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2023

Let's Talk!

**Young women and non-binary peoples' experience of sex education
in Australia**

PREPARED BY: YOUNG WOMEN'S ADVISORY GROUP FOR ERA



Content Warning

This report includes mentions of sexual assault, child abuse, homophobia and transphobia. Details of organisation's that provide support and education across Australia can be found on the final page of this report.

Acknowledgement of Country

Equality Rights Alliance's (ERAS's) Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) acknowledges and pays respect to the Aboriginal people on whose land this report was written and from whom data was collected from. Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded.

We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their ancestors and elders, both past and present, and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We acknowledge that the feminist movement in Australia has too often overlooked and oppressed the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and non-binary people. We are committed to ensuring that the future of feminism is intersectional and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are amplified.

Other Acknowledgements

YWAG wants to acknowledge and thank the young women and non-binary people who participated in this project, for sharing their experiences, opinions and impacts of sex and relationships of education in Australian schools. This survey was voluntary and we are deeply grateful for those who took the time to provide frank and comprehensive responses, particularly to open ended questions. We hope this report captures your experiences and contributes to systemic change which improves the experiences of those to follow. Thank you, Without your input, this project would not be possible.

We also thank the Equality Rights Alliance for their ongoing support of this project. ERA has provided YWAG with ongoing technical and strategic support to make this project possible.

The current YWAG team would also like to thank the YWAGers that came before us. Some members started this project and have since left our team. Further, while a couple of the members who contributed to the 2015 Let's Talk project remained on the team when the 2019- 2020 project started, they have since left the team. They provided invaluable foundations, and with insight from the original project, we were able to learn from their experience and create a more relevant, impactful project.

Acknowledgement of Funding

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Contents

- 1** About YWAG
 - 2-4** Executive summary
 - 5** Key recommendations
 - 6** Context
 - 7** Approach to CSE in Australia
 - 9-10** Methodology
 - 11** Limitations
 - 12-13** Who participated
 - 15** General findings
 - 16-21** Topics taught
 - 22** How it was taught
 - 23** Activities
 - 25** LGBTIQ+ Education
 - 26** Disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and age appropriate
 - 27** Abstinence
 - 29-31** Who taught It
 - 32** Sexually explicit communication
 - 34** Impact
 - 35** Conclusion and support
-



About YWAG

The Equality Rights Alliance's (ERA) Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) is an independent group of young women and non-binary youth aged 18-30 across Australia bringing young women and non-binary voices and perspectives to the national policy space. YWAG aims to amplify young people's voices and highlight young people's issues in the policy and advocacy space.

The Equality Rights Alliance is one of six National Women's Alliances. ERA is funded by the Commonwealth Government's Office for Women and is led by Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Australia. ERA's membership currently includes 66 non-government organisations and social enterprises with a focus on the impact of policy or service delivery on women. ERA's work is directed by its membership, overseen by a steering committee and supported by a small team of secretariat staff.

In 2010, young women representatives from ERA member organisations identified the need for a young women's space within the ERA network. Thus began YWAG, a space for young feminists to come together and work on projects to amplify the voices of young women within the ERA network and more broadly. YWAG has regular input into ERA's advocacy and policy positions, participates in ERA's policy work groups and develops papers for ERA's projects. In addition, YWAG creates its own projects and initiatives to best contribute to advocacy for and by young women and non-binary people.

YWAG's current membership includes young women and non-binary people living and working on the lands of the Gadigal People, Larrakia People, Ngannawal and Ngambri people, and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We hold different occupations across the private and public spheres. We have different lived experiences, which enable us to embed intersectionality more meaningfully into our processes and projects.

YWAG values and works towards meaningful and genuine representation, participation and engagement of young women and non-binary youth. We recognise, amplify, and value the work of young women, including supporting women and non-binary youth to be represented in policy discussions and debates. We act as an advocacy channel on issues affecting women and non-binary youth.

YWAG creates and supports connections between women and non-binary youth and politicians, policy makers, researchers, activists, and the women's movement. We build, strengthen and support movements of young women including to revitalise, transform and sustain the women's movement.

YWAG creates safe spaces for young women and non-binary people's advocacy, skill development, and growth. We embrace and advocate for strengths based approaches, recognising the contribution that young people make to their communities. YWAG's research is led by and for young people of marginalised genders.



Executive Summary

The survey, "Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education" (Let's Talk 2019) is the second iteration of a project first developed in 2015 by YWAG, to platform young women and non-binary peoples' experiences of sex education in Australia. It is based on the principle of informing effective policy that meets the needs of young people and aims to add the voices of young people to the body of literature concerned with sex education in Australian schools. In 2015, YWAG surveyed over 1000 young women aged 16-21 nationally about their experiences of sexuality and relationships education at school and their knowledge of sexual health topics.

In 2019, YWAG launched an update to the 2015 survey. Let's Talk 2019 aimed to enable young women and non-binary people to voice their experiences and opinions of sex education in school. This report provides a snapshot of the experiences of sex education and a snapshot of sexual activity online for young women and non-binary people in Australia. This second survey also captured over 1,000 responses.

While there has been a significant amount of public discourse and the intellectual and ideological debate in Australia on the role of sex education in formal education, there has been little acknowledgement of what young people want. YWAG conducted this survey in the belief that young people are best placed to provide insight into what education they want and need, and how it can be best provided.

The results of the 2019 survey had similar themes as the findings of the 2015 survey. It remains the case that young people predominantly rate their education poorly. In 2015, 76% of participants reported that they had not learnt anything from their sex education classes in school that had helped them when dealing with sex and respectful relationships. In 2019, 59% of participants reported that they had not learnt anything from their sex education classes in school that had helped them when dealing with sex and 78% reported they had not learnt anything that had helped them in their experiences with dating and relationships. Despite increased public discourse and amendments to curriculums, the quality of sex education, as rated by students, remains low.



