 3 months with a further 13% saying they hadn’t, but would like to.
- 58% of the young men who were in a relationship felt they could talk about anything with their current partner, 33% could talk about most things but not how the relationship was going, and 9% felt uncomfortable talking about anything.
- There is more caution about talking to adults, though only a third said they wouldn’t want to talk to their parents about concerns surrounding sex and relationships.
This research confirms the need for better provision of relationship support delivered through media with which young people are most comfortable. At the moment technology is far more likely to be used to access porn than advice or support. Social media can exacerbate pressures through sexting or the wide sharing of embarrassing episodes and does not always enable honest supportive communication.

We call on the following to take action to support young men who want to have better relationships and don’t feel well equipped:

**GOVERNMENT**

Relationships support and education should extend beyond the classroom with more support for new online campaigns and platforms that address relationship issues for people in their late teens and early twenties in an accessible way.

**THOSE PROVIDING RELATIONSHIP ADVICE**

Recognise the role of social media and digital technology in young men’s lives and work much harder in creating shareable content which impacts, provokes and brings about change in attitudes and behaviour.

**PARENTS AND WIDER SOCIETY**

Be aware that we are the role models for healthy relationships that young men look to. Our children will do as we do, not as we say.

Change the stereotype that men should not show their vulnerability or feelings. It’s great that attitudes to mental health are now changing; we need to see similar openness about relationships so that people, especially young men, can get the advice they need.

Understand better the impact of porn. A polarised response of condemnation or acceptance is not good enough. If we talk openly with young men about porn they may themselves be the most effective advocates and antidote to the false reality and expectations of porn.
We commit to leveraging digital media to reach, inform and inspire young men to share with and learn from each other and to achieve the healthy relationships to which they aspire.

Technology can be the enabler of communication that empowers, connects, skills, inspires and supports. It is the medium through which young men can challenge those aspects of culture that place hurdles in the way of finding happiness in relationships.

FASTN has therefore launched a social media campaign and advice hub, Status¹, to encourage young people to voice their hopes and fears, share experience, and to connect them with the resources, tools and insights that will equip them to build healthy relationships that last.

¹ www.statusonline.org, @heystatusonline
The path from 16 to 19 is transformational. Young men in this age group experience huge change and relationships are only one element of the challenges they face. All this takes place in a rapidly changing digital context for which there are few route maps. Are we equipping them well enough?
A lot happens between the ages of 16 and 19. GCSE results, A levels or BTECs. Starting a job, making career choices, perhaps leaving home. And, for many, sex or the first forays into intimate relationships.

It’s a time of growth and maturation with brains still developing and hormones raging. Amidst all the pressures of study, exams, work or dealing with the legacy of more difficult early teenage years, relationships loom large bringing with them intensely felt joy, pleasure and pain. The numbers becoming parents at this age are far fewer than previous decades (teenage pregnancies have fallen by 45% since 2007) and for most of these young people the relationships that will characterise the majority of their adult lives are still in the future. Yet the experience gained and lessons learned at this stage can shape that future. Will they emerge skilled or scarred? Confident or fearful?

Our first report looks at how 16-19 year old males experience relationships: their hopes, their fears, what they do and where they find information and advice. We focused on men because they are less likely to seek help and advice on relationships. This can take its toll on mental health and wellbeing. With Censuswide we surveyed 501 males aged 16-19 across the UK. This was supported by in-depth interviews with 18 young men, conducted in pairs. Their voices, quoted extensively in the report, reflect the survey findings and paint a vivid picture of the reality of their journey towards adult relationships.

I don’t like the saying knight in shining armour. It should be changed to knight in battle worn armour. Where’s the scars on the armour? What have you gone through and proven that you can stand and stay strong and keep fighting? [Ryan]

The young men are approaching or at a stage that is sometimes referred to as ‘emerging adulthood’. It is characterised by five features though these characteristics may be experienced quite differently depending on socio-economic circumstances:

- Identity exploration: a time to find out who you really are
- Instability: a time of life that is full of changes
- Self-focus: a time for focussing on yourself (less connected to your parents but without own attachments or dependents)
- Feeling in between: not feeling that you have reached adulthood
- Possibilities: feeling that anything is possible.

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2. One consequence of the particular male difficulty in seeking help and support is seen in the fact that suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45, and three in four of all suicides in the UK being men. [source: https://www.thecalmzone.net/news-room/#/pressreleases/record-male-suicide-awareness-as-new-stats-show-3-in-4-uk-suicides-are-men-1678227]
3. The sample was representative across all UK regions and included 329 in education, 110 in work, 35 on an apprenticeship and 27 not in education, employment or training.
4. Interviews were conducted in Dorking, Loughborough and Oldham. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
What is clear is that this is a time of discovery about self, others and relationships. All are learning and growing through both digital and face to face relationships. Indeed teenage (and we suggest emerging adult) romantic relationships can be seen as ‘a training ground for adult intimacy, providing an opportunity for learning to manage strong emotions, to negotiate conflict, to communicate needs and to respond to a partner’s needs.  

