

What young people need to know about relationships, sexual and mental health

Commissioner for
Children & Young People

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Young South Australians want realistic tailored information and practical strategies for promoting healthy relationships and positive mental and sexual health.

In 2023, the Commissioner for Children and Young People asked students in Years 10–12 what they need to feel supported in their relationships, and equipped to manage their sexual and mental health – essential knowledge for successfully navigating their personal lives.

Many young people told the Commissioner that they do not feel well prepared for these aspects of their lives, and that the education they get in school and the advice they receive at home is never enough. They are particularly concerned about the lack of knowledge and limited practical skills they have to maintain a healthy and happy life.

Young people said that what they want is more and better information, and that the information needs to be honest, unbiased, non-judgmental, shame-free, 'not cringe', and 'help to end stigma'.

Many teenagers currently rely on Tik Tok or Instagram for information about sexual and mental health, seeing social media as a place to connect safely with each other, particularly for LGBTQIA+ young people.



The young people who have spoken to the Commissioner have highlighted the need for approaches to relationships, sexual health and mental health education that appeal to all young South Australians, in all their diversity, and should not be 'boring' or 'overwhelming' but instead be:

- fun and interactive while also serious and useful;
- tailored to age and developmental stage;
- accurate, trustworthy, and up to date;
- helpful, in practical ways, and easy to apply in real-life situations;
- inclusive to the experiences of males and females, as well as to non-binary and trans young people;
- informed by and made by young people themselves;
- contain information about the full range of face-to-face, phone and online services available to all young people;
- clear about when and how each service can be accessed; and
- clear about what young people can expect from specific service providers (including who the service provider is, what they can help with, and what young people might want to ask them).

Young people said they want service providers who:

- they can contact and talk to for free;
- they can talk to freely and without judgement;
- they can contact without parental permission or intervention;
- they can trust;
- are confidential, and who can answer anonymous questions;
- are available 24/7;
- are shame-free and helpful;
- are easy to access and whose services are easy to navigate;
- are LGBTQIA+ friendly;
- are professional and cater specifically to young people; and
- specialise in sexual health and relationships.



What young people want to know about relationships

Young people said that it's hard to find useful information about:

- relationships and diverse sexualities and gender identities;
- cultural differences in relation to relationships and sexual health education;
- how to navigate or address mental health issues and relationships; and
- how to communicate well in relationships, including how to set boundaries and know when a relationship is unhealthy or healthy.

Young people say it's easier to find information about unhealthy relationships and 'red flags' than it is to find information about healthy relationships and 'green flags'. While they agreed that it is important to know 'what is wrong' in relationships, they also wanted to find out 'what's right', and learn more about positive practices that can be easily applied to help lead to and maintain healthy relationships.

Young people want information that is developed specifically for them about:

- how to start a relationship;
- how to communicate well, and how to set clear boundaries;
- how to recognise the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships;
- how to maintain a healthy relationship;
- how to recognise when a relationship is going wrong and whether it can be 'worked out' or might need to end, including how to end things 'peacefully';
- how to navigate relationships with diverse partners (diverse sexualities, gender identities, disabilities, poverty, mental health, age differences);
- what can be done and where to go if you don't feel safe in a relationship;
- how to manage 'the aftermath' of an unhealthy relationship, and apply the lessons to future relationships;
- how to have a healthy relationship with yourself; and
- how to navigate non-romantic relationships such as those with friends and family ('what can I do about peer pressure', 'how can I deal with strict parents?', 'is it ever okay to lie to my parents?').

What young people want to know about sexual health

Young people said that it's particularly hard to find useful information about:

- the different types of sex and sexual pleasure;
- sexual expectations and boundaries;
- sexual coercion and sexual consent;
- abortion; and
- pornography.

They said that information about other topics can be easier to find, but often provides only basic or inappropriate information. For example:

- **Pregnancy** – there is rarely a focus on teenage pregnancy, and what to do if you think you may be pregnant.
- **Contraception** – the focus is often placed on condoms for males and on taking contraceptive medicines for females, rather than explaining the full range of options available and how they work.
- **Consent** – while there is a lot of information about what 'non-consensual' sex is, there is less about 'ways to practice consent' (eg. using the traffic light system, establishing safe words, or knowing what 'enthusiastic consent' means).
- **Sexually Transmitted Infections** – there is a focus on STIs existing, but it is harder to find information about the signs and symptoms, as well as where to get tested and treated, and when and how often this needs to be done.

Young people want more information made specially for them about:

- physical changes during adolescence such as body hair and libido;
- periods, and 'menstrual health' including what's 'normal' and what isn't;
- understanding fertility, contraception, and pregnancy;



- self-pleasuring and masturbation;
- gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations;
- the emotional side of sex;
- how to talk about sex and sexual preferences and boundaries;
- how to have sex safely (including with same-sex and/or gender-diverse people);
- how to know if you're pregnant and what you can do if you think you are;
- deciding whether to have an abortion, where you can go for support and what is involved;
- what the difference is between consensual and non-consensual sex;
- what sexual assault/sexual violence is and where/how to get support if it happens to you; and
- what the relevant laws are regarding sex, pornography, and sexual violence.

What young people want to know about mental health

Young people said that it is hard for them to find useful information about:

- ways to de-stigmatise mental health issues;
- the connection between mental health and physical health;
- identifying signs of poor mental health or mental illness; and
- looking after your own mental health, as well as that of others.

Young people said that while they know it is helpful that conversations about mental health have opened-up a lot in recent years, they still have many concerns including:

- how talking about mental health so much has now led to 'no-one really listening or no-one caring as much anymore because so many young people suffer with it';
- that many young people tend to self-diagnose;
- the way stigma continues to exist and can make it extremely difficult to find help or reach out for support because of the fear of being judged;
- the way information tends to cover 'the stereotypical aspects of mental health' rather than explain how everyone has 'different experiences, symptoms and solutions' to their mental health issues;
- a need to know they're 'not alone', that it's okay to talk, it's okay to not be okay, and that there are places they can go (both online and offline) where they will be supported to feel safe and will be able to get the right support; and
- confidentiality when they do seek support, particularly in relation to the need for parental/carer permission if the parent or carer is causing or contributing to the mental health problem/issues.

Young people want information specific to them about:

- the range of factors that can affect mental health and mood, including the 'little things';
- how to identify signs of poor mental health that may go unnoticed, including potential differences by gender;
- realistic ways to sustain good mental health through activities, hobbies, and friendships, etc;
- ways to promote general wellbeing including information and 'pick me up' resources (eg playlists of songs for different moods, colouring in pages, etc);
- how to address issues relating to low self-esteem, including eating and body image disorders;
- what to do if you are the victim of verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse;
- what to do if your parents don't believe you have mental health concerns and refuse to get you support and help;
- knowing when to get help and what informal and formal support systems and services are available;
- how to access mental health specialists and services, including doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, and suicide hotlines;
- how to be a good ally to LGBTQIA+ friends with mental health symptoms;
- how to support people close to you that you know have mental health issues; and
- where to go and what to do when you, or a friend or family member experiences a mental health crisis/emergency.