



# Are you **ready**?

Young people's views of  
sex and relationships



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## Introduction

The topic of young people and sex is one which regularly attracts the attention of politicians, the media and society at large. More often than not, this attention focuses on the negative side of sex – for example the high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in the UK – and highlights so-called ‘irresponsible’ behaviour among teenagers. At times, the barrage of criticism against young people can be overwhelming.

Certainly, evidence shows us that young people are becoming sexually active earlier; the average age of first intercourse is now 16 for both men and women<sup>1</sup>. But what do young people themselves think about sex and relationships, and what influences their attitudes and behaviour? At **fpa** we believe that young people’s voices are sorely missing from this debate. We felt so strongly about this that we commissioned our own qualitative research to explore young people’s views directly.

This research provides up-to-date information about young people’s views of sex and relationships and, together with existing evidence, allows us to draw some strong conclusions about how best to meet the needs of young people.

## Research methodology

In March 2004 **fpa** commissioned research consultancy Opinion Leader Research (OLR) to carry out qualitative research with young people to explore their attitudes to sex and relationships. OLR conducted a series of extended discussion groups with young people aged 13–19 in different locations across England, Wales and Scotland, with the sample of participants structured according to age, socio-economic background and sexuality.

The extended group discussion format allowed for in-depth discussion on a series of issues, including: influences on attitudes and behaviour; attitudes towards sex and relationships; understanding of consent and readiness; and information needs.

## Background: the current picture

In England the mandatory elements of sex and relationships education (SRE) in schools are primarily contained within the National Curriculum Science Order, which covers human biology and reproduction. In addition, secondary schools are required to provide an SRE programme which includes (as a minimum) information about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections. Beyond this, each school is free to determine its own SRE policy, for which direction is given in guidance issued by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)<sup>2</sup>, now known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Under the Education Act 2002, all maintained schools in Wales must provide a Basic Curriculum in addition to the National Curriculum for Wales. This includes a requirement to provide SRE in all maintained secondary schools and for all young people of secondary school age in maintained special schools<sup>3</sup>. In September 2003, personal and social education (PSE) was added to the Basic Curriculum for all maintained primary and secondary schools<sup>4</sup>.

In Scotland, there is no statutory requirement to teach SRE in schools. The Scottish Executive's policy is to encourage schools to provide SRE within a comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education and religious and moral education<sup>5</sup>. In Northern Ireland SRE is known as relationships and sexuality education (RSE). In Northern Ireland in September 2007, a new learning area was introduced called *Personal Development and Mutual Understanding* (PDMU) in primary schools, and this develops into *Learning for Life and Work* (LLW) in post-primary schools<sup>6</sup>. The key concepts of personal development are self-awareness, personal health and relationships, supplemented with home and family life and independent living in home economics. Consequently RSE is now a statutory component of personal development and home economics as well as the science curriculum.

Evidence consistently shows that high quality SRE can lead to young people starting to have sex later, and helps to reduce teenage pregnancy rates and the rate of sexually transmitted infections<sup>7</sup>. Research also shows that effective SRE should be initiated early, before patterns of sexual behaviour are established<sup>8</sup>. However, SRE provision by schools is variable in content and quality. Young people report that they receive SRE which is too little, too late and too biological, and that they want to learn more about emotions and relationships.

Social class and educational achievement have a strong influence on sexual development – young people from lower socio-economic groups or those who leave school without qualifications are much more likely to engage in first sex before the age of 16<sup>9</sup>. There are huge pressures to conform to a societal norm, and the need to conform is particularly strong during adolescence. Young people often experience pressure to become sexually active, and also have misconceptions about the sexual behaviour of their peers – many believe that their peers are more experienced at a younger age than is actually the case<sup>10</sup>.

Children and young people from families in which sex and relationships are openly discussed are more likely to delay the age at which they first have sex, have fewer partners, and use contraception when they do have sex<sup>11</sup>. Evidence shows that children and young people want to talk to their parents about sex and relationships, and vice versa, but both can feel awkward about doing so<sup>12</sup>.