Artwork created by Sashini (@artwithsushi)



Executive Summary

'The Let's Talk 2019 results reflected that the curriculum has expanded to cover further topics, however students remain disheartened by how these topics are taught. The content appears to have been skimmed over, taught by a teacher who was disinterested or not qualified to take the course, or taught in a manner which was not relatable to the students' experience. participants described how their teachers trivialised aspects of the course, or made denigrating comments in class. Students noted significant curriculum gaps including a failure to meaningfully cover topics such as consent, gender identity, pleasure, healthy relationships, and pornography.

In 2022, the Australian Curriculum was updated to incorporate age appropriate consent education. This was a major recommendation of the Let's Talk 2015 report and we are pleased to see this addition. However, for this new curriculum to be effective, its implementation must be comprehensive, inclusive, and accessible.

YWAG is gravely concerned that most participants to the 2019 survey reported a poor experience of sex education, and that their education was heteronormative - i.e., centering male-female binary relationships and heterosexual sex and reproduction. Young people's needs are not being met by sex education at secondary school.

The intersectional data captured and the analysis presented in this report provides solutions to the inadequate and inappropriate sex education currently experienced by Australian secondary school students. Data from this survey can be cross-referenced according to age, geographic location, language/s spoken, gender, sexuality, disability, cultural background, and Indigeneity.

Sexuality education in Australia is failing to meet the needs and expectations of young women and young gender diverse people. While Australia's national curriculum includes sexuality education, State and territory governments are responsible for implementation which leads to optional or limited delivery in some states. The curriculum lacks a critical gender lens which would identify patriarchal assumptions and biases in curriculum material. Gender-equitable policies and procedures, are needed to encourage cultural change across school communities.



Key Recommendations

Young people want comprehensive, age appropriate, inclusive, and accessible sex education. The following recommendations should be implemented to make that a reality;

1. Include gender and sexuality as a cross-curriculum priority.

Enforce compulsory delivery of Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) in all Australian schools, in line with Australia's obligations under ICESCR ([International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#))
- 2.
3. Integrate Respectful Relationships education with CSE across all Australian States and Territories.
4. Invest in pre-service training and professional development for teachers to deliver CSE.
5. Invest in resourcing for and implement whole-of-school frameworks for gender equity, including policies and procedures, in all Australian schools.
6. Amend State and Territory legal frameworks which criminalise "sexting" behaviour by young people under child pornography legislation, to create a defence for minors, and a special offence for cases of non-consensual sharing of intimate images.



Context: Why Comprehensive Sex Education?

CSE is a public health intervention designed to provide young people with evidenced based information about their sexuality and reproductive health, to support autonomy over their sexual health. YWAG supports the inclusion of CSE in schools, as we believe all young people have a right to education which supports their exploration of their gender and sexuality in a safe way.

In 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisational (“UNESCO”) released a technical guide entitled “International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach”. UNESCO’s definition of CSE includes teaching “cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality”. The technical guide highlights the unique needs of those from diverse communities, such as those within the LGBTIQ+ community. The report also emphasises that many negative assumptions held by the community, regarding the impact of CSE, are unfounded. Particularly, that CSE does not “increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour or STI/HIV infection rates”. The technical guide provides the scientific basis for including CSE in primary and high school curriculums all around the world. While there is an appreciation for different sociocultural environments, the advice from UNESCO remains that CSE is integral to every child’s development, regardless of their country of birth.

CSE is a necessary component of international human rights and gender equality frameworks. International treaty monitoring bodies urge States to implement compulsory CSE in their education frameworks, referencing the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (the right to health and the right to education), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (“the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions”) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. These agreements fail to reference how a State should deliver education as per specified rights or what kind of education. Although the treaties themselves do not specify the need for States to implement CSE, the bodies that monitor these treaties have specified that some education, such as information about contraceptives, should be supplied.



Approach to CSE in Australia

In Australia, those who experience structural inequality are more likely to experience health, education and justice deficits. Cycles of discrimination perpetuate and exacerbate cycles of poverty. Making CSE available to all young people in Australia has the potential to contribute to reducing inequality. For example, CSE speaks not only to the technicalities of consent but also the power imbalances that can challenge consent paradigms. CSE can identify negative gender stereotypes and provide strategies for challenging those stereotypes. There is preliminary evidence to suggest CSE can adjust individual attitudes. A pilot study in Victoria applied a “whole of-school approach to respectful relationships education in a primary school setting”. The pilot found after 6 months, there were “signs of diminishing stereotypical gender attitudes regarding jobs and activities” among year 1 and year 2 students. This is an example of CSE targeting education around social factors that contribute to gendered violence.

While the federal government oversees the Australian Curriculum, to standardise teaching across Australia, it remains the State and Territories discretion as to how education is provided. In 2008, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) developed a national curriculum which aimed to standardise teaching across Australia. While there were high expectations that the inclusion of sex education in the curriculum would result in a curriculum in line with UNESCO’s CSE standard, this did not translate. While the curriculum mentions respectful relationships, it is done superficially and allows schools and teachers to determine how and to what extent the content is covered.

Each State and territory have incorporated sex education into their curriculums differently. Notably, none of the curriculums refer to sex education, as sex education. In Victoria and NSW, for example, respectful relationships appear to be under the “health and physical education” subject area. The Queensland Government’s website expressly mentioned that “Respectful relationships education program”, is compulsory within the State and can be taught by schools either as part of the delivery of the Australian curriculum or through pastoral care. Curriculums are not comprehensive, they guide schools as to what broad topics must be taught and the vague learning outcomes that must be achieved. While curriculums may at face value appear to address many of the elements integral to CSE, they do not do so with enough specificity to be mandated or even implemented by well-meaning schools.

In 2022, the National Curriculum was updated. The new curriculum includes ‘the explicit teaching of consent and respectful relationships from F–10 in age-appropriate ways’. YWAG notes that whatever is included in the curriculum will remain tokenistic unless it is accompanied by budgeting for subject matter experts to teach the content, age-appropriate resource design as well as mandating compliance with the curriculum.