The rapidly changing digital context for relationships creates new challenges and opportunities. As the American journalist Thomas Friedman observed, even in 2005 “Facebook didn’t exist, Twitter was still a sound, the cloud was still in the sky, 4G was a parking place, LinkedIn was a prison, applications were what you sent to college, and Skype was a typo.”  

Studies such as Pewinternet show how social media use is changing with 16–18 year olds increasingly tending to use Facebook to connect with older friends and family members, SnapChat and Whatsapp to connect with close friends, while Twitter and Instagram are used to communicate with wider friendship circles and strangers.

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IPPR note the positive side of this in that ‘easy access to digital technologies allows young people to socialise with their friends, find like-minded peers, and access supportive and diverse information and networks in an empowering way, independent of parents and adults’. Particularly when it comes to learning about sex and relationships, awkward questions can be easily answered. But they also warn of the negative side. This includes young people revealing more information about themselves and bullying, relationship breakups and social pressures becoming magnified online. Access to adult or extreme material is much easier while clear social norms, and opportunities for redress are less present in digital spaces than usually exists offline.⁹

Chris Sherwood, CEO of Relate, has also spoken about the challenges of love in a digital age.

“We’re also navigating this new digital world without a roadmap. People used to date, become girlfriend and boyfriend and get married. Today, announcing your relationship on Facebook or agreeing to take down your dating profile are new staging posts on this more complex relationship journey. We know from the counselling room that many of these staging posts only become clear when an unspoken rule has been broken…. We can’t stop the digital revolution but we can learn to better integrate technology into our lives, in ways that enable us to form and sustain loving and supportive relationships as well as to better navigate the dangers out there.”¹⁰

The pathways to getting established as adults are not straightforward. Identity and self-esteem can be fragile, poorly rooted constructs. The first rungs of the housing ladder may seem out of reach. Career pathways may be less structured or accessible. The road to financial security can seem to be paved with debt. Establishing the secure relationships that are incontrovertibly essential for health and wellbeing is no less important. For many young people that journey is one they, ironically, feel they are flying solo and without a route map. They may know about safe sex or the dangers of date rape. But too often, relationships are a matter of trial and error. Sometimes the wrong lessons are learned or the scars and consequences are a burden for many years to come. If young people do not feel equipped with the know-how to handle relationships the price for them, and for society, can be great.

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⁹ IPPR, Young People, Sex and Relationships: The New Norms, August 2014
¹⁰ http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-online-tinder-dating-relate
At 16-19, young men display a range of attitudes to relationships; some are more interested than others. The vast majority want to arrive in a long term relationship one day, but many are not confident of getting there.
There are profound differences in the experiences, perspectives and opportunities encountered by young men. Some will have started university. Others will not be in education, employment or training. Their experience of family relationships may be stable or unhealthy, happy or conflictual, secure or sometimes dangerous. Some will have been scarred by their early years and struggle with empathy and healthy relationships, whilst others are well set to form and enjoy healthy and stable relationships. Some will have ambitions they expect to fulfil – to travel, fulfil themselves through work, to buy a home or to accumulate possessions and financial wealth. Their commitment to relationships may be subordinated, initially, to many of these goals. While some may travel solo, others will journey together from a young age or perhaps find fleeting escapes from coping alone.

Our survey shows that the desire to be in a relationship is far from absolute – 35% of the young men said they would currently rather be single than in a relationship although most (87%) eventually want to end up in a long term relationship. 93% of the 16-19 year olds expected to marry at some point and 86% expected to have children.

**Getting engaged and married depends on whenever you’re ready. Getting married – well, it depends on whether you can afford it or not – but getting engaged is whenever you’re ready. But if you’re engaged it doesn’t mean you have to get married straight away. You can be engaged for 5 years or something. [Lee]**

When asked about the age at which they would expect to start a relationship that might be serious and for the long term the mean response was 21. This reinforces the view that the current experience of 16-19 year olds’ relationships is a learning phase.
Relationship Goals

There was a fairly clear sense of the order in which things might progress. Taking the median responses, the young men expected to hold hands 3 days into a relationship, to kiss after 6 days, to become ‘exclusive’ after 5 weeks, have sex after 5 weeks and 2 days, update their status on social media after 5 weeks and 6 days, and say ‘I love you’ after ten weeks. In longer term relationships living together might happen after one year and nine months, getting engaged after two years, getting married after three years and seven months and having children after four years, six months.

On the first date, you take them to a restaurant, like Nando’s…, and you hold their hand on the way in. A quick peck on the cheek on the first date but after two dates, then a kiss. Maybe a cheeky snog after the cheeky Nando’s. [Lee]

There is, of course, variation within all these figures. So, for example, 14% of the sample expected to have sex in the first week of a relationship, while 19% didn’t expect to have sex in the first year.

It depends on the person – if you’re drunk or not, if you’re off your head, it could be a one-night-stand. But if you actually like the girl, or if she’s your side bit or if it’s like a permanent relationship, then it could be a month or two. [Nathan]

For many of the young men, the period four to six weeks into a relationship is an important stage in a relationship when things start to become more serious – at least in terms of focussing attention on one person at a time.

