# Title

Understanding the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ youth

# Speaker information

* Kamil Sterniczuk (Interviewer) (Kamil)
* Liam Spencer (Speaker) (Liam)

# Description

To coincide with Pride Month in the UK, this episode of 'Public Health Research and Me' sees host and public partner [Kamil Sterniczuk](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Ffuse.ac.uk%2Fpublicinvolvement%2Fmeetapublicpartner%2Fkamilsterniczuk.html&data=05%7C02%7Celeanor.anderson%40newcastle.ac.uk%7Cd7947f2a03e44ffbd5e508dc9056884d%7C9c5012c9b61644c2a91766814fbe3e87%7C1%7C0%7C638543948535500264%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=e4dsoA0nwZCkF4kQLpo1CaZt4blj7zkRmTGEgqUZdSw%3D&reserved=0" \o "https://fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/meetapublicpartner/kamilsterniczuk.html) interview Fuse researcher [Liam Spencer](https://www.ncl.ac.uk/medical-sciences/people/profile/liamspencer1.html) about his work on the topic of mental health of LGBTQ+ young people.

# Contact

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Fuse Podcast: Public Health Research and Me

Transcript

Interviewer: INT

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[Start of recording]

[upbeat electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:05]

00:00:05 Kamil Hello, and welcome to our podcast, *Public Health Research and Me*. This podcast is led by public partners from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, and brings together the five Northeast universities of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside in a unique collaboration to deliver worldclass research to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities. Fuse is also a founding member of NIHR School for Public Health Research. My name is Kamil Sterniczuk and I’m a public partner collaborating with Fuse on creating this podcast. Today I’m going to be talking with Liam Spencer, who is a research assistant at Newcastle University, about his research relating to LGBTQ+ young people’s mental health, particularly in school environments. Welcome, Liam.

00:01:00 Liam Hi, thank you very much for having me.

00:01:04 Kamil Before we get started, could you please explain what we mean by LGBTQ+?

00:01:08 Liam Yeah, absolutely. I think it’s really important because we don’t want to kind of blind people with acronyms, and I know there’s sort of multiple variations of this that exist, different terminologies. But we decided to use LGBTQ+ for this project. We thought that it was quite an inclusive term to use. So it stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and then we’ve included the plus there as well to kind of include more identities that people might choose to identify as. So, yeah, that’s what we went for throughout this project.

00:01:45 Kamil Thank you, that’s helpful.

00:01:46 Liam No worries.

00:01:47 Kamil Please tell us about your background and how you came to research?

00:01:51 Liam So I guess it was a little bit by accident really. So for my undergrad, I studied psychology, and prior to that and during my studies I worked as a youth worker for different third sector organisations and local authorities. And that kind of helped me to develop an interest particularly around children and young people and mental health. And when it came to the end of my undergrad studies, I was kind of looking around for a kind of graduate job. And I saw one advertised which was at Newcastle University and it was working on a randomised, control trial with—working with fourteen to seventeen year olds in A&E. And I thought, oh well, I’ve kind of got that kind of young people’s experience and I’ve got the relevant degree. So I applied for it. And it was a six month post, it was part time, but I’ve been there ever since. So that was nine and a half years ago. So I’ve been at Newcastle University since then working on a variety of different projects. I did my master’s part-time whilst working and I’m currently coming to the end of my PhD, which I’ve been doing by publication alongside my work. So, yeah, it was kind of a little bit of an accident, but a happy accident, I suppose.

00:03:04 Kamil Brilliant. So it seems that you have a lot of experience and everything aligned for you, worked out.

00:03:10 Liam Mhm.

00:03:11 Kamil Can you tell me a little bit about the project you are working on at the minute?

00:03:16 Liam Absolutely. So I’ve been very fortunate, for the past two years I’ve had an ARC Mental Health Fellowship—so, the Applied Research Collaboration for the Northeast and North Cumbria. And what that’s allowed me to do really is have a little bit of flexibility in terms of the type of projects that I’ve been able to get involved with. So the idea of the ARC Mental Health Fellows is to build research capacity within the region for mental health. So I’ve been able to work on a variety of different projects. One looking at trailblazers, so that was a new pilot scheme in schools looking at improving mental health for children and young people. Another school-based project looking at developing teaching around autism for teachers within mainstream schools. And then also quite a lot of the work that I’ve been involved with has been to do with the School for Public Health Research. And then the public mental health programme. So I’ve been very lucky to work on quite a few different projects linked to that programme, particularly around school-based provision for mental health. So looking at children and young people’s mental health, which is my main sort of research interest. And yeah, by kind of chance again, I suppose, I was lucky enough to be asked to be part of this project led by Professor Liz McDermott looking at LGBTQ+ young people in schools and how we can improve their mental health.

