

A study evaluating the Steps programme, a school-based programme for boys in Key Stage 3 to prevent gender-based violence

Submission date 20/04/2026	Recruitment status Recruiting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prospectively registered <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Protocol
Registration date 23/04/2026	Overall study status Ongoing	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistical analysis plan <input type="checkbox"/> Results
Last Edited 23/04/2026	Condition category Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual participant data <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

Gender-based violence includes harmful behaviours, abuse and violence linked to gender. In the UK, there is growing concern about misogyny, harmful gender stereotypes, and unhealthy relationship behaviours among boys and young men. There is also concern about how social media can expose children to harmful messages about women and girls.

Steps is a school-based programme developed by Salford Foundation for boys in Years 7 to 9. It aims to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes, increase awareness of misogyny, support healthy relationships, and build boys' confidence to step in or seek help when harmful behaviour happens.

This study aims to find out whether Steps works under ideal conditions. In particular, it will test whether boys who receive Steps show improved perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes compared with boys who continue with their normal lessons. The study will also look at whether the programme affects related outcomes such as bystander confidence, attitudes to harmful online behaviour, emotional and behavioural wellbeing, and positive behaviours towards peers and family. Alongside this, the study will explore how the programme is delivered in practice and whether there are any unintended or negative effects.

Who can participate?

Boys aged 11 to 14 in Years 7, 8 and 9 attending secondary schools, including alternative provision, in Greater Manchester.

Steps is a universal programme, meaning it is intended for all boys in the relevant year group rather than only those identified as high risk. Boys will not take part if their parent or carer chooses to opt them out.

What does the study involve?

This is a two-arm parallel cluster randomised controlled trial. In plain English, this means whole school year groups, rather than individual boys, will be allocated at random to one of two groups:

1. the Steps group
 2. the control group, who will continue with business as usual, meaning their normal lessons
- Steps is delivered in schools in small groups of around 20 boys. It includes six weekly sessions

lasting about 60 minutes. The sessions cover topics such as gender stereotypes, misogyny, online harms, algorithms and social media, healthy relationships, consent, and being an active bystander.

Boys in both groups will be asked to complete questionnaires so the research team can compare outcomes between those who received Steps and those who did not. The main outcome is boys' perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes. Other outcomes include confidence to act as an active bystander, attitudes towards harmful online actions, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and prosocial behaviour.

The study also includes an implementation and process evaluation. This means the researchers will look at how the programme was delivered, what helped or got in the way, and whether some groups of boys experienced the programme differently.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?

Possible benefits are that boys who take part in Steps may develop healthier views about gender, become more aware of misogyny and harmful online content, and feel more confident about responding positively in difficult situations. The study may also help build much-needed evidence about what works to prevent gender-based violence in schools.

The main risk is that some of the topics discussed, such as misogyny, relationships, consent, prejudice, or harmful experiences, may feel sensitive or upsetting for some boys. To reduce this risk, Steps is delivered by trained staff and schools' usual safeguarding and pastoral systems remain in place. If concerns arise, school safeguarding procedures will be followed. Salford Foundation and the schools will work together to ensure appropriate support is available.

Where is the study run from?

The study is being run in secondary schools across Greater Manchester.

The programme is delivered by Salford Foundation. The independent evaluation is being carried out by Cordis Bright.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?

May 2026 to February 2029.

Who is funding the study?

The Youth Endowment Fund (UK).

Who is the main contact?

1. Dr Jade Farrell, jadefarrell@cordisbright.co.uk
2. Dr Stephen Boxford, stephenboxford@cordisbright.co.uk

Contact information

Type(s)

Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

Contact name

Dr Jade Farrell (nee Morris)

ORCID ID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1900-3001>

Contact details

23-24 Smithfield Street
London
United Kingdom
EC1A 9LF
+44 20 7330 9170
jadefarrell@cordisbright.co.uk

Type(s)

Scientific, Principal investigator, Public

Contact name

Dr Stephen Boxford

Contact details

Cordis Bright, 23-24 Smithfield Street
London
United Kingdom
EC1A 9LF
+44 20 7330 9170
stephenboxford@cordisbright.co.uk

Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title

An efficacy cluster randomised controlled trial of the Steps programme, a universal school-based gender-based violence prevention intervention for boys in Key Stage 3, compared to business as usual (normal lessons), assessing impacts on perceptions of harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes

Acronym

Steps

Study objectives

Among boys aged 11–14, does a universal, classroom-based, manualised programme designed to improve perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes, promote healthy relationships, and build confidence to act as active bystanders, compared to business as usual, lead to measurable improvements in boys' perceptions about gender norms and traditional stereotypes?

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)

approved 20/03/2026, University of Portsmouth Research Ethics Committee (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Portsmouth, Rm LB3.14 Milldam Building, Burnaby Road, Portsmouth, PO1 3AS, United Kingdom; -; simon.kolstoe@port.ac.uk), ref: 26/ETHICS/018

Primary study design

Interventional

Allocation

Randomized controlled trial

Masking

Blinded (masking used)

Control

Active

Assignment

Parallel

Purpose

Prevention

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Reduce gender-based violence in boys in Year 7, 8 and 9.