The month or three-month mark – they say if you can make it to that mark without any problems, then the relationship can last a full year. [Liam]

Judgements about what you will want or do in the future, especially at a stage of life characterised by change and development, are no more than general indications of values and outlook. Yet it does suggest that the experimentation of late teenage years is conducted with an eye to a more settled future. Whether this dream is attainable is another matter.
While 87% of the young men we surveyed would like to end up in a long term relationship, and many admired the longevity of their grandparents’ relationships, four in ten liked the idea of a relationship but couldn’t see themselves being with one person long term. For this generation, relationship goals, no less than their dreams of home ownership, satisfying employment or financial security, come with many hurdles and obstacles.

**Mostly people that I go with, we know it’s not going to be a relationship, we just do things and then go. That’s the way my mind set’s been from shit experiences at school and stuff. [William]**

This generation’s future relationships will be shaped by a number of pressures. Housing costs are a prime example. Shelter note that a growing number of adults are being forced to move back in with their parents or are simply continuing to live at home for longer due to housing costs. In their survey, 22% of 18- to 34-year-olds stated that they still live with their parents and of these, 45% confirming that the reason for this is because they can’t afford to rent or buy their own home. This in turn is undermining the ability of this group to develop and plan ahead for their own personal relationships. Over half of 18- to 34-year-olds living at home (58%) say they find developing and maintaining relationships is harder because they are still living with their parents. There is also a growing marriage gap with people on low incomes now up to six times less likely to marry than high earners.

The pathway of relationships has also changed with cohabitation becoming the norm, either as a preferred choice, a testing period, or an uncertain process leading to later weddings as a confirmation of success. For some, this is because they aspire to an expensive wedding and prioritise setting up a home together. The risk is that people are more at risk of ‘sliding’ into couple relationships without clear intentional decisions to be a couple with a future together (or legal recognition of their status) with strong evidence that this creates a significantly higher risk of subsequent breakdown.

People’s outlook on relationships must also be set in the context of the fear and experience of loneliness. Our survey found that 64% of 16-19 year old men worry about being alone and 47% said they feel lonely a lot of the time. This closely matches other findings such as the Aviva Health Check Report (2014) which found that nearly half (48%) of 18-24 year olds say they often feel lonely, compared to a quarter of those aged over 65 and a UK average of 34%.

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I don't want to be alone for my life. I feel as if it must get a bit boring and probably mess my head up a lot more than what anything else would. [Oliver]

Loneliness is not the same as isolation. Indeed, 16-19 year olds are not often alone; many are at school or college and in most cases still living at home. Rather, the Campaign to End Loneliness define it as an ‘unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship that happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want’. 14

Susan Moore, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, notes in writing about the experience of teenagers in love that ‘the normative nature of adolescent romantic relationships means that those young people without a girlfriend or boyfriend can feel stressed or different. Given that adolescence is a time when there is a great deal of pressure to conform to peer norms, young people who are not linking up romantically can feel lonely and out of step with their peers.’ 15

This fear of loneliness is likely to continue into their 20s. When Vice News asked their readers “What are you most scared of?” the answer that came out on top was: never finding love16. For people who were single, a significant 42% said it was their biggest fear.
WHAT IS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

Young men believe they know what a healthy relationship looks like and cite communication, love and honesty as the most important characteristics. But can they put it into practice?
Despite the prevalence of relationship breakdown – only half of today’s fifteen year olds are living with both birth parents – 75% of the young men we surveyed cited their parents’ relationship as one they admired, with even more (81%) admiring their grandparents’ relationships. Celebrities were also cited as admired relationships with the Beckhams, William and Kate (Duke & Duchess of Cambridge) and Cheryl Cole and Liam Payne being the most frequently mentioned, whilst other respondents mentioned specific friends or relatives.

My mum’s been through a shit relationship. My dad abused her and that. She’s got my step-dad now, they still argue but at the end of the day it’s still a good relationship because they’re honest and they talk about it but it’s not always like that for everyone….. But when you look to a grandparents’ relationship they’ve always been there for … over 30 odd years… because it was different eras. In those eras you used to stay with someone and now basically you can just fuck someone, leave them and go on to another person and you don’t get a name for it or anything. I just feel like the olden days were a lot better to live in. [Ben]

I admire my grandparents’ relationship because they’ve been together for 50 years. They’ve never strayed from each other. With my mother and my father, things were OK until last year when things got really bad, and I don’t really see either of them anymore. [Nathan]

My mum and dad have been together for like ages, I just like how long they’ve been together. [Lee]

Perhaps because of these admired relationships the great majority of the young men (84%) think they have a good idea of what a healthy relationship looks like. Asked to choose the three most important factors in a happy relationship, communication was ranked as the most important factor (46%), closely followed by love (45%) and honesty (43%).

If you don’t communicate, there’s no point in being together. You need communication and honesty because they could be lying to you and cheating on you. If there’s no love, what’s the point in being together? If you don’t like the person, you just want a relationship to boost your social standards. [Jake]

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17. Questionnaire gave a list: communication, faithfulness, forgiveness, fun, great sex, honesty, kindness, love, mutual respect, shared life goals, shared hobbies, similar backgrounds; and included an ‘other’ category for respondents’ suggestions.
With a relationship personally I would say you have to put the work into it especially if you want to be with that person. You have to put in the work, be honest with them, communicate. [William]

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS TO ACHIEVE A HAPPY RELATIONSHIP?