@VERTIGOCAVE



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Methodology

The survey captured the experiences of young women (including cis and trans experiences) as well as non-binary youth aged between 16-21. YWAG considered capturing survey responses from a younger cohort. However, due to ERA and YWCA's guidelines on conducting research with those under the age of 16 years old, and the group's capacity, the final decision was to restrict the age bracket to those 16 years old and above.

The survey was open from July 2019 and closed in February 2020. Of note, the survey closed **prior to** the COVID-19 public health policies that came into effect in 2020 which altered the delivery of education programs, as well as increasing the time young people were spending online.

The survey was promoted through YWAG's social media platforms and through stakeholder organisations. In promoting the survey, we were particularly committed to gaining responses from youth with diverse experiences, from a variety of different demographics. In this vein, we targeted representative organisations of underrepresented groups in the community to assist in promoting the survey.

The survey was completed on Survey Monkey and included 35 questions, a mix of binary (ie. yes/no), multiple-choice and open-ended questions. All but two questions, on gender and age, were voluntary. YWAG felt this was important to make sure young people felt comfortable to answer, without pressure of a compulsory response.

YWAG consulted with a range of experts in sexuality and relationships education and violence prevention to make sure the survey was appropriate and robust. These included sexual and reproductive health professionals, researchers and academics, youth workers, teachers, and women's services. The final survey design was approved by the YWAG members and ERA. This included a sign off on the purpose of each question as well as specific wording to ensure the survey was as accessible as possible.



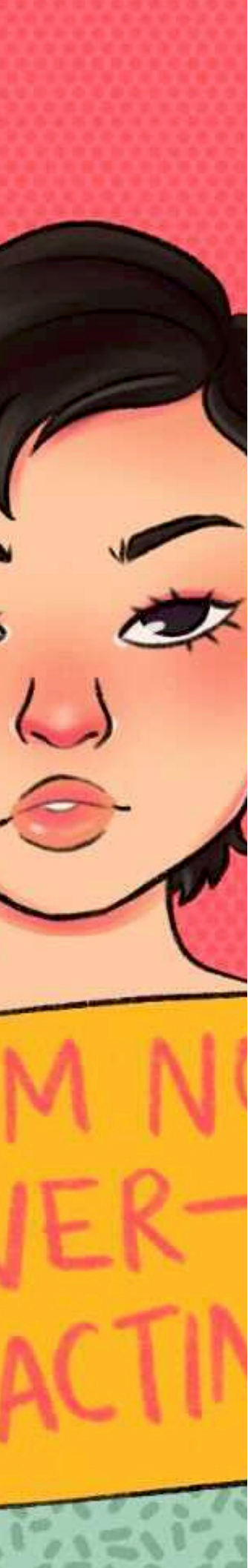
Methodology cont.

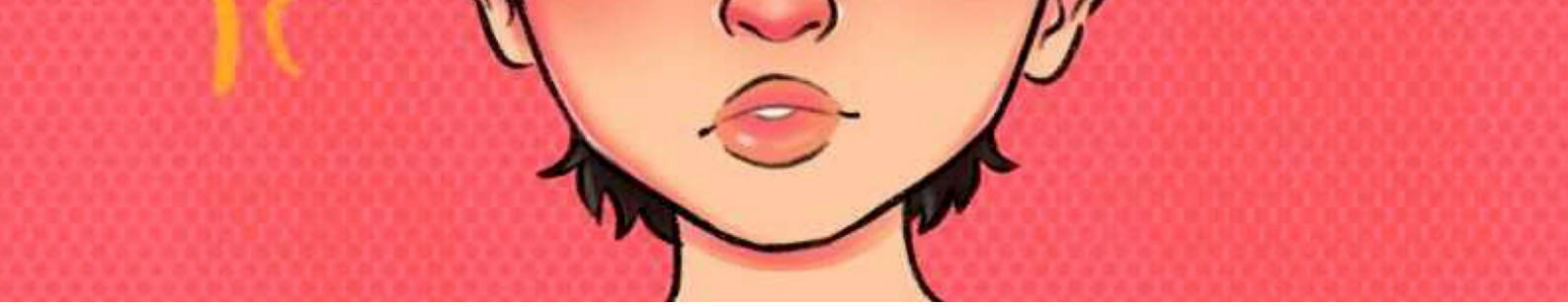
As the survey involved asking those between the ages of 16 and 21 of their experiences with sending and receiving sexually explicit messages, YWAG consulted with ERA as to the ethical and legal considerations. It was decided it was important to include a disclaimer for all participants at the start of this part of the survey that specified:

"IMPORTANT: Across all Australian States and Territories, it's illegal to take or send nude or sexual images of a person under 18 under child pornography laws (even if it's yourself or if the person consents to have the images taken). For more information, see the Youth Law Australia website or click here.

All of the answers you give here are anonymous and we don't collect any information that could identify you or your answers later, but it's important to know this before choosing how and whether to answer. Remember all of your answers are voluntary."

Survey analysis was completed in part by YWAG members, as well as two independent contractors who assisted in completing quantitative data analysis. The quantitative analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel. The qualitative analysis was completed through thematic analysis and a review of how the themes interacted with each other.





Limitations

The survey was open between July 2019 and closed in February 2020. This means the data does not represent students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including periods of study from home for many students.

As participants in our research self-selected after seeing our promotions of the online survey, the number of women and non-binary youth in our sample cannot be assumed to be representative of the population of Australian women aged 16 to 21 generally. The findings from our research provide an indication of the issues in relation to sex education for young women and non-binary youth in Australia. Further research could provide deeper insights into these issues, and the scale of some of the problems we have found.

YWAG consulted with subject matter experts when designing the survey to ensure it was accessible to young women, including cis and trans experiences, and non-binary youth. Looking at the survey results, it became apparent that transmen wished to engage in this survey and were not catered for. The YWAG team, at the time of report writing, are not sure why this perspective was not sought (intentionally or unintentionally) during survey design. The current YWAG team wish to acknowledge this was a misstep and any future work will aim to capture the experiences of transmen.