Interventions

Steps is a manualised, classroom-based programme delivered to boys aged 11 to 14 years old, which aligns with the statutory PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) or RSE (relationships and sex education) curriculum. The programme is designed to reduce GBV by supporting boys to:

- Improved perceptions about traditional gender norms and stereotypes.
- Recognise, understand and reject harmful misogynistic attitudes, content, language and behaviours (online and offline) and other risky and harmful behaviours,
- Understand how online content and algorithms shape beliefs and can amplify misogyny.
- Build confidence and intent to be an active bystander.

The intervention consists of six weekly sessions (60 minutes), delivered to boys (around 20 per group) by trained Steps facilitators.

The curriculum has been designed to complement the core elements of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum that all schools follow. The Steps team prioritises covering the core content for each session; however, additional topics may naturally arise in conversation, and the trained, experienced, Steps facilitators (youth workers) will support and encourage broader discussions.

The weekly content includes:

- Week 1: Gender Stereotypes, Internalisation, and Misogyny. Boys are introduced to the Steps programme's three key concepts which lay the foundations for later sessions. A simple input–output model is presented to show how socialisation (inputs) can shape internal beliefs and lead to outward behaviours (outputs). Boys are made aware of how gender stereotypes have a negative impact on their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of other people.
- Week 2: Awareness of and supporting those affected by (online) misogyny. Boys are made aware of misogyny as a prevalent social issue that affects women and girls. They are informed of how misogyny can be directed at women and girls in online spaces. Through a fictional scenario, boys reflect on how they might respond to female peers if they are impacted by online misogyny. Using elements of being an active bystander, boys are informed of healthy responses

to supporting their female peers.

- Week 3: Our online diet and our safety online. Using the Steps input/output model, boys are encouraged to reflect on how their consumption of online content affects their wellbeing. Boys learn about how misogynistic content creators intentionally make content that, on the surface, appears to seek to help men and boys, but in reality, contains divisive and provocative content, as this boosts online engagement.
- Week 4: Algorithms and social media. Boys are shown the basic mechanism of how social media prioritises what content is shown to them and how consistent engagement with misogynistic content increases the likelihood of social media algorithms presenting more misogynistic content. Boys are informed of how they can maintain a healthy online diet through reducing their time online, using digital wellbeing tools, and actively avoiding engagement with misogynistic or negative content.
- Week 5: Healthy relationships and being an active bystander. Boys reflect on how healthy relationships with their peers and family can be maintained through respecting people's choices, identities, and boundaries. Boys are made aware that misogynistic beliefs make relationships unhealthy, which links back to discussions in previous weeks about being conscious of how harmful messaging shapes behaviours and expectations of others. Boys are informed of what should be considered to ensure that affirmative consent is being expressed and obtained in platonic relationships (e.g. resisting peer pressure and negative values within platonic relationships). Using scenario-based activities, boys respond to examples of consent and boundaries being disrespected by using the active bystander model. Boys are encouraged to consider their safety and seek help from trusted adults if they witness misogynistic behaviours in public.
- Week 6: Survey and debrief. Once the boys complete the follow-up/T2 evaluation survey, they are encouraged to ask any questions or share reflections about their experiences throughout the previous week.

Randomisation

The trial includes random allocation at the school year level. The trial will use a restricted block design to ensure balance across trial arms and year groups. This means each school will be allocated to one of six predefined randomisation sequences, with three sequences assigning one year group to the intervention, and three sequences assigning two-year groups to the intervention.

In practice, this design means that across the 54-year groups in the trial, 27-year groups will be allocated to the treatment group, and 27 to the control group. Each year group (Year 7, Year 8, Year 9) will appear 18 times across the trial, with exactly half (n=9) allocated to intervention and half (n=9) to control.

Intervention Type

Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)

1. Young people's perceptions about gender norms measured using self-report survey Global Early Adolescent Study Gender Stereotypical Traits (GEAS-GST) at baseline (T1), 6-week follow-up (T2), 6-month follow-up (T3)

Key secondary outcome(s)

1. Attitudes toward cyberbullying measured using self-report Cyberbullying Attitude Scale at baseline (T1), 6-week follow-up (T2), 6-month follow-up (T3)

2. Emotional, behavioral, and peer problems, alongside prosocial strengths measured using self-report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at baseline (T1), 6-week follow-up (T2), 6-month follow-up (T3)

3. Confidence in performing bystander behaviours measured using self-report Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale at baseline (T1), 6-week follow-up (T2), 6-month follow-up (T3)

Completion date

28/02/2029

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria

All boys in Year 7, 8 and 9 (Key Stage 3) aged 11-14 years old attending secondary education including alternative provision in Greater Manchester.

Healthy volunteers allowed

Yes

Age group

Child

Lower age limit

10 years

Upper age limit

14 years

Sex

Male

Total final enrolment

0

Key exclusion criteria

1. Boys not in Key Stage 3 (i.e. in Years 7, 8 or 9)
2. Girls
3. Schools outside of Greater Manchester

Date of first enrolment

04/05/2026

Date of final enrolment

30/06/2028

Locations

Countries of recruitment

United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre

Salford Foundation

3 Jo Steet

Salford

England

M5 4BD

Sponsor information

Organisation

Youth Endowment Fund

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name

Youth Endowment Fund

Alternative Name(s)

YouthEndowFund, YEF

Funding Body Type

Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype

Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location

United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study will be archived after the study in the YEF data archive (<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/evaluation-data-archive/>) and will be available to researchers on request.

IPD sharing plan summary

Available on request

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Participant information sheet	version 1	01/01/2026	22/04/2026	No	Yes
Protocol file		23/04/2026	23/04/2026	No	No