LOVE 45%
COMMUNICATION 46%
HONESTY 42%

Respondents asked to select three from: communication, faithfulness, forgiveness, fun, great sex, honesty, kindness, love, mutual respect, shared life goals, shared hobbies, similar backgrounds; and “other”

Only one in five of the young men cited “great sex” as one of the most important factors to achieve a happy relationship. In interviews there was recognition that the pleasure of sex could be fleeting and that love involved something deeper where thoughtful attention also mattered.

[Love is] an emotional connection. It shouldn't have to be physical. That's what a lot of people think now. Love means you have to kiss them and have sex with them but it shouldn't have to be that. It should be an emotional attachment. [Oliver]

You may say you’re in love but it’s not love. It’s lust…. Sex- maybe it’s good for that moment or two but after you don’t feel great. Then when you’re in love and you have sex you know it’s special because you can feel it. [Ben]
Kindness (13%) and forgiveness (11%) were lower ranked yet may prove to be essential in relationships that last. Whilst these qualities may be seen as part of good “communication, love and honesty”, their importance especially at more challenging times in a relationship is considerable. And without preparing young people for the relationship road ahead, it is perhaps not surprising that many will not fare well when they face such challenges.

While communication and honesty are prized, these are not things that always come easily to the young men. 41% of them said that they were not comfortable talking about their feelings and 55% worried that if they're open with someone they will laugh at them. This finding is of great concern. Even though many young men believe that they should be honest and communicate well, they don't always feel able to follow their own advice.
One aspect of the digital context for relationships is the ease of access to porn. It is now part of many young men's everyday lives but the role it plays is disputed. Is it entertainer, instructor or corruptor?
While interviewees distinguished sex and love, and had clear views about what makes for a good relationship, the challenges of porn were clear. Online porn is easy to access and, the evidence suggests, frequently viewed by young adults. Does this matter for relationships?

Our survey found that watching porn comes fifth in the list of high frequency activities, with 28% doing this five or more times a week and 63% at least once a week. This fits with other findings such as IPPR's report Young People, Sex and Relationships which found that seven out of 10 said 'accessing pornography was seen as typical 'while they were at school.'

When guys get horny what are they going to do when they don't have a girlfriend? [Ben]

There were mixed views in our survey about the impact of porn on relationships with 41% of the young men thinking watching porn makes it harder to maintain a long term relationship and 41% thinking it improves a relationship.

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43% of the young men in our survey worried that they watched too much porn, with a third expecting sex in real life to be like it is in porn. Our interviewees were aware of dangers such that it might be addictive or create false expectations but also saw it as a harmless relief.

**You shouldn’t watch porn in a relationship. You’ll get all these false images in your head and you’ll get disappointed.** [Rhys]

**It’s unrealistic, the standards in it. Most porn the woman’s got big tits and the man’s got a fucking horse dick. It just sets unrealistic standards.** [William]

Our survey only included men, but the Girlguiding Girls Attitude Survey looks at the concerns of young women aged 17-21. 87% of them thought that online porn creates unrealistic expectations of what women’s bodies are like. 71% thought it makes aggressive and violent behaviour towards women seem normal, with the same number believing it sends out confusing messages about consent.¹⁹

**With porn, the whole shaving thing is normal now when it really isn’t. Like if you’ve got hair there it’s meant to be there otherwise it wouldn’t grow. Now they [girls] see it as that if they’ve got hair down there it’s disgusting.** [Oliver]

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Concerns about the impact of porn on relationships are also influenced by the extent to which people may draw on it to learn about sex and relationships. IPPR’s survey found that one in six young people selected pornography as one of the three main places where they had learned about sex and relationships; this is more pronounced among men (almost one in five) than women (one in eight). The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles reports that 24% of men cite porn as a source of information about sex. Men citing pornography as a source were more likely to have unmet information needs (76.2% vs 65.5%) and more frequently reported needing psychosexual information (53.4% vs 37.7%) than men for whom pornography was not an information source.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Maybe they’ve had sex but they feel like they weren’t that good so they watch that [porn] and see where they went wrong and how to improve. [Callum]}

The impact of porn on teenagers is an area which requires more research and open discussion, especially because porn is so easily accessible. Recent studies have shown that, because the teenage brain is still developing, it is particularly vulnerable to stimulation and can lead to a propensity to developing addictions, a craving for stronger stimulation and reduced self-control.\textsuperscript{21}

Porn is not the only digital context for this age group’s relationships, nor are digital pressures the only ones they face. Although our survey didn’t explore issues such as the use of dating apps, sexting, revenge porn, or concerns about privacy, there are widespread concerns. The IPPR study, for example, found that almost half (46%) of young people said ‘sending sexual or naked photos or videos is part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays’.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{With heightened awareness of cyber-bullying, online shaming and revenge porn, it appears the younger generation are well aware of, perhaps having witnessed it first-hand, the destructive power of technology. [IpsosMori Global Trends]\textsuperscript{23}}

Given, then, the extensive viewing of online porn as well as the pressures of inappropriate use of social media, it is important that at an essential developmental stage where young people are learning how to form and maintain healthy relationships they are not blown badly off course by such experiences.


