

A grounded theory study explaining female adolescents’ behaviour in the sun

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Introduction

Sun exposure is a major preventable risk factor for melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers and so is sunburn in childhood.¹

Internationally and historically it has been recognised that knowing about sun safety may not lead to behaviour change or lower incidence of sunburn² and that young people are difficult to reach with health promoting messages.³

The Study Aim

To explore the sun-related experiences of young women and to develop a grounded theory explaining their behaviours in the sun

Methods

Qualitative grounded theory methodology

Detailed consideration of ethical and access issues

Purposive and theoretical sampling

Two school and two youth work settings

Main method of data collection was semi-structured interview

In-depth one-to-one and group interviews with twenty young women aged 14-17 years old to explore their sun-related experiences

Data were analysed using the constant comparative data analysis.

Data collection, analysis and theory generation took place concurrently.

Findings

Five categories of findings originated from the data :

Slipping Up, Being Physically Comfortable, Fitting In, Being Myself and Being Comfortable (the core category).

The factors influencing the young women and impacting on their sun safety were complex and a strong theme was comfort (physical and/or psychosocial comfort) for example:

- Participants avoided sunburn but suffered from it because they either misjudged environmental conditions or forgot to protect themselves in the sun.
- Participants avoided feeling uncomfortably hot in the sun through planning or by reacting spontaneously to discomfort. Activities they engaged in spontaneously did not necessarily support sun safety.
- Perceptions that appearance influences a person’s social acceptability meant that behaviours and ‘looks’ were adopted to enable conformity to the appearance agenda, however this was not the case for everyone; self-confidence and learning from negative experiences of sunburn were also influential.

The Theory

The core category of Being Comfortable underpinned the theory that when in the sun, young women direct their activities toward meeting their physical and psychosocial comfort needs. Each individual has different priorities at any particular time as to whether these are psychosocial and/or physical. Activities inclined to compromise physical and/or psychosocial comfort are avoided, whereas those likely to maintain or enhance comfort are adopted. Sun safe activity is relevant and appropriate when it helps an individual to feel comfortable or at least, does not hinder their comfort.⁴

Conclusions

The grounded theory explains the sun-related activities of young women in terms of their comfort needs and it challenges assumptions that they necessarily take risks. It also explains the poor sun-protection practices highlighted in the literature. The issues are complex and there are implications for primary skin cancer prevention interventions for example consideration of a holistic conception of health is indicated. Although UK based, the theory and findings from this study appear to be transferable to other countries where sun exposure and skin cancer prevention are issues.

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