As a high proportion of our participants were 16 and 17 years old at the time of completing the survey, we acknowledge they may have been yet to receive education on certain topics during their year 11 and 12. We note that the age of consent is 16 and many young people are engaging in relationships, sexual and romantic, prior to this age and topics should have been covered by this time.



Who Participated?

The survey captured the experiences of young women (including cis and trans experiences) as well as non-binary youth aged between 16-21. The survey received 1,058 responses to the survey.

Diversity of Participants

Table 1: Personal characteristics of participants

CHARACTERISTIC	NUMBERS
GENDER DIVERSE	74
REFUGEE	7
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER	37
MIGRANT	102
SPEAK ANOTHER LANGUAGE	105
CALD	111
DISABILITY	134
DIVERSE SEXUALITY	583

Diversity of Participants

The survey received responses from people with a broad range of sexualities and age.

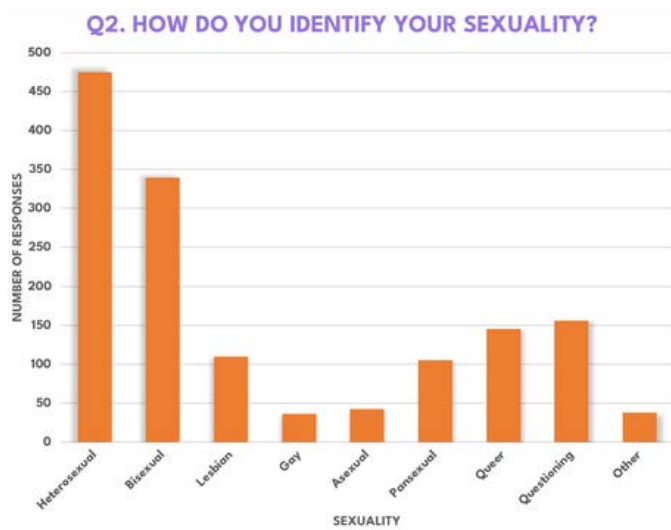


Figure 1: Sexuality

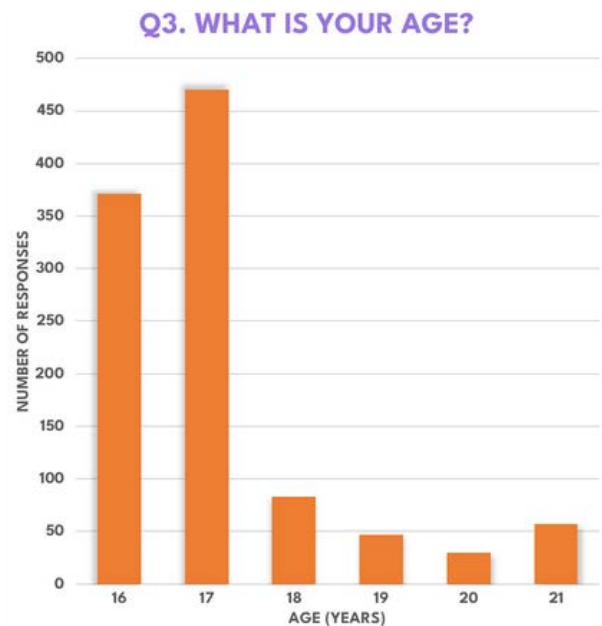


Figure 2: Age

Type of School Attended

Table 2: Types of school attended to by participants

TYPES OF SCHOOL	NUMBERS
DISTANCE EDUCATION-PRIVATE	3
SPECIAL SCHOOL	3
NO RESPONSE	3
HOMESCHOOLING	5
DISTANCE EDUCATION-PUBLIC	6
INDEPENDENT/ PRIVATE SCHOOL-NON RELIGIOUS	61
INDEPENDENT/ PRIVATE SCHOOL-RELIGIOUS	403
PUBLIC SCHOOL	574



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General Findings

While sex education is mandatory in all states and territories in Australia, YWAG found that how it is taught is inconsistent, and out of the 1058 participants, 96 said they did not receive sex education at school, with a further 21 saying they were unsure if they had received it. This finding is consistent with our findings in 2015, where 89 of 1162 participants did not receive sex education at school.

What was taught

We found that while most students were taught about penetrative sex (penis in vagina sex), condoms, STIs, pregnancy, sexting and puberty, very few students were given the opportunity to learn about gender and sexuality diversity, pleasure or other sexual activity.



Figure: Topics Taught



Figure 3: Topics taught

Those who contributed to the "other" category when asked what they learnt about in sex education, either commented on the quality of teaching on a topic, what was not included in their education but not captured by our question.

Some participants also specified some topics and content they were taught, including: "drugs and alcohol", "abstinence as best contraception", "never have sex before marriage", "the bible", "evils of porn and sexting", "male ejaculation", "anatomy", "abortion", "sexual assault/rape", "date-rape drugs", "rhythm method contraception" and "the logistics about how things fit together".

Consent

In 2015, 37% of participants were taught about consent in their sex education in school compared to 62% in 2019. In 2015, after receiving sex education, young women did not feel confident in their understanding of respectful relationships and were unsure about their level of confidence in understanding concepts like consent. In 2015, 48% of participants disagreed to some extent that after doing sex education in school they felt confident in their understanding of consent, while only 40% agreed to some extent that they felt confident. In 2019, 67.3% of participants felt confident in their understanding of consent and 40% strongly agreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of consent". While it is encouraging to see consent taught more frequently in schools, it appears the way it is being taught is not actually useful for students.

One of the primary themes of responses was the lack of holistic consent education, leaving young people unsure and concerned for their safety. Young people expressed concerns that the consent education was glossed over, and expressed the importance of safety based, practical consent education as a foundational element of sex education in schools. When asked what they **wished** was included in sex education, participants told us:

"Consent - including coercion, blackmailing, drunk. What counts as sexual assault, harassment, rape. Where to go/who to ask to deal with these things"

"Affirmative consent, how to care of people who have been harmed during sex, how to care for yourself after harmful experiences, pleasure as important, how shame works and its consequences, exploring romantic attraction vs sexual attraction vs sensuality vs platonic attraction etc, asexuality, sexuality as fluid, vaginismus and other related conditions, sex seen as a fun/intimate/pleasurable activity that some people like, BOUNDARIES and how to set them and change them depending on what you want and value"

Participants expressed disappointment that they were taught "how to say no", not the "importance of consent". Participants when expressing what they wished was taught regarding consent, demonstrated a nuanced understanding of consent. YWAG believes there is merit in further research being conducted as to where young people are gaining a comprehensive understanding of consent and whether these avenues could be incorporated into formal education.