\textsuperscript{21}http://www.nurturingminds.co.uk/index.php/psychology-research-and-child-development-blog/entry/pornography-adolescents-and-addiction

\textsuperscript{22}IPPR, Young People, Sex and Relationships: The New Norms, August 2014

\textsuperscript{23}https://www.ipsosglobaltrends.com/will-technology-kill-us-al
RELATIONSHIP CONCERNS

A considerable proportion of the young men interviewed expressed worries about relationships; in particular, finding and keeping a partner and rejecting or being rejected. Many did not feel confident about sharing their feelings with a partner and are therefore unlikely to put into practice the “good communication” they seek.
Growing up has its stresses. Exams, parents and friends can all be sources of grief and angst – sometimes fleeting, sometimes persistent and damaging. The good news is that most of the young men we surveyed generally feel confident (71%) and are happy with how they look (66%). They are split over whether it is easy to have good relationships (53% do find it easy, 47% don’t) but many also have a number of fears or worries.

When you go online, most people come off it thinking my life isn’t as good as other people’s lives, or I’m not as cool or as popular or as fit or as healthy or as good-looking as others. [Tom]

Some of them were worried about themselves and their future. 64% of the young men worried about being alone and 47% said they feel lonely a lot of the time. 61% are scared they’ll be a disappointment in a relationship. This is a time when there is a great deal of pressure to conform to peer norms and young people who are not linking up romantically can feel lonely and out of step with their peers.24

I’m worried in my relationship that I’m not going to be the best. It’s a very tricky situation because you want to be able to impress your partner and keep that going. [Jake]

I got with someone under pure pressure because all my friends were in relationships. I didn’t like the person that much but I ended up staying with them for quite a while. But then it just didn’t work out. [Liam]

If you’ve been in a past relationship that ruins your trust and all that, you’re going to be scared of disappointment again. [Oliver]

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They were also concerned about what happens in their relationships. Ending relationships well is difficult at any stage of life. Almost half the young men (46%) have carried on a relationship they wanted to finish, while a similar number (43%) have finished a relationship they wanted to carry on with. The challenge of long distance relationships was one of the most common reasons in open responses to why they had ended a relationship that they wished had continued. Break-ups are, of course, a common feature of adolescent romantic relationships, some of which last only a few weeks. The impact of splitting up may not be particularly severe or long-lasting, especially in the case of short-term liaisons. Research does suggest, however, that break-ups are more distressing among adolescents with more ‘clingy’ relationship styles and greater tendencies toward negative mood.\(^{25}\)

If one of your friends is telling you to get with this person, there’s that pressure, that peer pressure to get with that person and you may not want to. But once you’re with that person, it feels sad to let them down so you kind of stick with them. [Rhys]

*It was a long distance relationship, and although we loved each other it caused us both too much distress not being able to see each other all the time.* [Survey respondent]

Young men, as well as women, can feel pressured in relationships, can struggle to manage endings, and do not always feel good about the way they have behaved. 45% of the young men said they have felt ashamed of the way they’ve treated a partner.

*I find it hard to end things with partners because I don’t wanna hurt them and I don’t wanna be alone.* [Survey respondent]

30% of the young men said they had had sex when they didn't particularly want to. A few of the open responses to the reasons why suggested an abusive relationship, but common reasons given were being drunk, or being tired but not wanting to disappoint or let down a partner.

*I felt pressured to have sex, as seemingly all my mates were doing it, and he already had a boner so I felt like I’d be a disappointment if I didn’t deal with it.* [Survey respondent]

One of the striking findings from our survey was the level of concern about openness, honesty and communication about feelings and relationships. 55% said they worry about being laughed at if they’re open about how they feel. More generally, 59% feel comfortable talking about their feelings,
41% are not. This finding is particularly pertinent as this same sample championed the virtues of “communication” and “honesty” as two of the top three most important characteristics of a healthy relationship; clearly, putting theory into practice is not straightforward.

I can talk to someone I don’t know, a complete stranger, better than I can talk to one of my mates. [Lee]

With me, I either talk about things or I do boxing or the gym to get things off my mind. [Euan]

There is also pressure to pretend you’re living according to perceived norms, although perceptions about what others do are not necessarily accurate. So, for example, 36% of the young men we surveyed have pretended to mates they’ve had sex with someone when they haven’t.

In a lad culture there’s so much pressure. When I was 16/17, I remember the people who lost their virginity first were seen as lads or legends! So it doesn’t surprise me that people would lie about it just to get some attention. [Sam]

The fear of being open is in part a result of the greater risks resulting from social media and the wider circulation of stories.

