

# Sex Education

By Frankie Bray

Sex is no longer the taboo subject it once was, and sexualised images are rife in today's media. Even the most diligent parents can't shelter their children from sex, as much as they might like to. So what's to be done? Many argue that education is the best defence, yet sexuality education is one area in which our education system is sadly lacking.

## Why It's Important

The idea behind sexuality education is to prepare children for the transition into adulthood, to provide them with the tools they will need to protect themselves from disease and abuse, and enable them to foster healthy relationships – sexual and otherwise. Unfortunately the subject matter is sometimes seen as uncomfortable, inappropriate, or embarrassing and is not always discussed at home. However, the younger children are when these topics are raised with them, the more comfortable they will feel and the less likely they will be to feel ashamed of their development and to be secretive about it.

An Australian study, which researched the difference in the sexual behaviour of

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secondary students between 1997 and 2008, had some disturbing results.

- The number of year 12 students who had been with over 3 sexual partners within the previous year more than doubled.
- The percentage of boys in year 12 who had not had sex in the previous year dropped from 9.2 to 2.6 during the study.
- Despite the number of students reporting having more than 1 sexual partner, the percentage of students who always wear a condom remains around the same at just over 50%.

Also concerning is the rise in a number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In the years between 1997 and 2008 the occurrence of chlamydia in SA more than tripled, and the recorded cases of syphilis and gonorrhoea almost doubled. In

addition, the rate of teenage pregnancies in Australia is among the highest of all developed countries.

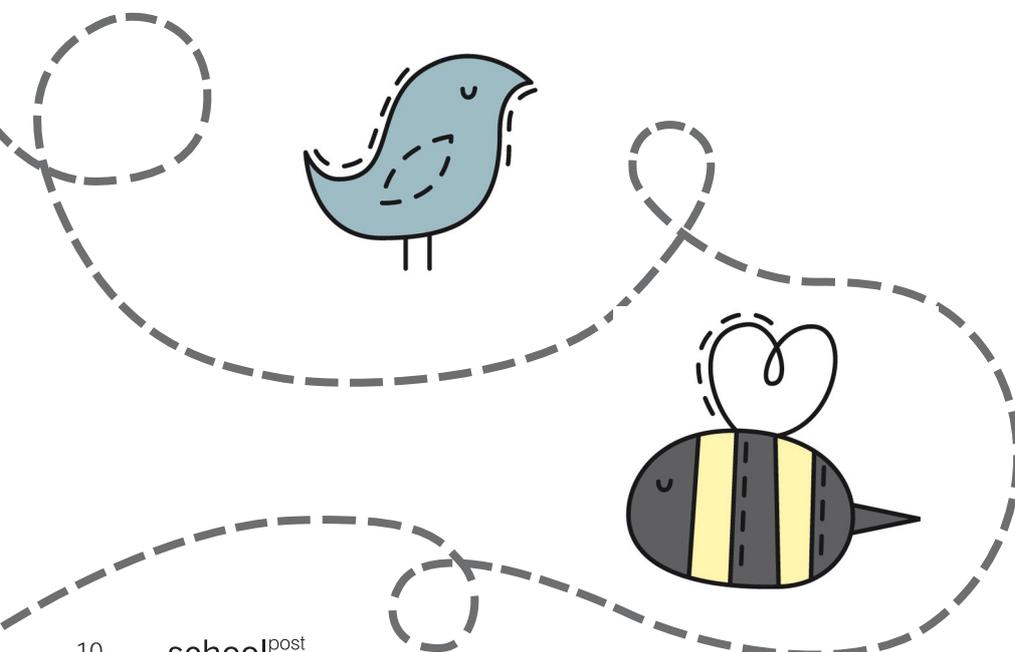
These statistics are alarming because they indicate that not only are more teenagers having sex at a younger age, but also they are not necessarily doing it in a safe and educated manner – despite the information available.

There is particular concern for the sexual health of international students. Although they may have received sexuality education in their home country before coming to Australia, there is no guarantee that they receive any information about the services and support available to them here. As many as 1 in 3 abortions carried out at the Women's and Children's Hospital are performed on international students – a worrying figure.

## The Current Situation

In Australia, New South Wales is the only state in which sexuality education is compulsory and enforced in schools. In South Australia, it is supposedly included in the prescribed health and physical education curriculum, but it is optional. If schools do decide to provide the material, parents can still choose to opt their children out of classes with sexual content.

While the flexibility of the curriculum allows individual schools to determine what is most appropriate for their local community, lack of support for the content means that many simply put it in the 'too hard' basket.