Gender and Sexuality Diversity

In 2015, only 8.9% of students received education about diverse gender identities. In 2019, 10.3% of students received education about diverse gender identities. Of these students, 70.2% of participants did not feel confident in their understanding of diverse genders and 37% strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of diverse genders". In 2019, 81.4% did not feel confident in their understanding of intersex variations and 49.8% strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of intersex variations". In addition, 62.6% did not feel confident in their understanding of homophobia and 32.2% strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of homophobia". 62.1% did not feel confident in their understanding of diverse sexualities and 29.6% strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of diverse sexualities".

Participants from different geographical locations, cultural backgrounds and ages all expressed their disappointment that they were not taught about gender and sexuality diversity. Further, when the "mechanics" of sex was discussed, this was heteronormative. Perpetuating harmful myths, or conspicuous silences around gender identity can lead to more confusion at best, or active harm at worst. Students noted they **wished** they had learnt:

"More (or any) trans related education [sic] More of a focus on what makes a relationship okay and healthy (from an inclusive perspective)"

"LGBTIQ+ topics, transphobia, intersex, types of protection, consent"

"safe LGBTIQ+ sex, trans and nb identity, significance of misgendering and dead naming, intersex individuals, where to access forms of sti prevention (other than condoms)"

"QUEER RELATIONSHIPS, GAY/LESBIAN SEX, TRANSGENDER AND NONBINARY IDENTITIES. I am a Nonbinary person, who sexually identifies as a lesbian our school had a distinct lack of queer related discussion about sex and things like that. It made it hard to learn anything about what should be considered normal for queer people. Problem with that is so many people, including myself turn to things like Pornography which has serious mental health impact".





Pleasure

In 2015, nearly three quarters of participants (74%) told us that after participating in sex education in school they did not feel confident in their understanding of pleasure. In 2015, 63.5% did not feel confident in their understanding of pleasure and 33% strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel confident in my understanding of Pleasure". In 2019, only 12% of respondents received education about pleasure. While this survey did not capture students' level of confidence in their understanding of pleasure, participants provided insight into their experience in open ended questions.

Students understood the sex education curriculum to have a primary focus on the reproductive element of sex, and there was little to no discussion of female pleasure. Mirroring prominent cultural silences, participants told us:

"I would have liked to be taught about the pleasure side of sex like the boys did. I would have liked to be taught that sex wasn't something to be feared. I would have wanted to be taught that it's normal to be thinking about the same sex. It would have been nice to be taught that WOMEN ARE NOT JUST SEXUAL OBJECTS."

"Female masturbation was not explained as clearly as male."

bleeding & succeeding

An illustration featuring three women. On the left, a woman in an orange shirt and white shorts is kicking a soccer ball. In the center, a woman in an orange dress holds a red flag with a white paw print. On the right, a woman in a white sailor-style top and orange pants carries a black bag. The background has faint purple paw prints.

Artwork created by Lauren (@invero.co)

Harmful Myths, Domestic Violence and Pornography

Many students expressed concerns about how difficult topics like victim blaming,, domestic and family violence and pornography were discussed. Young people noted that there were overtones of shame which class discussions of behaviour that did not fit into a heteronormative framework, meaning that LGBTIQ+ , Gender diverse narratives and pleasure were largely either not included in material, or were perceived as afterthoughts. This is particularly important, because the ABS found that one in three women has experienced gendered violence from the age of 15. There is a real opportunity to address harmful myths and utilise sex education as a primary prevention mechanism against gendered violence. Young people noted:

"Victim blaming. That it's not about what she/they wears or where she/they walks. It is about what the assaulter did. To not blame the victim for not fearing what's behind every corner"

"That God doesn't give you STDs if you have sex with someone you're not married to. (My school taught this in year 9)"

Sexual Health

Notably, menstruation and care appeared to not be sufficiently discussed, and prominent issues such as endometriosis were noticeably absent. When female anatomy was discussed, there was minimal to no discussion of female pleasure, or even prominent female health issues like PCOS and endometriosis, which usually begin in teenage years.

"It has been very scientific and biological. We were taught the basics but consent and the clitoris weren't touched upon and I found that inadequate. I also have a condition (endometriosis) that affects my experiences with sex and am very disappointed that it's existence was never mentioned because it is thought that 1 in 10 women will have it. Other conditions that may effect sexual health like vaginismus or PCOS ect were never mentioned either."

"We were told about periods and that tampons and pads exist but they never tell you how to put a tampon in. I used to swim competitively and I had no clue how to put a tampon in. I cried in the bathroom the first two trainings sessions on my period trying to work out tampons. I mean I worked it out but a tutorial before that would of been nice."



Sexual Health cont.

"For me personally, I have endometriosis, and though all the education I was told that the pain I was in was normal. I think a lot more could have been done to teach me that pain isn't ok and to see a doctor"

"I have endometriosis, I went to the er recently from collapsing multiple times in pain and will be getting surgery for it shortly. In high school I had no idea that endometriosis even existed, I was told it was just pain and to get over it. When I couldn't walk from being in utter agony, I specifically remember being told that I was exaggerating and to get over it. This is a chronic disease that affects 10-20% of women of childbearing age and causes extreme pain, and I was told to get over it. You can bet that I'll bet till the day I die that I won't forgive that my teachers who were meant to support, guide, and educate me told me to get over my chronic disease when I was in such insufferable pain. In general I think a little more discussion about what I will call "vagina topics" is necessary, I think it's important for kids that age to thoroughly know and understand the hymen. Also I'd love to comment on any of the gay or trans sex ed that was done except that my sex education in high school was the one of straightest things I've been taught to date."