In the past I’ve told friends about how I’ve felt and they’ve gone to broadcast it all the way through social media. I don’t feel like that helps at all. Basically they just take the absolute piss out of you. ...You say I’m really upset my girlfriend's broken up with me and the next day it’s all around school and everyone’s like “Haha, you’ve been dumped!” I only tell one person how I feel, or two, and as soon as one of them tells something they’re not my friend anymore. I only give one chance out, as soon as you break that one chance you’re done. [Ben]

But there is also the difficulty of talking about sensitive or personal topics.

While tales of ‘epic fails’ in relationships of limited value or importance are easily shared, there is a lingering conception of masculinity that discourages emotional openness about relationships that do matter.

The risk here is that young men will not seek help or guidance either to deal with their feelings or to manage the relationship. Some of this stems from a fear of how others will respond.
I feel like guys keep their emotions to themselves and how they feel in a relationship but you can see how it’s affecting them. Girls can talk about their problems because that’s what girls do, they are more open about how they feel. [Ben]

Guys are supposed to have that person of ‘we’re big strong tough men with eight packs and ridiculous biceps and we can shake anything off’ [Sam]

This inability to be open has implications for mental health as Ben and Ryan reveal in their conversation:

**Ben:** If you go up to one of your mates and say you know what I feel really upset you’re probably worried he’s going to say you’re not a man then. Because in the olden days men just kept their feelings to themselves and tried to cut all emotions off because that’s what you do to make yourself feel like a man. Well you know, days have changed and you can be more open with your opinions and people can help you through it.

**Ryan:** Yeah I think the same because these days you should try and be more open because if you don’t show your feelings then no one can help you solve the problem.

**Ben:** That’s when you get into depression and then life becomes really shit.
The vast majority of young men would have valued better relationship advice and support when experiencing a relationship problem but are reluctant to seek it. Only a minority had sought advice online despite the easy access and privacy offered. The untapped potential for online relationship resources must be addressed.
While talking and being open about feelings may be difficult, this does not mean young men don’t want to talk. Eight out of ten of the young men surveyed cited at least one concern or problem in a relationship they had experienced where they would have valued better advice or support. The most common were:

**WHAT CONCERNS OR PROBLEMS IN A RELATIONSHIP HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED WHERE YOU WOULD HAVE VALUED BETTER ADVICE OR SUPPORT?**

- **25%** Argument with their partner
- **24%** Lack of trust in their relationship
- **16%** Wanting to end a relationship, but not being sure
- **23%** Not being sure about relationship status
- **20%** Not being able to talk about relationship issues with their partner
- **8/10** Young men have problems in their relationships they wish they could talk to someone about.

Base: 409 16-19 males who are or have been in a relationship. Respondents invited to tick all that apply from: arguments with my girlfriend/boyfriend, lack of trust in my relationship, not being sure about my relationship status, not being able to talk about my relationship problems with my girlfriend/boyfriend, wanting to end a relationship but not being sure, worries that my girlfriend/boyfriend was cheating, not being sure if what my girlfriend/boyfriend expects me to do is normal, fear of being rejected, one of us being more committed than the other, finding sex difficult or disappointing, other, I have never experienced such a problem in a relationship.

As well as advice about specific, immediate problems or concerns, young adults may also want more general advice and information. The Natsal survey provides a wider perspective on what men aged 16-24 (an older but overlapping age band) wished they knew. When asked if they felt they ought to have known more when they first felt ready to have some sexual experience, 23% of men aged 16-24 thought they should have known more about ‘sexual feelings, emotions, relationships’.

Most of us, well at my school, we weren’t really taught what a healthy relationship is and how to support it... I’d value more information and support. Because you don’t really get that nowadays. I think most people nowadays learn it through first-hand experience or through second-hand experience. Like watching friends and family.

[William]

26. [http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/3/e007834#T4](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/3/e007834#T4)
We therefore asked the young men we surveyed who they felt most comfortable talking to about relationship concerns, and how.

Despite the prevalence of digital media, over half preferred to talk about relationship concerns face to face. Some of the young men prefer to use phone (15%) or some form of messaging (18%). For some this will be a matter of practicality – for example people in long distance relationships are more restricted in the potential for face to face conversation. Messaging apps eliminate facial and vocal expression and importantly provide a space between senders’ contributions to review the previous message and draft their response. There is perhaps potential to help young men utilise messaging apps to facilitate tricky relationship conversations, to help overcome their inhibitions and to share difficult opinions sensitively.

Our survey also found that 38% of young men discuss concerns about sex and relationships in online chat rooms or forums at least once every 3 months with a further 13% saying they hadn’t, but would like to. This suggests significant untapped potential for the young men’s digital experience to be a better source of advice.
I don't know who to turn to because I grew up figuring things out on my own. [Ryan]

The ability to be able to communicate well with your partner in a relationship is one of the fundamental ingredients for relationship success. This includes the simple enjoyment of interacting with each other, the ability to convey support, as well as the capacity to address concerns or difficulties in a constructive manner. Arguments, frustration and dissatisfaction can all too easily spiral if concerns are poorly communicated or misunderstood.

Among the young men we surveyed who were in a relationship, 58% felt they could talk about anything with their current partner, 33% could talk about most things but not how the relationship was going, and 9% felt uncomfortable talking about anything. The fact that 42% could not talk about how the relationship was going, or about anything, indicates that many of these young men’s relationships are not that mature or healthy. In the early more exploratory days of a relationship such hesitance to talk about the relationship may be understandable, but if it continues into a persistent inability to discuss things that concern you in a relationship then a key skill needs to be learnt.