00:04:37 Kamil Yeah, it seems you’ve done a lot so far.

00:04:40 Liam Yeah, it’s been busy. [laughs]

00:04:44 Kamil [laughs] What drew you into looking at mental health of LGBTQ+ schoolchildren?

00:04:50 Liam Mhm. Well, I suppose, as I said, you know, school-based mental health provision, early intervention and prevention is kind of my main area of interest. So that immediately kind of was an attractive proposition to me. You know, we know that LGBTQ+ young people are at greater risk of having poorer mental health than their peers. So it’s obviously really relevant, really important. That was another kind of motivating factor for being involved. I think as well just being a member of that community myself, it’s sort of of personal relevance and personal interest. Obviously it was a while since I was at school, but you know, some of those things, I think, still resonate, and things that were relevant then are still relevant now. You know, also a fantastic opportunity to work with colleagues from other universities, other parts of the country, work with Liz McDermott, who’s, you know, a really big name in the field. And I think, you know, some of the discourse in kind of the media and on social media around LGBTQ+ issues recently has become quite divisive, which I think again makes it harder for young people living through that, and also makes it a really important sort of area to look into further. So I guess a combination of those things was why I really wanted to get involved.

00:06:09 Kamil I agree. It’s so difficult to be a teenager these days—

00:06:12 Liam Mhm.

00:06:13 Kamil —with pressure coming from all directions.

00:06:16 Liam Absolutely.

00:06:17 Kamil What changes, if any, have you made your research after hearing from people with lived experience?

00:06:24 Liam So this was really important to us, actually. The project that we undertook looking specifically at LGBTQ+ young people’s mental health had kind of two parts. So it was a realist project, which means that we kind of try to pick apart the black box of interventions. So we’re looking at what works, for whom, why, and in what context? And so the first part of the project really was to look at all the literature around different types of intervention and support that’s available within schools for LGBTQ+ young people, and then kind of formulate a model based upon that. And kind of we wanted to propose what we thought could make the situation better for those children and young people. And then the second part of that really was about the engagement. So we interviewed children and young people, intervention practitioners, and school staff. 00:07:21 And the whole aim of that phase of the project was to take the model that we had developed in the first stage and refine it, develop it based on what those voices were saying—those people who had that lived experience and had that expert knowledge, so we could make sure that what we were proposing was relevant, could be applied, and wasn’t just something that was coming purely from academic literature. Because that’s not always, you know, the most helpful way to translate things into practice. So we really wanted to ensure that we had those voices included in what we were publishing.

00:08:00 Kamil Thank you. Any ideas how we can improve things?

00:08:04 Liam Yeah. So, at the moment, the point that we got the model to was obviously this phase of redevelopment and refinement. And, you know, that’s published now, and we have this model out there that, you know, we hope will grow and will continue and will be kind of developed more and investigated more with more stakeholders. But the kind of the crux of it was three causal pathways that we think might improve mental health within schools for LGBTQ+ young people. So the first one is around delivering interventions that promote LGBTQ+ visibility and facilitate usualising, school belonging, and recognition. The second part is interventions for talking and support that develop a sense of safety, and also coping strategies that children and young people can use. And thirdly, interventions that address institutional school culture. So this is a really big one and school culture is really hard to change; it’s a really a—kind of a slow changing process. 00:09:09 But, for example, things like staff training and having very inclusive policies within schools that foster school belonging, empowerment, recognition, and safety. So essentially our model suggests that providing a school environment that affirms and usualises LGBTQ+ identities and promotes that school safety and belonging can improve mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people. So that’s really what we’re hoping with the work that we’ve published so far.

00:09:44 Kamil That sounds great, that sounds very thorough. And where do you see the areas for further research in terms of the mental health of LGBTQ+ children?

