



How is our sexuality education meeting students' needs?

Anne Mitchell and **Pamela Blackman** on the results of the fifth National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health

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A national survey of the sexual health of Australian secondary students has been carried out approximately every five years since 1992, each survey wave funded by the Australian Government Department of Health in order to provide accurate information to guide the work of health and education personnel. Researchers at The Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University in Melbourne again collected data in 2013 to gain an accurate picture of the sexual attitudes, knowledge and experiences of Australian young people. This is research has been widely used in the past and will be relied upon again to guide curriculum and program development in this important area of health education, particularly resources supporting the new *Australian Curriculum in Health and Physical Education*.

Over the years it has documented some important changes in the social and sexual worlds of young people. Each time a balancing takes place between existing and new questions. In this iteration new questions were added

about use of the internet, technology, and social media; attitudes toward fertility, reasons for virginity and experiences with sexuality and relationship education at school. In addition to Year 10 and 12 students, Year 11 students were also asked to participate for the first time since 1992, providing more detailed information about young people's sexual practices between the ages of 16 and 19.

A total of 2136 students from 436 government, Catholic and independent schools in all states and territories completed the survey. The majority of the students were recruited through schools but 36% of the final sample was recruited on line. In 2013 61% of the participants were female and 39% male.

Sexual behaviour

Levels of sexual activity were not vastly different from those found in previous surveys. Most students (69%) had experienced some form of sexual activity. Sixty-eight per cent of the sample had experienced deep kissing; approximately 50% sexual touching, and over

one-third of the sample had given or received oral sex. Thirty-three per cent of students reported having had sex with a condom and 24% without a condom. Finally, only 9% of the sample reported having had anal sex. It is important to note that, while most of the students are to a degree sexually active, around 30% have had no sexual experience at all. The challenge of accommodating the range of needs these data demonstrate remains a significant one for school programs.

Although most students who reported having had intercourse had only one sexual partner in the past year, a substantial proportion (39%) of students reported having sex with more than one person. A higher proportion of young men (28%) than young women (20%) reported having sex with three or more people in the past year.

Students were asked what forms of contraception, if any, were used at their last sexual encounter. Sexually active students most commonly used a condom (58%) and/or the contraceptive pill (39%) the last time they had

Table 1 Sexually active students who have *ever* had unwanted sex: reasons

	Males (n = 54)		Females (n = 124)		Total (n = 178)	
Too drunk	53.7%	(29/54)	46.8%	(58/124)	48.9%	(87/178)
Too high	24.1%	(13/54)	17.7%	(22/124)	19.7%	(35/178)
My partner thought I should	37.0%	(20/54)	60.5%	(75/124)	53.4%	(95/178)
My friends thought I should	22.2%	(12/54)	8.9%	(11/124)	12.9%	(23/178)
I was frightened	14.8%	(8/54)	33.9%	(42/124)	28.1%	(50/178)

Base: Sexually active students who have had unwanted sex. Note: Multiple response questions

Table 2 Non-sexually active students' *importance* ratings of reasons for not having sexual intercourse