If someone’s open with me and I find it funny, I’m the kind of guy who just laughs at you. I’ll tell you how it is. [Rhys]

Men are always meant to be tough. Women are more emotional. Women talk to each other a lot more than men do. They have deep conversation about sexuality and things like that, but men don’t really do that. [Charlie]

Sometimes it is helpful to talk to or seek advice from people other than your girl/boyfriend or partner so we looked at who people might choose to discuss concerns about sex and relationships with. Only one in ten of the young men said they wouldn’t want to discuss their concerns with male or female friends.

WITH WHOM DO YOU DISCUSS ANY CONCERNS YOU HAVE ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS?

Respondents were asked to identify the preferred medium of communication through which to discuss relationship concerns with each of the above or to indicate that they wouldn’t want to speak this person, or would like to speak to them but didn’t know how.
I’d like it to come from closer friends. Possibly some family but talking to your parents about this sort of stuff is awkward, you don’t really want to talk to them about it. [Oliver]

If I think I’ve got a problem in my relationship or with a girl, then I will go and ask my mate. And go ‘Right, is this OK?’ If not, then ‘What should I do?’ And it’s mainly ‘Get rid of the girl’! [Charlie]

Most of the people I talk to say you should get rid of your girlfriend if you have a problem with her. You need to get through it and to man up and all that. They say it’s really getting on top of you if your health starts to suffer – your mental health – so you shouldn’t be with them anymore. [Euan]

There is more caution about talking to adults, although only a third said they wouldn’t want to talk to their parents about concerns surrounding sex and relationships. Half the young men said they wouldn’t want to talk to their grandparents about such issues.

My best mate – I’d class him as my little brother, but he’s not blood, but he’s still family. He’s always there for me, I know his past and he knows my past. If I ever need to speak to him, or his nan – I see his nan, I love his nan to bits. [Charlie]

The young men were not markedly more reluctant to talk to their parents’ partners who were not their mother or father – 38% (of those for whom this was relevant) said they would not want to talk to their Mum’s partner and 43% to their Dad’s partner. There was, however, greater reticence in discussing these issues face to face. While 41% would prefer to talk to their Mum face to face about sex and relationship issues, and 22% using some form of technology, only 23% would choose to talk to their Dad’s partner face to face, with 33% preferring to use technology.
Young men aspire to healthy relationships yet each of the three characteristics of healthy relationships that they identify represent challenges.

They prize communication, but may be fearful of talking about their feelings or seeking advice and support.

They prize love, but fear loneliness.

They prize honesty, but may struggle to end relationships not wanting to cause hurt or lie to impress mates or conceal pain.

They are learning about relationships, sometimes the hard way and often through trial and error. These lessons take place in the midst of the pursuit of pleasure, the satisfaction of desires and the quest for connection (as well as in the midst of homework, exams, sport and all other aspects of daily life). The pathway to adulthood, and the secure stable relationships that provide a bedrock for health and wellbeing in adult lives, is not straightforward with the potential for relationships to bring both pleasure and pain evident in their own lives and the lives of those around them.

The men we surveyed expected to be thinking about serious long term relationships when they were 21. There are important lessons to learn before then about who to choose, how and when to commit, and how to communicate well and to work at relationships so they grow and thrive through all the stages of life. In the meantime the young men are growing, learning, having fun, feeling sad, and acquiring the skills and attitudes that will help them achieve the relationships they hope for. Or not. For the sad reality is that current trends suggest all too many will see their dreams turn to dust as the long term relationship is not as long term as hoped for.

So how can we best support these young men in managing the pressures and realising their ambition of healthy long lasting relationships that are the stronger for all the lessons they have learned?
CONCLUSION

We conducted this research because we believe there is a need for greater understanding of the relationship mind-set and needs of young men. In our opinion, this research confirms the need for better provision of relationship support delivered through media with which young people are most comfortable. We can and should do better than the private pain (and sometimes public social media shared shame) of learning through trial and error supplemented by the false impressions of porn and Instagram bragging. With social media being such an important part of their lives, and online porn a frequent port of call, we think it’s essential that social media empowers people to learn, explore and develop safely and happily.

The first challenge is thus for the government in its funding of relationships support and education.

• Young men want to have better relationships and don’t feel well equipped. Current in-school relationship and sex education does not fully equip young people to negotiate the transition to adult relationships. Supporting relationships amongst young people shouldn’t be confined to the classroom but should continue into late teens and early twenties. Relationships education should be extended online with a dedicated campaign and virtual platform designed to appeal to young people and address relationship issues in an accessible way.

The second challenge is for all those organisations involved in the provision of relationships support and education as well as for the many organisations who work more generally with young adults.

• Relationship advice and information is not something young men seek out actively. Those who have relationship advice to give need to recognise the role of social media and digital technology in young men’s lives and to work much harder in creating shareable content which impacts, provokes and brings about change in attitudes and behaviour.

