

# It's Not All About Sex

By David Knuckey

**Sex education in our schools has been the contentious national issue in 2016. The topical Safe Schools program has divided the country over just what information should be presented to children in school.**

Advocates want sex education programs to reflect the changing values in society, while critics claim the program pushes a minority agenda.

But what do the students themselves think? A new university study asked them.

The Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education (EYPSE) project focuses on two questions:

1. What are young people's views on school-based sexuality and relationships?
2. In what ways could sexuality and relationships education be improved?

## Sex Education

Historically, the content of sex education programs is decided by adults - not students - and the effectiveness of programs is also measured by adults.

*The Australian national curriculum acknowledges the need to include issues such as gender and sexual diversity, love, sexual desire, and pleasure ... this signals a huge shift in how sexuality and relationships education has been positioned and taught in schools in the past.*

“Evidence is also clear that delivering school sex education before students become active reduces sexual health problems.”

South Australia has had sex education in schools since the 1970s. The report states, however, ‘education authorities, in South Australia and in other states, have been reluctant to develop comprehensive curriculum materials and related support processes to help increase teachers’ capacity to teach sexuality education’.

Surveys show that the majority of students are sexually active by Year 10. Evidence is also clear that delivering school sex education before students become active reduces sexual health problems.

Research also shows that, at present, school sexuality programs present gender in traditional heterosexualised terms. Gender itself is also presented as binary: ‘these distinctions often position men and boys in negative discourses in need of change ... and young women as victims, responsible for safe sex and in need of protection’.

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## The Survey

2,325 SA and Victorian public high school students participated in the survey. The students were aged 13 to 16 years. 83% declared themselves heterosexual, with the remainder saying they were same sex or both sex attracted, unsure or preferred not to disclose\*.

## Schools Most Used & Trusted Source

For three quarters of students school sex ed. programs were the most used source of information about sexuality and relationships.

The second most used source was friends.

- Boys rated schools the most trusted source of information.
- Girls rated ‘mum’ the most trusted source - with school second.

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## The Best Teachers Of Sex Education

Given sex is a private aspect of life, it is a challenging subject to teach. Much research has been critical of teachers who are ill-prepared to teach in this area, are too embarrassed to teach certain topics (like sexual pleasure and eroticism) and who lack the skills to confront sexist and homophobic attitudes.

Students say the best teachers of sex ed. are those who are respectful, have a sense of humour and relate well to students.

- Girls rated respectful highest, while boys put sense of humour first.

## What is Currently Taught

Despite recent policy and attitude changes, teachers still make the final decision about what is taught in sex education classes. In a recent study, SHine SA found that not all aspects of the curriculum pertaining to sex and relationships were taught equally.

Those areas not taught as intensively were the newer, more controversial issues:

- Pornography.
- Cyber-bullying and sexual safety.
- Gender.
- Sexual desire and attraction.

The new survey found the most taught areas are:

1. Respect in relationships.
2. Puberty changes.
3. Female reproduction.
4. Our bodies are our own.
5. Correct terminology.

## What Should Be Taught In Greater Depth

'Gender Diversity' and 'Violent Relationships' were the two topics students want taught in greater depth.

Topic	Female	Male
Violent Relationships	54.1%	37.8%
Gender Diversity	51.8%	41%
Online Safety	44.1%	40.5%
Ending Relationship	43.5%	38.1%
Love	42.2%	39.4%
Starting Relationship	40.8%	41.3%
How To Have Sex	24.8%	37.8%
Different Sexual Acts	19.1%	31.6%
Sexual Pleasure	18.7%	37.8%
Masturbation	17.3%	37.3%
Pornography	14.2%	31.6%



'Love' and 'Starting a Relationship' were also listed by boys and girls as topics worthy of greater focus.

*Students' reasons for wanting more information frequently centred on their need to be knowledgeable about sexuality issues when they become involved in relationships.*

## Improving Sex Education

A quarter of students want more say in the content, more say about teaching methods and fewer secrets about sexuality and relationships education.

- Students also want more visual materials.
- More information about the impact of alcohol.
- Better teachers.
- Greater use of peer mentoring.

*They wanted less repetition of the biological aspects of human sexuality and more explicit and accurate information about gender diversity, violence in relationships, intimacy, sexual pleasure and love.*

\* The South Australian education department refused to allow researchers to ask students if they were transgender or intersex - instead students were given the option of 'other'. ■