Reasons*	Importance	Males (n = 256)		Females (n = 527)		Total (n = 783)	
I do not feel ready to have sexual intercourse	Not at all	14.1%	(36/255)	5.70%	(30/526)	8.5%	(66/781)
	Extremely	31.8%	(81/255)	63.9%	(336/526)	53.4%	(417/781)
Current (or last) partner is not willing	Not at all	19.1%	(48/251)	15.9%	(83/521)	17.0%	(131/772)
	Extremely	41.0%	(103/251)	51.6%	(269/521)	48.2%	(372/772)
I am proud I can say no and mean it	Not at all	13.4%	(34/254)	4.4%	(23/525)	7.3%	(57/779)
	Extremely	36.6%	(93/254)	62.1%	(326/525)	53.8%	(419/779)
Against my religious beliefs	Not at all	60.1%	(152/253)	45.1%	(237/525)	50.0%	(389/778)
	Extremely	14.2%	(36/253)	21.5%	(113/525)	19.2%	(149/778)
Against my cultural beliefs	Not at all	57.8%	(144/249)	43.4%	(227/523)	48.1%	(371/772)
	Extremely	9.2%	(23/249)	20.7%	(108/523)	17.0%	(131/772)
Fear of parental disapproval	Not at all	32.9%	(84/255)	22.4%	(117/523)	25.8%	(201/778)
	Extremely	14.1%	(36/255)	18.4%	(96/523)	17.0%	(132/778)
Fear of pregnancy	Not at all	23.5%	(59/251)	8.2%	(43/525)	13.1%	(102/776)
	Extremely	31.5%	(79/251)	39.1%	(205/525)	36.6%	(284/776)
Important not to have sex before marriage	Not at all	61.6%	(154/250)	44.7%	(234/524)	50.1%	(388/774)
	Extremely	13.6%	(34/250)	19.1%	(100/524)	17.3%	(134/774)
Fear of damaging reputation	Not at all	40.9%	(104/254)	28.9%	(150/520)	32.8%	(254/774)
	Extremely	11.8%	(30/254)	16.4%	(85/520)	14.9%	(115/774)
Not met a person I want to have sex with	Not at all	17.1%	(43/252)	7.6%	(40/526)	10.7%	(83/778)
	Extremely	30.6%	(77/252)	53.4%	(281/526)	46.0%	(358/778)
I worry about contracting HIV/AIDs	Not at all	18.6%	(47/253)	12.2%	(64/525)	14.3%	(111/778)
	Extremely	24.1%	(61/253)	24.8%	(130/525)	24.6%	(191/778)
I worry about contracting STIs	Not at all	16.1%	(41/254)	9.2%	(48/524)	11.4%	(89/778)
	Extremely	23.2%	(59/254)	26.9%	(141/524)	25.7%	(200/778)
Too shy/embarrassed to initiate sex	Not at all	23.4%	(59/252)	11.2%	(59/525)	15.2%	(118/777)
	Extremely	9.1%	(23/252)	18.5%	(97/525)	15.4%	(120/777)
Not in a relationship long enough	Not at all	11.8%	(30/254)	7.2%	(38/525)	8.7%	(68/779)
	Extremely	28.0%	(71/254)	44.6%	(234/525)	39.2%	(305/779)
Important to be in love the first time	Not at all	14.3%	(36/252)	5.9%	(31/524)	8.6%	(67/776)
	Extremely	34.1%	(86/252)	57.4%	(301/524)	49.9%	(387/776)
I don't feel physically attractive / desirable	Not at all	22.6%	(57/252)	13.6%	(71/522)	16.5%	(128/774)
	Extremely	12.3%	(31/252)	21.7%	(113/522)	18.6%	(144/774)
Not had the opportunity to have sex	Not at all	17.6%	(44/250)	14.8%	(77/522)	15.7%	(121/772)
	Extremely	29.2%	(73/250)	32.0%	(167/522)	31.1%	(240/772)

Question: 'Here are some reasons that people may have for not having sexual intercourse. Please indicate how important these reasons are for you. Please click one answer to rate each reason.' Response options were a 5 point Likert scale with extremes being 'Not at all important' and 'Extremely important'. Adapted from Sprecher & Regan, 1996; Miller et al, 1998; Herold & Goodwin, 1981. Base: Non-sexually active students. *Some statements are abbreviated

Table 3 Prevalence of sexuality/relationship education

	Males (n = 827)		Females (n = 1309)		Total (n = 2136)	
Yes	84.2%	(645/766)	87.1%	(1104/1268)	86.0%	(1749/2034)
No	11.9%	(91/766)	9.5%	(120/1268)	10.4%	(211/2034)
Don't know	3.9%	(30/766)	3.5%	(44/1268)	3.6%	(74/2034)

Question: 'Have you ever had sexuality / relationship education at school?' Base: All students

Table 4 Students' assessment of sexuality / relationship education relevance

	Males (n = 827)		Females (n = 1309)		Total (n = 2136)	
Not relevant at all	8.1%	(63/778)	5.7%	(72/1272)	6.6%	(135/2050)
Somewhat relevant	40.1%	(312/778)	41.9%	(533/1272)	41.2%	(845/2050)
Very relevant	28.0%	(218/778)	28.4%	(361/1272)	28.2%	(579/2050)
Extremely relevant	15.4%	(120/778)	17.6%	(224/1272)	16.8%	(344/2050)
Not had sex / relation education at school	8.4%	(65/778)	6.5%	(82/1272)	7.2%	(147/2050)

Question: 'How relevant did you / do you find sexuality / relationship classes?' Base: All students

sex. Fifteen per cent of sexually active students reported using the withdrawal method at their last sexual encounter. Emergency contraception was not widely used with only 4% of students having accessed it.

