

Adolescent sexuality - a research update 2020.

Unless otherwise noted, the primary reference for this research update is the *Sixth National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018*ⁱ. The survey involved over 6,327 students enrolled in Years 10, 11 and 12 from the Government, Catholic and Independent school systems and from every jurisdiction in Australia. This report includes a detailed description of the 2018 data analysed by gender. For the first time in addition to “female” and “male,” the report includes results for people who identify as trans and gender diverse (TGD). However, the number of responses from TGD participants were too small to be tested statistically. Therefore, statistical differences reported throughout the report only apply to comparisons between male participants and female participants.

Information on Harmful Sexual Behaviours and Child Sexual Abuse are largely from the Australian Institute of Family Studies report *Problem sexual behaviours and sexually abusive behaviours in Australian children and young people*ⁱⁱ and Institute of Child Protection Studies *Research into Practice: Safeguarding principles for residential care and youth justice*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research with young people repeatedly finds they want more guidance on sexuality in the context of relationships, rather than a sole focus on reproductive biology and sexually transmissible infections. Young people want to talk about love and emotions, how to deal with real-life situations, how to get to know someone, and even how to break up. Interestingly, in all major surveys of school-based sexuality education, young people identify the absence of diverse sexual and gender identities. Young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender say they feel excluded from school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

Excitingly, the research also tells us what makes great RSE^{iv}. We know that it makes a difference in promoting better health and wellbeing by building children, young people’s and adults’ capacities to talk about this fundamental aspect of being human.

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Sexual Activity

Sexually active young people:

Vaginal Sex

44% have had vaginal sex (32% by Year 10, 52% by Year 12).

Anal Sex

12% have had anal sex (8% by Year 10, 16% by Year 12).

Oral Sex

51% have had oral sex (39% by Year 10, 61% by Year 12).

Of those who have had sex most had positive feelings after sex. Younger students were less likely to say it was positive.

Not yet sexually active:

53.4% had not had sex and didn't feel regretful about their decision (88.9%), weren't feeling much pressure from partners or peers to have sex (91.2%), and wanted to be "in love" when they did (78.2%).

75% of Year 10 and 50% of Year 12 students have not had sexual intercourse (defined as anal and vaginal sex).

Those who had not had sex, had positive feelings about not having sex – they were happy with their choice because they weren't ready for sex.

Results of the Sixth National Survey provide a picture of teenagers demonstrating similar sexual behaviours to those in previous surveys.

Sexually active students were largely having sex in their homes with a boyfriend or girlfriend who was about the same age as them. Most reported discussing having sex and protecting their sexual health (76.9%) prior to having sex, were using condoms (56.9%) and/or oral contraception (41.0%), and felt good about their last sexual experience.

Victorian datav:

5% of Year 8 students have had sexual intercourse.

Students in regional Victoria were significantly more likely to have had sex (20%) compared to metropolitan students (13%).

Among sexually active Year 11 students, the mean age of sexual initiation was 15.3 years old.

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Sexual and Gender Identity

Sexual Identity National data:

11% of young men and 4.9% of young women reported sexual attraction mostly or only to people of the same sex.

3.3% of young men and 8.7% of young women were equally attracted to people of both sexes

67% of young men were only attracted to females.

55% of young women were only attracted to males.

Among same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people:

61% reported verbal abuse.

18% physical abuse.

62% 'other' forms of abuse (Hillier et al. 2010).

80% of those who were abused name 'school' as the location of abuse, an increased rate from previous studies (Hillier et al, 2010)

Young people report that sex education continues to leave out mention of LGBTIQ relationships and identities. We can include diverse sexualities and genders by using gender-neutral pronouns.

We can support young people's mental health and wellbeing through enabling youth activism. Research with trans and gender-diverse young people has found that engagement in activism has an immediate impact on their wellbeing and social outcomes. Even 'passive' activities such as tick-a-box support for a public opinion survey have a positive effect on a young person. More obvious action such as Wear It Purple Day have even stronger positive outcomes. ^{vi}

There is consistent evidence that bisexual people have poorer mental health than heterosexual people, gay men or lesbians, but the reasons for this remain largely unknown. ^{vii}

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Sex and Consent

National Data:

A disturbingly high number of young people who had had sex, had experienced unwanted sex (28.4%).

However the vast majority (93.2%) reported that their last sexual event was wanted.

More young women (36.8%) than young men (15.9%) had experienced unwanted sex.

Reasons for unwanted sex:

- Pressure from a partner (53%)
- Being drunk (34% - a significant decrease from the 2014 result of 49%)
- "I was frightened" (31.4%).^{viii}

Young people with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and assault, as are young people in Out of Home Care.

Nonconsensual sex is not always perpetrated by an older person. There is increasing concern around peer-on-peer abuse.^{ix}

More than half of transgender and gender diverse Australians have been victims of sexual violence or coercion - almost four times the rate of the general population.^x

'Unwanted sex' is a very broad term. It could include child sexual abuse to sex-I-wish-I-hadn't-had. There is a strong likelihood that some of these young people would not understand that being frightened into sex constitutes sexual coercion and assume that rape is more physically violent.

The majority of young people know the basic legal facts about sexual consent but are less sure how to deal with real-life pressure.

Gendered assumptions such as blaming girls for 'getting themselves in the situation' or presuming males' entitlements to female bodies can mask and complicate young people's understandings of ethical (and legal) behaviours.