00:09:58 Liam So I think probably one of the limitations that we had throughout this work was that an awful lot of it was done during still some remnants of the COVID-19 pandemic. So obviously school for all young people than was different to what it was before and to what it is now. So that limited us in terms of how much we could get into schools and how many young people we could actually access. So I think what we would really like to do now is to test this model in practice, in this new kind of post-COVID-19 world that we live in. So that would really be around undertaking further consultation with some of those key stakeholders again. You know, of course children and young people, school staff, those people who work specifically in LGBTQ+ charities and organisations that deliver interventions in schools and other youth organisations. But yeah, really capturing the voices of those with lived experience to see how this model could be adapted in different contexts. 00:10:56 So, you know, as part of that model, obviously, I mentioned that we have three kind of causal pathways. And we’ve proposed different ways in which things could be brought into schools that could improve situations. Things like having sessions run—dedicated sessions for children and young people who might be struggling with their sexuality or their gender identity. Having really visible displays around schools, normalising conversations around LGBTQ+ issues. And we’re not saying that all schools should try and incorporate all of those components into what they deliver. It’s really about what suits each school’s context and each school’s circumstances. So we hope that by taking this forward, undertaking, you know, further research, more consultation with those relevant people, we could perhaps develop a practical guide that, you know, people within schools can look at and say, “Oh well, actually that would work really well for us,” or, “This bit would work nicely.” So we want it to be flexible and we want it to be relevant to all types of schools. really.

00:12:05 Kamil So in a way you want to give them a repository of available tools which they could adapt to their own circumstances.

00:12:14 Liam Yeah, definitely, and I think one of the strengths of this work is that, you know, it’s informed by academic literature, but we’ve also been through a lot of different stages of developing and refining our model and speaking to relevant people and including their lived experience in that. So I think that’s the biggest strength of it, and I think the flexibility of it is really nice so that, as I say, you know, schools can hopefully adapt it to their own contexts.

00:12:43 Kamil That sounds great. If you had the one message for our listeners to take away, what would it be?

00:12:50 Liam That’s a really interesting question. I think, you know, being a young person is tough in any circumstance. Being at school can be really tough for a lot of children and young people. But also school can provide an opportunity, you know, for meaningful change. It—you know, schools are a place where the majority of children and young people spend most of their time. You know, Monday to Friday, all day. There’s an opportunity there to kind of improve things for those people and create a culture and an environment that’s supportive and inclusive. So if we can do that, if we can harness the power that already exists within schools—you know, there’s some fantastic people working in schools, people working in external organisations into schools, you know, that we’ve been fortunate to engage with throughout this project. So we know they’re out there. But we also know that schools face multiple challenges in terms of a lack of staffing, a lack of costs—you know, not having enough money to do exactly what they want to do. Not having enough time. 00:13:56 So we’re aware of those challenges. But I think, you know, if we’re aware of them and we’re also aware of what we have got and the positives and the facilitators that we have, then hopefully that can lead to better environments and, you know, better mental health and emotional wellbeing for children and young people. And that can only be a good thing. So I think—I know that’s not a very snappy kind of message for listeners, but I guess it’s just being aware of what we’ve got and using it to the best of our abilities.

00:14:29 Kamil I remember when I was in school, it felt like eternity, and it felt like a full-time job, because you had to juggle so many things.

00:14:40 Liam It does, and I think it—you know, it’s interesting how, you know, that time does feel like it goes on forever. And then when it stops, life flashes by in an instant. So I think young people should be encouraged to know that it is a small but important part of their lives. If we can make it as easy as possible for them then that’s a good thing. That’s what we should all aim for, I think. I’d just like to say as well, it’s a real honour for me, and I’d like to say thank you very much for asking me to take part in this podcast during Pride Month in the UK. Obviously it’s a really important subject to me but to a lot of other people as well. So I hope that people have found this interesting, finding out about the work that we’ve been doing. Of course if people would like to find out more, there’s some links attached to the podcast about the publications that we’ve put out there. I produced a blog for Fuse as well about the work we’ve been doing. And if people want to get in touch, find out more, they can do that through Fuse, or of course through X, formerly known as Twitter. I think you can find my handle somewhere in the details and get in touch with me that way. But yeah, I just wanted to say thank you very much.

00:15:47 Kamil Thank you Liam. Thank you for talking to us. [upbeat electronic music fades in] So if you are a fan of our Public Health Research and Me podcast, please subscribe on your preferred streaming platform. Let us know how we are doing with a rating or review, and share with your friends, family, colleagues, and networks. Thank you and we’ll see you next time. [music fades out]

[End of recording]