Condom use was not generally consistent, only 43% of sexually active students reported 'always' using condoms when they had sex in the previous year. A considerable proportion (39%) of sexually active students reported they only used condoms 'sometimes' when they had sex, and a small (13%) but nonetheless notable proportion 'never' used condoms when they had sex in the previous year. However there was some good news as looking at only those who had access to a condom at their last sexual encounter, showed that if students reported having access to a condom, the majority of young men (89%) and young women (84%) actually used it. This suggests that a major factor to increasing condom use may be the availability of a condom at the time of a sexual encounter. This is an area in which both schools and parents could play a greater role.

Issues of consent and sexual decision making remain important areas of learning for young people. Approximately one quarter of the sexually active sample reported ever having experienced unwanted sex. Young women were slightly more likely than young men to have experienced sex when they did not want to (28% vs. 20%), however the numbers of young men are notable and indicate a trend towards less significant gender differences which was a feature of the current findings. Reasons for unwanted sex varied.

Gender did play a role however in the reasons for unwanted sex with higher proportions of young women reporting being influenced by their partner (61% vs. 37%) and being frightened (34% vs. 15%), and a higher proportion of young men being influenced by their peers (22% vs. 9%).

Nevertheless, as we have found regularly,

students overall expressed positive feelings after their last sexual encounter with only small proportions reporting feeling used upset or guilty. Thus we can deduce that young people are happy about their sexual choices and are on the whole having sex when they want to with people of their choice. Evidence of positive choices was also particularly marked amongst those who had never had sex, which was explored in more detail this time than in the past.

Table 2 illustrates the importance placed on a number of reasons for not having sexual intercourse.

Reasons which indicated personal choices rather than a lack of opportunity were cited as important. Religious (19%) and cultural (17%) beliefs played less of a role in these decisions, as did parental disapproval (17%).

Internet, technology and social media

Previous surveys have demonstrated that, since its inception, the internet has increasingly become a well-used source of information about sexual health for young people, with 43% citing it this time as a used source. Questions relating to the role of technology more broadly were asked for the first time in this survey. Students indicated that they commonly used forms of electronic communication and digital technologies as part of their social worlds. Social networking sites (93%), sending and receiving instant messages (91%), text messaging (88%), mobile phone calls (86%), and sending / receiving emails (72%) were the most common forms of this communication.

Social networking sites were used at least once a day by 87% of all students. Facebook was the most commonly used social networking site with 91% of students reporting regular use, however many students also reported that they regularly used YouTube (82%) and Instagram (49%). Only 2% of students reported that they did not use any forms of social networking. The vast majority of students regularly accessed

these sites using computers (95%) and mobile phones (85%), but less commonly methods such as iPads/tablets (42%) and iPod touch (or similar) devices (39%) were also used.

It is not surprising that the young people who have embraced these forms of communication are using them as part of developing and conducting sexual relationships. Over 50% of all students reported receiving a sexually explicit written text message while over four in 10 had sent such a text message (43%), or received a sexually explicit photo of someone else (42%). Just over a quarter of young people reported that they sent a sexually explicit photo of themselves (26%). Higher proportions of young men sent (14% vs. 5%) and received (45% vs. 40%) sexually explicit photos or videos of someone else. Young men also were more likely to have reported using social media for sexual reasons (31% vs. 16%).

If these behaviours are analysed only for sexually active students, the proportions are a lot higher. Most sexually active students reported receiving (84%) and sending (72%) sexually explicit text messages, and receiving a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else (70%), while 50% reported sending a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of themselves. Nearly one-third of sexually active students have used a social media site for sexual reasons (31%) while 17% have sent a sexually explicit image of someone else. Higher proportions of young men than young women reported sending (25% vs. 11%) and receiving (76% vs. 66%) explicit images of someone else and using social media for sexual reasons (45% vs. 23%).

The common use of sexually explicit text messages and sexually explicit photographs and videos indicates that this behaviour is well and truly embedded in the sexual worlds of these young people and is an element of many sexual relationships. This phenomena appears to have been very little modified by the fact that some

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of these practices are illegal, and resources using this approach as a deterrent to young people appear to have fallen on deaf ears. A more realistic approach to the harm that can occur to individuals when this technology is misused to humiliate and shame would be to focus on the importance of ethical behaviour in sexual relationships across the board. Young people need to feel confident with issues of consent, self care and care of others as they work towards ethical maturity and both parents and school programs can support them in this process.

Sexuality and relationship education

All of the participants in this survey are students in Australian secondary schools and, as all state and territory curriculum frameworks mandate some form of sexuality education, we felt it was a reasonable expectation that they would have something to say about nature and quality of that education. Some religious schools may choose not to meet this requirement, but commonly they do provide some version of sexuality education in line with their religious ethos. School sexual health programs were cited by 43% of students as an important source of information on sexual health, followed closely by female friends (41%) and mothers (36%). Teachers were also cited by 28% of students, indicating the importance of schools as sites for sexual health education.