## Key findings

### Influences

Young people are influenced by a complex range of different factors throughout their daily lives. In terms of shaping their attitudes – and their behaviour – around sex and relationships, the most important influences are their peer group, family and the media, with variations according to age, gender and socio-economic background.

The research highlights the extent of peer group influence, which ties in closely with both age and socio-economic background. It is clear that particular friendship groups can act either to restrain or encourage sexual activity, and there can be a kind of ‘domino effect’ whereby once one member of a group has started to be sexually active, and this is endorsed by the group, the rest of the group is more likely to follow suit.

“Your friends influence you. Peer pressure. They can get right down your neck. They can just be like, come on, you haven’t done it yet. And then you think, okay then.”

Young man aged 15–16

“Depends what group you’re in. It totally depends on again the people that you hang around with or the person themselves.”

Young woman aged 17–19

### Gender differences

Some key differences emerge in the attitudes between young men and young women. For the majority of young women, sexual activity and relationships are inextricably linked, and there is a high association between emotional attachment and sexual activity. In contrast, many young men focus on the physical triggers for sexual activity, and articulate a competitive ‘need’ for sexual experience which is distinct from any overt association with emotions and relationships.

“It’s like a competition. It’s like the first one to, like, get off with a girl or something, that’s all it is, it’s like a big game.”

Young man aged 13–14

## Public vs private

However, more in-depth discussion reveals that, under the surface, the differences between young men and young women may not be as stark as they first appear. Many young men clearly feel under pressure to display a certain sexual confidence and experience, which they feel confers status upon them within their peer group.

In reality, it is apparent that this macho exterior often hides inexperience and nervousness within. As they get older, young men begin to articulate a more considered and honest approach to sex and relationships, although the majority still make a distinction between meaningful sex within a relationship and the opportunity for 'no-strings' or one-off sex.

## Consensus

Despite some clear differences in the way that young men and young women view sex and relationships, there are some key areas in which there is broad consensus between the genders.

Both young men and young women speak openly about the importance of contraception, in terms of protecting against sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. However, it emerges that unwanted pregnancy is perceived to be more of an issue for young women, and there is therefore a sense that the responsibility for preventing pregnancy lies ultimately with them.

Reputation is also an issue which emerges repeatedly, and in particular the difference between the reputations gained by young men and young women who are, or are perceived to be, sexually active. There is general agreement that experienced young men enhance their reputations, whereas experienced young women are criticised and vilified for this experience.

“The girls . . . they get called names, if boys do it it's alright for them. It's like say if you do something like with a boy you can be called a tart, but say if a boy did it they're like 'oh – good work'.”

**Young woman aged 13–14**

## Consent and readiness

There is broad understanding among young people that the legal age of consent for sex is 16<sup>13</sup>. However, engagement with the more emotional concepts of consent and readiness varies considerably.

Young women, with their views of the association between sex and relationships, are more likely to talk spontaneously about the emotional side of consent and readiness. Across the age groups, young women articulate a range of core elements which they feel indicate genuine consent and readiness for sexual activity, which include:

- **saying and meaning yes**, and not being under any pressure to do so
- having **contraception** available, and understanding its use
- **thinking through the consequences**, both physical and emotional
- **being in the 'right kind' of relationship**, in particular trusting the other person and being able to be open and honest with them
- **being happy with their own body**, so that they will feel relaxed and able to enjoy sexual intimacy.

“People are ready to have sex if they're prepared to handle the emotional side, and that there's a good chance that they will stay together.”

**Young woman aged 14–15**

“When both parties are willing to do it, rather than one saying, 'yeah I want to do it' and the other one, 'oh I'm not sure, but let's do it anyway'.”

**Young woman aged 17–19**

“If you're questioning it you're not ready.”

**Young woman aged 17–19**

More encouragement is required to prompt discussion from young men around the emotional elements of consent and readiness. Often, consent and readiness are spontaneously associated with the availability of sex, and there is an assumption that young men are always 'ready' and that the onus is on their (female) partner to consent to the activity.