The third challenge is the broader cultural change that is necessary in enabling young men to develop healthy relationships and the skills that sustain them. Three aspects emerge from this study where all of us have a responsibility to shape the context in which young men complete their journey to adulthood.

• Role models are important, both in their presence and absence. Young men admire long term relationships in their families, when they have them. The ways in which parents communicate, argue, forgive, work at relationships, stick together, have fun and enjoy each other’s company all provide lessons that are learned from. Becoming the best role models may require parents to attend to their own relationships and there are many organisations able to support and advise in this task. For those, who lack role models in the family, this gap needs to be filled.

• The age old stereotype that men should not show their vulnerability or feelings must change. It’s great that attitudes to mental health are now changing; we need to see similar openness about
relationships so that people, especially young men, can get the advice they need from friends and/or professionals.

- We need to understand the impact of porn better and provide a counterbalance of fresh perspectives on intimate relationships. Pornography is more accessible than ever and viewed regularly by many young men. A polarised response of condemnation or acceptance is not good enough. Two thirds of adults in Britain (and this includes the young men's parents, teachers and others with a concern for their future wellbeing) think the internet makes young people's expectations about sex unrealistic. If we talk openly with young men about porn, the most effective advocates and antidote to the false reality and expectations of porn are likely to be the young men themselves.

There is no shortage of energy, passion, compassion, creativity or hunger for a better future. Getting relationships right at an early stage, learning the important lessons in safe and healthy ways, working out how to be happy in relationships and be a source of happiness for others – these are all enabled by helping young men to talk about their relationships and draw on the wisdom and experience of others. There is a clear opportunity to make young men’s digital experience a vehicle for learning, growth and social change.

But for now, technology is far more likely to be used to access porn than advice or support. Social media can exacerbate pressures through sexting or the wide sharing of embarrassing episodes and does not always enable honest supportive communication. Technology doesn't have to be just the purveyor of the false reality of porn or Instagram bragging, the power to bully, or to turn partners into swipeable commodities. It can be the enabler of communication that empowers, connects, skills, inspires and supports. It is the medium through which young men can challenge those aspects of culture that place hurdles in the way of finding happiness in relationships.

The last word, though, rests with the young men themselves:

It’s a bit awkward when you go to your mum “I’m having a shit relationship, can you give me some advice?”

FASTN is therefore leveraging digital media to reach, inform and inspire young men to achieve the healthy relationships to which they aspire. The pathway to creating healthy relationships can be complicated. There are few instant wins or unsurmountable losses. Relationships require work and people need to be able to fail. We need to change a culture where relationship difficulties and endings are evaded. It's time to harness the potential of digital media to share with and learn from each other.
Being in a relationship is more than an update to your status. It can be brilliant. It can also be tough. It’s complicated...

There are no new mistakes to make in relationships, nor undiscovered recipes for success. There are plenty of organisations, local and national, dedicated to providing support or relationships education yet that support, advice and inspiration is not always visible or accessible in the crowded digital lives of those aged 16-25.

Status is working with this age group because it is a formative developmental stage for the skills, attitudes and behaviours that will shape the health and quality of the relationships that form the majority of people’s adult lives. It’s the first project of FASTN, the Family Stability Network, a group of not-for-profits who passionately believe that everyone has the potential to experience fulfilling, stable relationships, if they have the know-how.

We believe that success in life’s greatest endeavour will, ultimately, be rooted in recognising four key lessons:

1. **That healthy and stable relationships which last are good for you (and for children).** The young men admired the longevity of their grandparents’ relationships and others who had worked through difficulties. Understanding the benefits, as well as the costs of relationships going wrong, underpins the belief that working at and investing in relationships and developing the essential skills is well worth doing – and possible.

2. **Not just good for you, but also fun and enjoyable.** The long term can seem a long time away. Investing in relationships can feel a bit like starting a pension – it’s sensible but there are more fun things to do with your time and money right now. Stable relationships sound a bit dull whilst ‘settling down’ might be the end of fun and freedom. But you don’t have to be a Bridget Jones to find the pressures of dating and hook-ups leaving an unfulfilled desire for secure intimacy and a recognition that there are many experiences that are a lot more fun when shared.
3. **Choosing well matters**, and it isn’t the superficial features of a Tinder profile that really count. But believing there is one perfect candidate out there who is the perfect complement and meets every need is a recipe for disappointment. Young adults need the confidence to choose who to spend their lives with.

4. **Beyond choosing there is deciding that you are a couple with a future together.** Drifting, or sliding, into relationships means that you can get stuck in a not very good relationship as it’s much harder to leave someone you’re living with than to stop dating someone (though even that is something people can find very difficult and do badly).

For the younger age group which this report has focused on these beliefs may be being formed, but they are also lessons for the future. The immediate demands are learning the core skills of relationships, understanding themselves and others.
Our work is based around a website statusonline.org and social media engagement through facebook.com/statusonlineofficial, instagram.com/onlinestatus and twitter.com/heystatusonline.

Through these we are encouraging young people to voice their hopes and fears, share experiences, and to connect them with the resources, tools and insights that will equip them to build healthy relationships that last.