"I wish they'd talked to us through our bodies, not just "oh yep your boobs will grow". I didn't even know where my vagina was until I left that school. We didn't discuss ways to ask people about their sexuality or gender, didn't learn how to properly address someone who isn't in their birth gender, how to ask someone about STIs/STDs or even how to put a condom on."

Of a series of key indicators for successful sex education, young people felt most confident in their understanding of STIs and contraceptives such as condoms, but there were significant gaps in LGBTIQ+ awareness and issues, and there were prevalent themes of shame and even ridicule in the teaching environment.

How it was taught

Regularity

Participants expressed a disappointment with when sex education was taught and how often, particularly noting years 9, 10 and 11. The first-time participants received sex education at school was most commonly in years 5 or 6. There was a large disparity then, as to the frequency of the education received.

Q13. DURING YOUR TIME IN SECONDARY SCHOOL, HOW OFTEN DID YOU RECEIVE SEX EDUCATION?

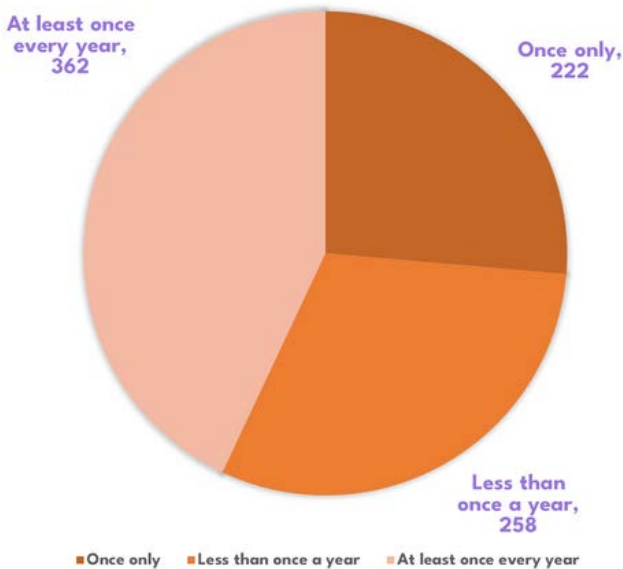


Figure 4: How often received

Q14. FOR EACH YEAR THAT YOU RECEIVED SEX EDUCATION, APPROXIMATELY HOW MUCH TIME DID YOU SPEND LEARN ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS?

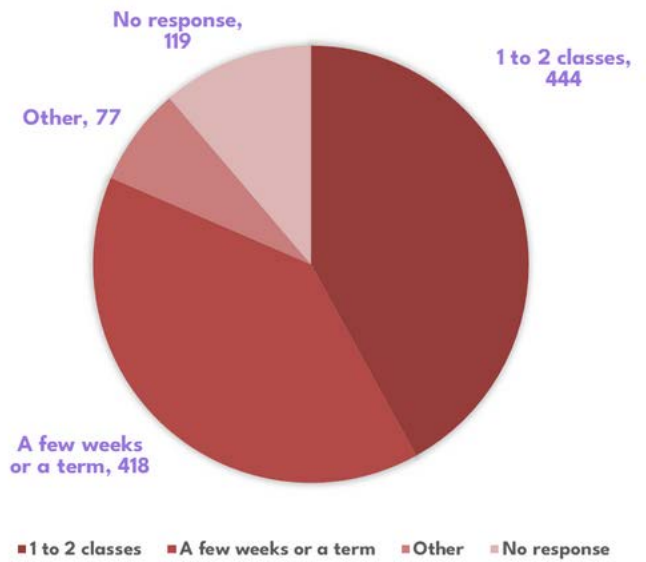


Figure 5: How much time

Most participants stated they received very basic sex education, mainly about reproductive biology, in years 7 and 8. But several noted that they would have liked more consistent and extensive education about consent and healthy relationships in years 9, 10 and 11:

"It was good from yr 7-10 and we spent an entire term on it each year. I definitely think it could have covered issues surrounding LGBTIQ+ people more. Consent wasn't really taught until yr 10 and in yr 11 and 12 there was no sex education which is really strange."

"Missed one day of school because I was sick so never got any sex education was told the next day that we do not have sex till we are married so I didn't miss anything important."

"only other education was year 7 with a few lessons then a test on extremely basic things (labelling parts of genitalia, when can you get pregnant, how does pregnancy occur etc"

@VERTIGOCAVE



Artwork created by Manuela (@vertigocave)



Activities

Many of the responses noted that there was a focus on practical approaches to sexual health, which participants felt was beneficial, such as:

'Practical approaches, like proving you're never too big for a condom by competing to see who can fit the most tennis balls in, inserting dams into a 3D vaginal model, putting condoms on things, and holding and looking at physical examples of contraception all proved memorable and effective.'

However, these appeared less frequently than negative experiences. Participants particularly noted feeling awkward when discussing sex education, and that this feeling increased when the subject matter was treated as a joke by the educator or other students. Even worse, diverse identities were treated as a joke, which further marginalised students.

"Grade 7 our sport teacher was running the sex eEd class. He put on a video that explained a lot of male reproductive health from STDs to masturbation and sex. He skipped the section of the video that spoke about periods. He spent most the time on his phone but made sexual jokes during the male masturbation section, including shaking a white-out pen causing white liquid paper to fly everywhere. He thought this was funny. Grade 9, my other male sport teacher put being LGBTIQ+ up for debate in class and spoke negatively about transgender people and gay men. He let the class speak freely, which as a bunch of 14 year olds, it was all negative. It was very damaging for me who was questioning my sexuality and identity."