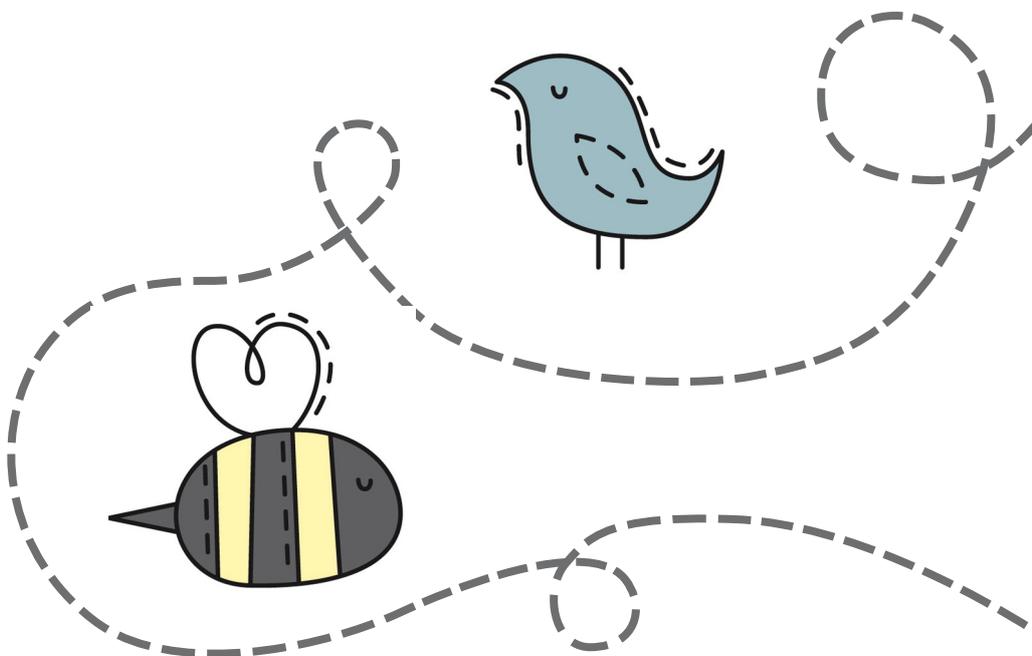
One of the main issues preventing consistent provision of sexuality education in SA is the lack of training given to teachers. A Bachelor of Teaching at the University of Adelaide doesn't include any instruction on providing sexuality education to children, despite the fact that its graduates may be expected to deliver sex education classes when they enter the workforce. Without proper training teachers are finding themselves unprepared to present the material to students, leading to an unwillingness to do so.

#### What's available

The most comprehensive training for teachers on the topic of sex education is provided by an independent not-for-profit organisation called SHineSA: namely the Sexual Health Information Networking and Education organisation of South Australia. Their course on sexual health and relationships is provided not only to teachers, but also to doctors, nurses, youth workers and disability workers across the state.

SHineSA also runs the Focus Schools program, which is designed to support schools to develop an appropriate approach to sexual health education. Schools involved in the program commit to providing at least 15 sessions on sexual health for students in years 8-10 and to provide support for staff to attend 15 hours of professional development relating to sexual health education. Currently there are only 72 schools involved in the program.

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In December 2009 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) released its International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. The lengthy document outlines recommended instruction for children of ages 5-18, based on information sourced from 87 studies worldwide. The purpose of the guidelines is to encourage the implementation of sexuality education internationally, and is a response in particular to the HIV pandemic.

There are six key concepts addressed by the document: relationships; values, attitudes and skills; culture, society and human rights; human development; sexual behaviour; and sexual and reproductive health. Each key concept is separated into a number of ‘topics’, for which learning objectives and key ideas are specified. The guidelines are split into four levels, level one being appropriate for children aged 5-8, level two for ages 9-12, level three for ages 12-15 and level four for teens aged 15-18 plus.

For example, key concept #1, Relationships, covers the topics of Families; Friendship, Love and Romantic

Relationships; Tolerance and Respect; and Long-term Commitment, Marriage and Parenting.

The guidelines have been subject to criticism in relation to the material that is suggested for children in the youngest level – originally the word ‘masturbation’ was used in the material provided. It has since been revised to read ‘it is natural to explore parts of one’s own body, including private parts’. Despite concern over wording, experts have supported the suggestion that children as young as 5 should be receiving sexuality education.

The Executive Director of UNAIDS, Michel Sidibé, suggests that “If we are to make an impact on children and young people before they become sexually active, comprehensive sexuality education must become part of the formal school curriculum, delivered by well-trained and supported teachers”.

The UNESCO Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education is available online, and resources from ShineSA can be accessed via [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au). ■