

Vexed about sex

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/07/11/1215658134130.html?page=fullpage>

Ignorance of sex is widespread among students. And while schools may be condemned if they teach responsible behaviour, they are also criticised if they don't offer sex lessons. By Denise Ryan.

THESE are the facts of life that will make many parents cringe. Most young people in years 10 and 12 at Australian high schools have experienced some form of sexual activity. Twenty six per cent of year 10 students have had sexual intercourse, rising to just under 50% of year 12 students.

A third of sexually active year 12 students have had sex without a condom and 57% have had oral sex (56% of males and 58% of females).

You might think these statistics couldn't possibly apply to your teenager. But research by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University indicates that many teenagers are not as innocent as their parents think.

A national survey of the sexual health of 2388 year 10 and year 12 Australian secondary students, which included Catholic and independent school students, found that the number of sexually active young people had increased from surveys in 1992 and 1997 to the 2002 levels outlined above.

Thousands more teenagers will be surveyed next year and researchers are predicting the records will show a further slight increase in teenage sexual activity.

By year 12, 86% of students had experienced deep kissing and 75% had touched or been touched on the genitals.

Clearly teenagers are experimenting with sex, whether their parents like it or not. Most are using condoms most of the time, but most do so to prevent pregnancy, forgetting (or not knowing about) their important role in preventing sexually transmitted infections.

Haphazard use of condoms is also disturbing when linked to another statistic - more than 25% of sexually active young people have had unwanted sex at some time, with 16% attributing this to being drunk and 13% to being pressured by a partner.

What can parents do to protect their teenagers from unprotected and sometimes unwanted sexual activity? Is it their responsibility - or can they rely on secondary schools to provide information about sex?

Leading researchers in adolescent sexual health warn parents that the quality of the sex education offered in high schools varies wildly. They urge parents to try to talk to their children about sex, particularly in terms of acceptable behaviour in relationships. Boys need to know that it is not acceptable to pressure girls to perform, for example, oral sex. Girls need to know that it is not OK, for example, to dump boys by text or to taunt them.

Yet speaking to your offspring about such delicate issues is challenging, as Doreen Rosenthal of Melbourne University readily admits.

Like many parents, Professor Rosenthal didn't feel comfortable talking about sex when her nowadult children were teenagers. This is despite founding the ARCSHS centre at La Trobe University in 1992 and her public role as an expert on adolescent sexuality."

I don't think we ever talked about sex. Kids are hideously embarrassed to have their mother on television talking about sex," she says.

With so much sexual content embedded in television and movies - and with young people having easy access to the internet and teen magazines such as Dolly - Professor Rosenthal understands why parents might think they don't need to bother on the grounds that young people already know it all.

That's the impression teenagers like to give. 'We know, we know' is the common response when parents clumsily try to broach the subject.

But studies show that what students know about sex is often based on hearsay and misinformation.

Leyna Buller, a teacher of sex education at Hoppers Crossing Secondary College, says much of what young people glean from the media is both vulgar and vague in detail. "Many people make the assumption that young people learn by osmosis, which is unfortunate."

Professor Rosenthal says even if parents are comfortable talking to their teenagers about sex, many young people will refuse to hold the conversation. She recommends parents leave books such as *Girl Stuff* by Kaz Cooke lying around.

To help fill the gap, Professor Rosenthal created an information website - yoursexhealth.org - which was carefully designed to appeal to teenagers. This has clearly worked, with the website winning an Australian Teachers of Media award and also an international award.

Her other website for children aged 10 to 12 years - <http://www.thehormonefactory.com>

thehormonefactory.com - is also very popular.

She says parents must recognise that what is taught varies between schools, with some offering very little sex education.

Anne Mitchell, an associate professor at ARCSHS at La Trobe University, has run many oneoff sessions at secondary schools over the years but says this is not ideal. "This is a way for the school to dodge its responsibility," she says. "There is no follow-up. To be effective, you need to take a whole school approach."

Nurses are also often invited to run such sessions, she says, which means any information comes from a medical model, failing to address other issues such as how young women and men negotiate their sexual relationships.

She and Dr Debbie Ollis, of Deakin University, have developed a national curriculum framework called Talking Sexual Health that provides practical classroom resources for secondary school health education teachers. It has a preventative focus, teaching students about sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and bloodborne viruses such as hepatitis.

Another teaching resource for year 9 and 10 teachers, Catching On, has a similar focus.

Dr Ollis says the teaching resources drew on La Trobe University research that revealed that even when teenagers were taught safe sex practices, many didn't use them. Young men expected their partners to take responsibility while young women tended to regard their relationships as monogamous and "long term".

To demand a condom be used implied a lack of trust and that their partner might be infected or sexually promiscuous.

Yet the research also found that the so-called long-term relationship usually lasted three to six months. It also confirmed that young men are more promiscuous. They have more partners than young women and may have steady and casual partners simultaneously.

Knowing this, Dr Ollis says the teaching resources aim to help students understand the uneven power dynamic that can develop.

Young men are encouraged to take responsibility for contraception and prevention of STIs and young women practise being assertive in the face of sometimes aggressive demands from young men.

As the teacher of sex education to years 8 and 11 students, Ms Buller says it is important that young women feel they can say no to sexual activity.

She says it is a concern that popular culture gives the impression that oral sex is the first step to intimacy for young people."

Students need to know that this is not so, that it should be a mutual, comfortable relationship that meets each person's needs."

But this is difficult material for teachers to tackle with teenagers.

Dr Ollis says sex education is mostly taught by physical education teachers who have received little training and so many simply don't cover it."