“For a lad it's when it's there. But for a lass it's when they want to.”

**Young man aged 15–16**

Some young men do talk about the importance of feeling 'ready' themselves, but struggle to articulate what this means beyond a situation feeling 'right'. As young men get older they are increasingly able to acknowledge that consent does have emotional associations, and to express what readiness means for them. Common definitions include being in a safe and supportive relationship, being able to discuss emotions and consequences with a partner, and having no doubts about what you are doing.

“If you're sensible enough to sit down with your girlfriend or something and have a chat about it, that shows a little bit that you're ready.”

**Young man aged 17–19**

## Scenarios

During the research young people were presented with scenarios on which to comment and advise, as a way of enabling them to express their views on a particular subject without having to talk about personal experiences.

These scenarios highlighted two key issues. Firstly, young men are very aware that there is often pressure on them to get involved in sexual activity, and that this can be unwelcome and unpleasant. When presented with scenarios in which this is the case, young men are likely to advise others to trust their instincts and not to succumb to such pressure. However, it is clear that, for themselves, there is an ever-present concern that if they act honestly and resist pressure then they could risk damaging their image.

Secondly, young women may sometimes talk in one way but behave in another, according to different circumstances. As we have seen, young women are fully versed in what it means to be ready and give genuine consent to sex, but acknowledge that in certain situations they may consent to sex even if they don't feel truly ready in order to protect a relationship.

Both young men and young women agree that, in situations where a person is uncomfortable with taking the next step, it is often easier to lie to get out of the situation rather than be honest and explain how they are feeling. This clearly demonstrates the power and importance of image, and the need for young people to maintain a certain image among their peers.

## Communication

It is clear from the research that young people find it difficult to communicate about sex and relationships. Even within peer groups, some young people find it hard to open up about their own personal views and experiences.

In many cases young people are simply unequipped with the vocabulary to talk openly about sex and relationships. Many young people struggle to articulate the details of sex – in particular the steps between kissing and full intercourse – even though they may have the knowledge. Communication about sex and relationships appears to be particularly difficult for those from lower socio-economic groups, who have extremely limited experience of discussing these and other similar issues. It appears that some of these young people either missed out on what little SRE their schools provided, or weren't able to engage with the teaching on these issues.

Many young people have particular problems communicating with the opposite gender about sex and relationships, and it is clear that they are unused to discussing such issues in mixed groups. However, many young people are interested to know what the opposite gender thinks about these issues, even if they don't feel confident or able to start these discussions themselves.

There are wide variations between young people in terms of relationships that they have with adults; some clearly have strong and open relationships in which they are able to discuss sex and relationships, whereas others say that they could never discuss this subject with adults. It is clear that, where young people are able to discuss sex and relationships with parents or others – including older siblings and other relatives or professionals – this can represent strong and valued support which those without such relationships lack.

## Information needs and sources

There is widespread agreement among young people that information provision on sex and relationships is generally poor. The majority of young people are highly critical of formal SRE, which they criticise as being too limited in scope, squeezed into a small number of lessons, poorly delivered, and insufficiently supported by adequate information materials. There are also specific concerns that SRE focuses almost exclusively on heterosexual relationships, and is therefore largely irrelevant for gay and lesbian young people.

Young people highlight particular gaps in SRE in exploring sex in the wider context of emotions and relationships, the positive and enjoyable side of sex, and the implications of being in a relationship. There is a sense that SRE is overwhelmingly negative and does not prepare young people for the realities of relationships. Young people also criticise the lack of opportunities for them to ask advice about issues around sex and relationships.

In this context, young people turn to other sources of information to find out more about sex and relationships. Peers clearly represent a significant source of information, as does the media and, sometimes, family members.

“If I didn’t have my pals I don’t know how I could cope. Honestly, if there’s something the matter with me, that’s the first person I go to, to tell them.”