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Sexual Health

National Data - Pregnancy:

3.5% of sexually active students reported that they had sex that resulted in pregnancy.

Some young people are more likely to become pregnant in their teens than others: young women with disabilities, indigenous young women, young women living in disadvantaged areas and remote areas, and young women who identify as same-sex attracted.

National Data - Sexually Transmissible Infections:

1.6% of young men and 2.7% of young women report that they have ever been diagnosed with an STI. ^{xiii}

Australia has significantly increased the number of young people vaccinated against Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and is the first country to document substantial declines in HPV infection, genital warts and cervical precancer

The last decade has seen record increases in STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis in Victoria. The majority of new infections remain undiagnosed.

There has been a slight increase in HIV cases among young men who have sex with men.

Condoms remain the most accessible form of prevention. For people at high-risk aged over 18, anti-HIV medications (PrEP and PEP) are available that are 99% effective preventing the transmission of HIV.

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Social Media Use

National Data:

At the time, most students used SnapChat, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook every day or most days.

7.7% used a dating app, mainly males using Yubo or Tinder

'Sexting':

44% had received a nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else

32% sent a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video

Most messages or images were sent between people in a relationship (Fisher et al, 2019).

Of those who had sent nudes, 22% had sent them to 'someone I just met' or 'a stranger'.

Of those who had received nudes, 42% were from to 'someone I just met' or 'a stranger'.

Sexting is a common aspect of contemporary young sex lives. Most often within relationships or friendships.

Younger students, especially girls (Year 8) are more upset by the sexual and sexting pressures they face and feel less able to say no.

The pressure to participate comes from peers rather than strangers and primarily boys harass girls. Few teens wish to be excluded, but to take part is to be under pressure – to look right, perform, compete, judge and be judged. ^{xv}

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Child Sexual Abuse

The Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, reports that certain characteristics may increase children's vulnerability to sexual abuse:

- pre-adolescent females aged 8-13
- boys are also frequently abused
- children with a disability
- children with previous experience of maltreatment such as neglect or family violence
- children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. ^{xvi}

In advice to the residential care and youth justice sectors Higgins & Battaglia (2019) wrote: Sex education is an effective protective factor in preventing child abuse. Children and young people need to be aware of their bodies and understand normal human sexual development as well as issues of consent, control, respect, and boundaries in respectful relationships. ^{xvii}

Higgins and Moore (2019) recommend training about typical sexual development to be able to talk about sexuality, relationships, safety, and help-seeking in developmentally appropriate and safe ways. ^{xviii}

Problem Sexual Behaviours and Sexually Abusive Behaviours

Australian studies find that 30-60% of all experiences of childhood sexual abuse are carried out by children and young people who exhibit PSBs and SABs; however, accurate statistics are difficult to obtain.

Children and young people who demonstrate such behaviours are themselves in need of therapeutic support.

Only a small number of children and young people with adverse childhood experiences will exhibit PSBs and SABs. ^{xix}

Young people who had completed Harmful Sexual Behaviour treatment were interviewed to find out what might have prevented their harmful sexual behaviour. ^{xx}

The young people said that sexuality education delivered in both mainstream and specialised schools for children with intellectual disabilities could have helped prevent their harmful behaviours. They said they needed to know what was ok and what wasn't by the age of 11 (before their abusive behaviour).

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Sexually Explicit Material Online, Including Pornography

The 9-12 year-old age range marks an important stage in the beginning of riskier internet behaviour. ^{xxi}

Older teens say they are less upset by online porn but there is growing evidence that identifies a relationship between viewing pornography and violent or abusive behaviour in young men aged 14 to 17. Boys who regularly watch online pornography are significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes

Children should receive education about what to do in response to finding explicit sexual material online by age 9 at the latest. ^{xxiii}

The most popular and accessible pornography has messages about sex, gender, power and pleasure that are deeply problematic. Physical and verbal aggression is predominantly done by men to women. ^{xxiv}

Rather than focus on the sex acts per se, discussions with young people should help them identify power imbalances and alternative scripts for sexual negotiation on consent and safer sex.

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Relationships and Sexuality Information

National Data:

Years 10, 11 and 12 students were asked about sources of information for HIV and STIs, contraception, and sex in general. In that context, the most commonly used sources were:

- internet websites (78.7%)
- female friends (74.7%).

The least used sources included:

- school counsellors (9.5%)
- nurses (9.0%)
- youth workers (8.5%).

Research discusses the mismatch between young people's needs and what schools provide. Boys tend to be more critical of school-based education, saying that it is often addressed toward girls. Both LGBT and heterosexual students frequently describe hearing nothing that relates to their LGBT relationships ^{xxv}.

Young people would like more time spent on the complexities of relationships and emotions (for example, getting to know someone and/or breaking up), and dealing with sexual pressure.

School-based RSE and school-linked sexual health services are effective at improving sexual health. Young people who report lessons at school as their main source of information are:

- Less likely to have had unsafe sex in past year than those receiving most information from other (nonparental) sources.
- Tend to be older the first time they have sex.
- Less likely to report having had an STI diagnosis.
- Women more likely to report being 'sexually competent' the first time they have sex (ie, both partners are 'equally willing'; contraception used; not due to peer pressure, drunkenness or drugs; sex occurs at the perceived 'right time')
- Less likely to report non-volitional sex, abortion or distress about sex ^{xxvi}.

Walsh, J. Contemporary Context. 2020

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