PE students would be lucky to receive one week of sex education training in a four-year degree. In many schools, teachers don't have the skills, confidence or resources to talk about these issues," she says.

To address this problem, Dr Ollis has provided professional development training for 300 teachers since 2000.

She is pleased that the State Government has recently funded ARCSHS to provide one day of professional development for all interested health education teachers but says two days of funded training are needed. In fact, Dr Ollis would like to see all teachers receive such training.

Her PhD research also revealed a serious problem with high school sex education courses - the fact that young people who are attracted to the same sex are consistently portrayed negatively.

Research by Lynne Hillier at ARCSHS has indicated that 8% to 11% of young people are not exclusively heterosexual, which means there are likely to be two or three students in every class who may consider themselves to be gay.

Dr Hillier's research found that many of these students had been verbally or physically abused because of their sexuality."

We were horrified by the violence," she says. "Homophobia is worse than other forms of bullying because the alienation can be so final. Students often can't talk about the bullying because that means they have to come out to their parents, who may be heterosexual."

Many teachers are aware of the homophobia but are reluctant to discuss it with students."

Teachers are concerned about a parental backlash and stepping over the boundaries. The Victorian Essential Learning Standards require schools to cover sexuality but unless we provide teachers with support and professional development they don't do it," says Dr Ollis.

Training teachers does help. Dr Ollis interviewed 15 teachers before they taught the Talking Sexual Health program. She

trained them for two days and then looked at the impact on their practice a year later."

After the professional development, they were willing to cover issues around sexual diversity as having access to the latest research and activities gave them confidence."

However even the best trained teacher will not provide all the information that a young person might need to know about sex. The preventative focus of sex education in schools means that some topics, such as the clitoris and its contribution to orgasm, are unlikely to be discussed because this might seem to condone sexual pleasure and activity.

Yet anal sex is explained as part of the curriculum because the student needs to understand how to prevent the transmission of HIV."

It is an interesting dilemma to know what to teach," says Professor Rosenthal. "There are gaps."

While some parents might find some of the material covered in years 9 to 11 confronting, she says today's students mostly do not. "I would have been shocked to my eyeballs at the same age. But students these days are very open about sexuality and sexual diversity."

However Professor Rosenthal admits there can be problems if students are from diverse cultural backgrounds . "I think teachers can have a lot of difficulty if they are teaching to a broad church."

She says sex education, particularly in terms of relationships, should start earlier in schools and a strong partnership between the school and parents should be encouraged. Parent information nights are one way to do this."

I don't think parents know much about what's going on in schools. There is a dysfunction there."

Professor Rosenthal says many schools offer sex education quietly, hoping that parents don't find out what is covered."

It's a terrible burden for schools.

We are asking schools and teachers to do things that in the past would have been the prerogative of the parents. Schools worry about parents and so they self-censor. It's usually just a couple of parents who might complain and be antsy but schools fear them."

Yet schools do their students a disservice if they don't provide good sex education courses. The La Trobe University research indicates that if young people have a comprehensive sex education program, they are far more likely to delay sexual activity and, if already sexually active, to increase safe sex behaviours.

'If one person wants to know something, you will find 15 others do, too'

LEYNA BULLER, 23, in her second year of teaching at Hoppers Crossing Secondary College, admits she felt embarrassed at the prospect of discussing some issues with students during her university studies.

But she says her training by Deakin University sex education researcher and academic Debbie Ollis means she can now comfortably handle any questions that might arise in her years 8 and 11 health education classes.

Sex education in secondary schools is mostly taught as one-off sessions by invited experts or by physical education teachers as part of the health component of PE classes.

Ms Buller is unusual in having a Bachelor of Education and a Bachelor of Health Science and so has received more training in related areas than most teachers.

Schools are required to provide students with education about drugs in years 7 to 9, and most offer some sex education as part of their pastoral care program. But Ms Buller says many only offer cursory information.

If PE teachers are not comfortable answering questions about sex, Ms Buller says, they focus on anatomy, physiology and nutrition instead."

Students can miss out on sex education altogether."

Many parents are also uncomfortable talking about sexuality with their children, which means young people can end up knowing very little."

That's very common. I have taught year 8 students who don't know the basics about reproductive organs. Primary schools are expected to have covered this but it can get pushed to the bottom of the pile."

Ms Buller says her year 8 course begins with a focus on anatomy, effective communication and where students can find more information.

Sources of advice include the school nurse or student welfare officer. Youth resource centres, run by councils, also provide excellent information. As well, she recommends certain websites (see below).

There is also a question box in the classroom. Ms Buller discusses the questions in class. "If one person wants to know something, you will find 15 others do, too."

Ms Buller uses the Talking Sexual Health and Catching On teaching resources provided by La Trobe University's Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society as a framework for her courses.

An important part of her year 11 course teaches young people about their sexual rights. "It's really hard to teach about power and relationships.

The media, and society in general, seems to suggest that boys have more power. Girls have to learn that sex is a choice, not a demand."

After teaching in different schools during her teaching rounds, Ms Buller says the quality of courses varies greatly. "Some just work out of a work book, while others offer fantastic courses where students get to interact and inquire about what they want to know." -- DENISE RYAN

INFORMATION FOR TEENAGERS

- yoursexhealth.org
- thehormonefactory.com (for 10 to 12 year olds)
- Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
- Girl Stuff
- your full-on guide to the teen years, a book by Kaz Cooke
- Family Planning Victoria 9257 0100
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre 1800 032 017
- Health education teacher, school counsellor or the family doctor

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

- betterhealthchannel.com.au
- Parentline 132 289