The results of the survey captured students' disappointment that programs did not address the experiences of those within the LGBTIQ+ community or those with disability. Participants reflected in some instances that they wished this information were to be provided so they could explore their own sexuality with educational support. Others expressed that the information provided actively condemned their identity. In the 2019 results, 17% of those who identified as heterosexual rated their sex education experience between 8 and 10, on a scale of 1 to 10. Whereas only 8% of those who indicated they identified as Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Asexual, Pansexual, Queer, Questioning or Other, rated their education between 8 and 10. One respondent shared with us that they would have liked to be taught:

"More detail about sexual relationships with non cis-het couples. As a young lesbian, I had to turn to porn to find out how to do it, and to the internet to find out how to stay safe without condoms or the pill. Instead, our teacher acknowledged it but didn't think it necessary in our class as "everyone seemed interested in boys".

LGBTIQ+ Education and Representation

The responses noted that sex education was largely hetero-normative, and seemingly did not include other gendered or sexual identities, which lead students feeling confused and isolated:

"It was taught only for cisgender straight couples looking to reproduce basically. No focus on pleasure or proper y'all about consent. LGBTIQ+ + relationships were not condoned at all. Only the boys were talked to about pornography at it was taught like it would ruin your life"

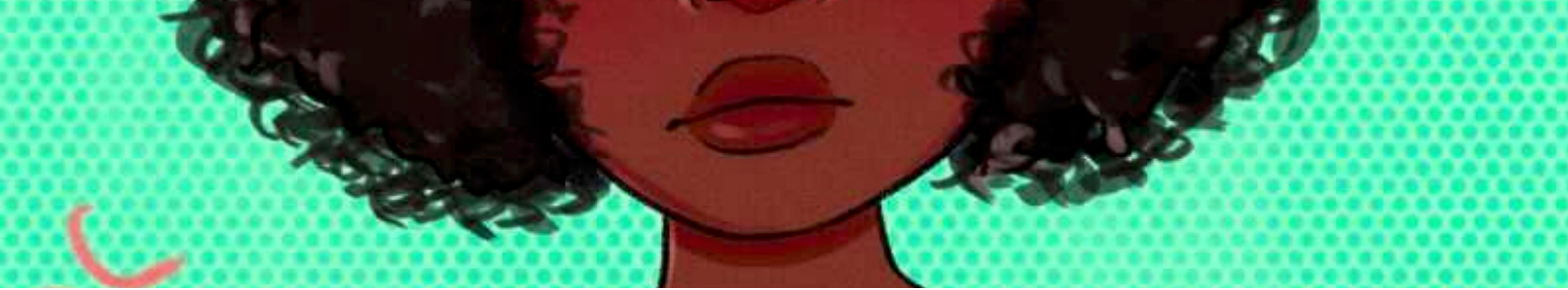
Our findings indicate that students are rarely taught about diverse genders and sexualities. By extension, when topics such as puberty and sex are taught, they are not taught in a manner inclusive to those within the LGBTIQ+ community. On the contrary, participants noted the teachings were blatantly homophobic or resulted in students making homophobic comments of which educators failed to address.

"1. Don't let homophobes teach your children about LGBTIQ+ and gender identity 2. Don't let teachers who victim blame rape survivors teach! Full stop! 3. Try to make sex Ed an LGBTIQ+ friendly space. Homophobic shit was being thrown around and the teachers did???? Nothing????"

While not specifically mandated in any State curriculum, many participants noted that their religious school did not teach them about LGBTIQ+ issues, forms of contraception and other sexual health issues. These answers often spoke about an experience of shame linked to sexuality.

"We had one day where we went off campus to a church. We spent the day learning about abstinence and why abstinence is the best choice. There were a lot of STI and pregnancy horror stories, and at the end they got us to sign a card declaring we would remain abstinent until marriage. There was no explanation about the actual process, protection, different types of sex, different types or relationships, anything like that. It was just a bunch of activities telling us that sex was between a man and a woman in marriage, and this is what happens if you sleep around. No mention of queer people, it was generally discouraged within the school...Everything I know now about sex and sex related topics I learnt from the internet/YouTube and friends, and a bit from my parents."

"We were essentially taught that if we had sex we would get an STD. They also used scare tactics by talking a lot about abortion and how we are killing babies. The whole experience was completely unhelpful and a little traumatising."



Disability

Those with a disability similarly reported lower rates of satisfaction, with 8% of those with a disability rating their education between 8 and 10, on a scale of 1 to 10. As opposed to 13% of those without a disability rating their education between 8 and 10 on the same scale. One respondent noted that their education was very basic:

'Basic- the reproductive systems and how to reproduce. Taught about consent and safe sex, including various methods of birth control. Did not discuss more taboo topics such as masturbation, sex for pleasure, the stigma surrounding sex etc.'

Inaccessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth

Of the 35 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth who participated in the survey, 24 said that they did not learn anything that was useful in their experiences with sex. 29 said they didn't learn anything that helped them take care of their physical sexual health or wellbeing. 27 said they didn't learn anything that helped in their experiences with dating or relationships.

Numerous participants mentioned their disappointment that they did not receive sex education that was inclusive of LGBTIQ+ experiences. This left students feeling "ashamed" of their sexuality, experiencing "self loathing" and uncomfortable disclosing their sexuality to friends and family.

Age Appropriate

Participants expressed their desire for age-appropriate education. This was expressed as necessary to ensure information was obtained prior to the age of 16, to protect and empower them.

'Updating information giving more necessary information to students as they get older and keeping information useful'

YWAG notes that the 2019-2020 survey was not designed in a way that produced results outlining in which year certain topics at certain years, nor the development of the content in year to year. However, the responses to open ended questions make it notable that sex education content was not useful to students at the time presented.



