



SA Young People's Current Experiences of Relationship and Sexual Health Education



Commissioner for
Children & Young People
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Summary of Survey Findings

In a recent survey of 1,225 young South Australians between the ages of 12 and 22, the vast majority want sex education in schools to move beyond puberty, anatomy and the prevention of pregnancy and diseases, and instead focus on teaching them about the current realities and pressures of their own situations. This includes providing practical advice and guidance on relationships and sexual health in the areas they are struggling to understand.

The online survey, conducted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People between August and October 2020, gathered young people's experiences and views on relationships and sexual health education and invited their suggestions for ways in which they felt it could be improved.

Just over half the respondents (53%) were aged between 15 and 17 years, with almost one third (33%) aged 18 to 22 years. The remaining (14%) were young South Australians aged 12 to 14 years.

The young people who provided their responses reflect the diversity of South Australia's population:

- **63%** identified as female
- **34%** as male
- **2%** as non-binary
- **3%** as transgender or gender diverse
- **27%** identified as sexually diverse (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer+)
- **15%** as being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- **4%** as living with a disability; and
- **3%** as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The majority of respondents attend government schools (43%) with more than one third (37%) attending Independent schools. Almost one quarter (19%) were at Catholic schools with 1% home-schooled.

Most respondents reported that their schools were located in metropolitan Adelaide (71%). A third (27%) attend a regional school with the remaining 2% attending schools in more remote regions of South Australia.

What Young People Said

Young people reported that learning about relationships and sexual health is an important part of their education with 99% of survey respondents choosing either 'very important' or 'somewhat important' in response to this question. Yet, they rated the quality of their relationship and sexual health education as either good (31%), acceptable (35%), or poor (32%).

Young people also reported that their relationship and sexual health education currently lacks depth and detail, comes either too early or too late in their lives, and is not consistently inclusive of diversity.

Young female and sexually diverse people were more likely to report their relationship and sexual health education as being a negative experience that lacked relevance to their situations.

Young people surveyed also reported that at times their relationship and sexual health education did not equip them with sufficient practical skills and knowledge, leaving them misinformed and confused.

'It can be difficult to identify abuse... a topic that can sometimes be awkward'

(Female, 17)



Young people reported identifying and dealing with abusive relationships, sexual assault and violence, homophobia and transphobia, and gender identity and diversity, as the topics least likely to be taught in relationship and sexual health education.

“ *I experienced domestic violence and abuse... if abusive relationships were covered in sex ed, I would have been able to be more aware of my situation*’ (Female, 18)

Young people reported the content of their relationship and sexual health education was focused primarily on male and heteronormative experiences, relationships and perspectives.

“ *I know how to date and have great and safe sex with women... [but] I'm gay*’ (Male, 17)

“ *Education around the LGBTQI+ community... would have made for a much more accepting cohort*’ (Female, 17)

Approximately 40% of young people aged 12 – 14 years, 50% of young people aged 15 to 18 years, and 61% of young people aged 19 to 22 years, reported learning about sex from pornography.

Rather than just focus on physical biological processes, or the potential legal consequences of certain behaviours, young people want more recognition of the complexity of situations there are in relation to sex and sexuality. They also want the practical, social and emotional aspects of relationships and sexual safety to be taught.

Young people want to be able to engage in ‘in-depth discussions of consent’ including the ‘reality of consent’, ‘what it means’, ‘what it looks like’, and ‘how to give it’. They’re seeking more information on the ‘intricacies of consent rather than just consent as a broad term’, and they want to understand consent in a way that’s not limited to individual sexual acts.

“ *The ‘blurred lines’ of consent, rather than just black and white situations*’ (Female, 18)

“ *I think consent should form a bigger part especially, but in a way that doesn’t fill boys with some ingrained cultural shame for the acts of the men of the past, and also empowers girls to stand up for themselves well beyond the bedroom* (Male, 21)

Conclusion

As with other life domains, relationships and sexual health and safety are crucial to a young person’s development. Yet relationships and sexual health education in schools is particularly polarising. It pits those who want to limit relationship and sexual health education to biology and reproduction, against those who want to equip young people with a more comprehensive knowledge about their bodies and their rights; about what it means to have a healthy relationship and how best to approach sexual and gender equity and diversity.

If we provide evidenced rights-based relationships and sexual health education that responds to the contemporary realities, pressures and behaviours of our young people, we will go much further in protecting them from any potential harm, now and in the future.

Access to ongoing accurate, evidenced-based information lays the foundations for informed decision making and protection. Children and young people who are left uninformed are left vulnerable. As one 15-year-old survey respondent put it, ‘Lack of education doesn’t mean lack of sex, it means lack of SAFE sex’.

The full CCYP Report will be released in May 2021.