**Young woman aged 15–16**



## Recommendations: looking to the future

### **Information needs – more than just biology**

Our research strongly reinforces all the existing evidence that young people want and need more and better information about sex and relationships. Yet again, young people criticise the information they currently receive as being limited in scope and, often, badly delivered.

“They’re always showing them really horrible videos . . . which are so unrealistic. So mechanic.”

**Young woman aged 17–19**

SRE must be made compulsory within the curriculum in both primary and secondary schools, within the framework of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). It is imperative that young people are given more comprehensive information about all aspects of sex and relationships, as well as opportunities to explore the issues more fully. In particular, young people must be able to learn about and discuss the emotional and positive side of sex and relationships. This needs to be an ongoing process whereby young people are encouraged and given time within SRE to think about and discuss these issues.

### **Gender differences; gender similarities**

It is clear from the research that young men and young women grow up with distinct frames of reference in terms of sex and relationships and, to an extent, both have equally unrealistic views of sex and relationships. Early on, young women are able to associate sexual activity with emotional investment and relationship development, and display a seemingly sophisticated understanding of what it means to be ready and able to consent to sexual activity. However, young women may also have an overly romanticised view of how relationships develop. In contrast, young men appear to be conditioned to discuss sex publicly in a much more physical context – whereby the focus is on sex rather than relationships – and consequently take much longer to develop an understanding of sex as it relates to relationships.

In this context, it is vitally important for both young men and young women to have the opportunity to develop the same understanding of the interplay between emotions, relationships and sexual activity, and to discuss and explore these issues together as well as separately.

“You know, in sex education classes, if the guys and girls talked about it more and it was more of a group discussion, maybe the guys would understand where the girls were coming from and vice versa. But if you watch a video, they don't really talk about it, because it's a taboo subject. They should really try to get us talking. We'd get a different perspective that way.”

**Young woman aged 17–19**

### **Promoting confidence and self-esteem**

It is evident from the research that, in many scenarios relating to sex and relationships, young men and women may think one way but act in another. This kind of behaviour demonstrates a real lack of self-confidence and belief in their own judgement and instinct.

We know that young people with lower self-esteem are more likely to start sexual activity earlier and to take more risks, whether in order to prove themselves, to enhance their reputation, or to preserve a relationship. It is therefore crucial that SRE in schools – as part of a broader framework of PSHE – addresses these issues of confidence and self-esteem among young people.

### **Young people in context: the role of parents and families**

Evidence shows that young people benefit immensely from being able to talk to adults close to them – particularly their parents – about sex and relationships. This can act as a strong and valuable means of support for young people, and gives them a credible source of information and advice to turn to.

However, parents can find it difficult to broach the subject of sex and relationships with their children, and may benefit from advice on how to do so. In this context, parenting programmes – such as **fpa's** Speakeasy programme – can play a valuable role in giving confidence to and supporting parents and carers in discussing this subject with their children. There must be greater resources and prioritisation given to such programmes, which not only offer significant benefits in the realm of sex and relationships but can also help parents to discuss a range of issues openly with their children.

### **Consent and readiness: understanding the issues**

Our research has highlighted some interesting issues related to young people's perceptions of consent and readiness for sexual activity. Young women, in particular, focus on a series of factors such as trust which influence their decisions, whereas young men find it harder to articulate the steps which lead to sexual activity.

It is critical to understand this whole area more fully in order to develop more effective ways of working with young people and influencing their behaviour. We therefore believe it is vitally important to conduct further research which explores more deeply the complex interplay of factors which influence young people's perceptions of readiness and their decisions to consent in sex and relationships.

In order to develop a responsible and considered approach to sex and relationships, young people want and need more and better information, advice and guidance. Clearly, focusing on scare stories and the negative aspects of sex is a real turn-off, and doesn't equip young people with either the skills or the knowledge to negotiate relationships in the real world. Collectively, parents, schools and wider society need to stop being afraid of talking about sex and relationships, and start being honest with young people.



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