Most students (86%) reported that they had received sex education at school, although approximately 4% expressed uncertainty. (Table 3). Around one in 10 students reported having no sex education.

Most of this education took place in Health and Physical Education classes (80%) while just less than one-third (31%) took place in Science and Biology classes. For 13% of students it was part of a Religious Instruction program. Pleasingly, sexuality and relationship education appears to be predominantly taught by teachers (83%), however someone from outside the school (34%), and / or the school nurse (22%) were also commonly involved. Fewer students reported that school counsellors (10%) or chaplains (4%) were involved in the subject's delivery. It appears that while the impulse to call in an outside expert to deliver these programs is still widespread, outsiders may be operating more in conjunction with classroom teachers.

Despite the high numbers of students who reported receiving sexuality education, not all found it met their needs. Less than half of students (45%) found their sexuality and relationship education to be 'very' or 'extremely' relevant (Table 4). In particular, 8% of male students found that the subject was not relevant at all, a proportion that was slightly higher than for female students (6%). This indicates that while schools are doing well in this area of the curriculum, there remains (as always) some room for improvement.

In this context students were given the opportunity to provide some commentary on

their sexuality education and 474 responded with some interesting and insightful results. Comments were both positive and negative with many well-considered suggestions for improvement.

"The information that they gave us sounds good in theory, but in reality, it's not at all realistic. For instance, we were taught how to say no to sex if we aren't comfortable with the situation, but none of the techniques would realistically be effective. It seems like the teachers are rushing through the course to get it out of the way and to sort of 'tick the box' of having covered the content, but we can all tell that they don't endorse what they are saying."

"We have a great sex ed class. Even though I personally knew a lot beforehand, it was good to see that people were taught important life lessons such as understanding sexuality and gender as well as safe sex."

Students were critical of a lack of information on sexual practices (19%), the lack of information on the practicalities of how to have sex, how to enjoy it and sexual practices other than penis in vagina intercourse such as anal or oral sex. Many noted the lack of information for students who were same sex attracted. Contraception and condom use were also both reported as missing by many respondents (16%). Often respondents reported that they were not educated about the proper use of contraception because they felt that their school supported an abstinence approach:

"I think sexual education should focus more on being realistic and explaining about proper types of contraception. Teenagers are always going to have sex, so school should be educating us how to safely do that rather than make us ashamed"

Several respondents commented that they felt their sexuality education did not include enough information or emphasis on the importance of consent in sexual relationships (21%). Related to this, many students said that they would have liked more information on the emotional side of sexual relationships and how to build a healthy, positive sexual relationship:

"It was done through more of a biological lens and taught us about STI prevention and anatomy but did not include many topics that are very important, such as communication with partners, different relationship dynamics or unusual circumstances, actually getting pleasure from sex etc"

Despite the negative comments and the deficits reported it is important to acknowledge the many positive comments made by young people about their sexuality education, and to compliment those teachers who are providing it:

"I already felt that I knew about sexual relationships already due to just general accumulated knowledge, but sex education in school helped to clear some things and terms up"

"It's actually been very good and helped out a lot.."

"I am glad I had Sex Ed. It was super helpful."


Sexuality education is clearly a topic on which many young people are prepared to offer an opinion, using its relevance to their lives as a criterion to determine its value. It

is clear that schools vary in their capacity to make judgements about what students need to know and in delivering on those perceptions. Listening to the voices of young people and trusting in their sense of what is important is likely to be a useful strategy for improving our programs in the future.

Conclusion

Despite ongoing concerns for the sexual wellbeing of young people, the data from this study demonstrate that the vast majority of young people are confident in their decision-making around their sexual health. Those who are sexually active are, by and large, having sex that they enjoy and feel positive about. The majority of those who are not having intercourse are feeling comfortable and confident that this is what they want. This is clearly a strength of young people and one which should be recognised in the approaches taken to sexual health promotion and sexuality education targeting young people.

There is still much to be done to help young people negotiate the exciting, confusing and sometimes treacherous territory of sexual relationships as they look to reliable and trusted sources, such as schools and parents, for help. Schools are rising to this challenge in great numbers and the implementation of the new *Australian Curriculum in Health and Physical Education* provides an opportunity to reinvigorate our programs to meet these needs realistically.

The full report can be downloaded from www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshts 



Emeritus Professor Anne Mitchell has been working in sexuality education for over 20 years. She was a founding staff member of the Australian Research Centre

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