Abstinence

Participants told us that abstinence was taught as a method of avoiding pregnancy and/or STIs. It was also used to explain why students would not be receiving any other form of CSE. YWAG undertook some further analysis to determine if participants' experiences differed depending on the location or type of school they attended. 9% of participants told us they did not receive sex education at school. Of these participants, the majority attended Private Schools (Religious). The rating of sex education differs slightly between those who attended Public School, Private School (Religious) or a Private School (Non-Religious). Those who attended religious schools noted abstinence was taught as well as "no sex before marriage", and gender and sexuality was often excluded. One respondent told us:

"Catholic schools need to be more informative. They tend to avoid talking about what constitutes as sex, rape and about genders/queer/trans people etc"

Some teachers appear to be teaching content in conflict with the desire of the school's management. One respondent told us:

"As I go to a catholic school, our teachers are required to preface any statements [sic] with "this is not applicable for you girls as you will not have sex until marriage" to which we all laugh (even our teacher who does not believe in this ethos) e.g. "girls this is a condom, however you won't need this because you won't have sex until marriage and by that time you will be aiming to have children"

Another respondent articulated that the sentiment among their peers is that sex education is being taught at their school to comply with the curriculum, rather than to provide a meaningful education. They told us:

"My school is an all girls catholic school near the city. We have had lessons on puberty but that's really it. We did a two week "sexuality and identity" topic in HPE but that really only scratched the surface, and the feeling among students is that our school is doing the bare minimum because we feel they don't want to talk about it as it goes against catholic teachings, and that they are only doing this so that they can say they are providing sex education. Which is true, but no student feels as though it is sufficient or supported."

In addition to there being a difference of experience between the types of schools, there is also some differences depending on the location of the school.

whore

hoe



slut

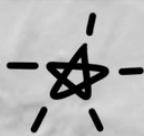
bitch



NO ONE EVER DESERVES TO BE JUDGED



BY THEIR SEXUAL HISTORY OR LACK THEREOF



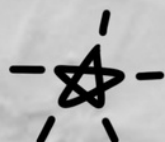
virgin



frigid



Artwork created by Julia (@juliaperture)



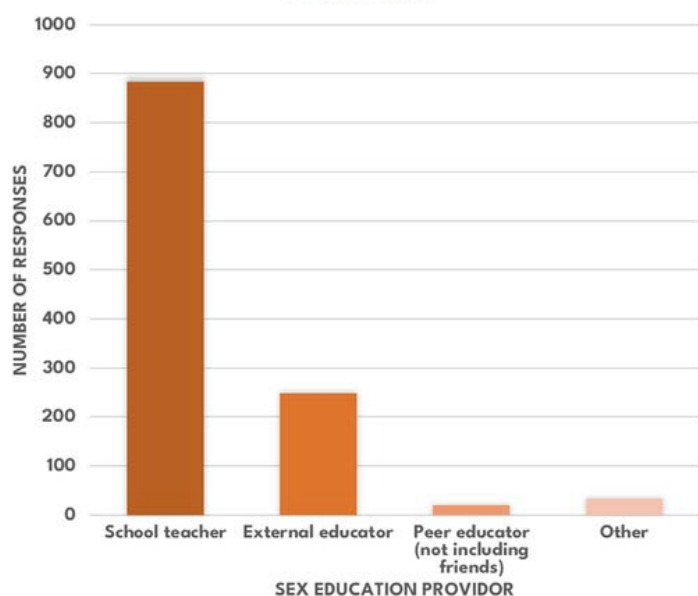
Who Taught It

The survey asked who delivered sex education but, this question appears to have created some confusion among participants. Some have answered in regard to what sex education they received that was facilitated by their school, whereas others provided examples of educational sources beyond formal education sources. This is evident in responses within the "other" category. Education sources captured within the other box included: "school nurse", "PE teacher", "Shine SA", "Chaplain", "pastor", "priests", "nuns", "external educator from catholic organisation", "work experience teacher", "a police officer", "the health students in the grade above us (ie the year 11s when we were in year 10)", "school counsellor" and "school captains".

Others that used this opportunity to specify where they received sex education outside the classroom. Some responses included, "friends", "parents", "internet", "media", "myself" and "YouTube videos by a clinical sexologist". Those who contributed to the "other" category either commented on the quality of teaching on a topic, what was not included or what was included but not captured by our question

Overwhelmingly, sex education was delivered by a school teacher. Responses to open ended questions gives us insight into the challenges faced when teachers are asked to teach sex education when it is not their specialty, they are not trained to teach it and often they appear to resent being asked to teach it.

Q15. WHO PROVIDED YOUR SEX EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL?



"OH GOD CAN TEACHERS PLEASE TALK ABOUT LGBTIQ+ + COMMUNITIES?????? I FELT SO ALONE WHEN MY HOMOPHOBIC ASS TEACHER TALKED ABOUT IT. IT'S 2019, GET BETTER SEX EDUCATION. AND MAYBE (DEFINITELY) DON'T LET HOMOPHOBES TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR IDENTITY! YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE THE ABOUT OF SEXIST SHIT I HEARD FROM MY TEACHER. SHE LABELED FEMINISTS AS PSYCHOS AND SHIT AND REPEATEDLY TOLD US THERE WERE ONLY 2 GENDERS. WTF"

Figure 6: Who provided

Who taught it cont.

"Everything. There needs to be a dedicated sex ed teacher, we need to be having more sex ed, lessen the class sizes to make it more comfortable to discuss, discuss different methods of sexual intercourse, discuss different genders and different sexualities. We need to learn to address red flags in abusive relationships."

"It needs to be taught by people other than normal classroom teachers and needs to be much more inclusive."

"It needs to be taught in a series of lessons and probably with a nurse."

"Take away the stigma and slut shaming. Increase information around some areas. Have younger people teaching it."

"I think it needs to be more comprehensive. If the teachers are not comfortable delivering this, maybe it would be good to have an independent party deliver this topic."

Some participants thought that the difference between private schools and public schools curriculum was notable and was potentially harmful.

'From my experience of attending both private and public schools, this is an area where public schools are astronomically ahead of private schools - in one 'revision' health lesson at a public school I learnt more about contraception and STDs than a combined 3 years of sex ed at a private school'

Furthermore, participants repeatedly made reference to what their friends at other schools received. If students were not satisfied with their experience but had friends who had told them of "worse" experiences, they provided a higher rating. Other students appeared to have low expectations of their education. For example, one respondent (who ranked their education 3 out of 10) told us:

"I think it was good enough compared to what some schools get but i don't think they actually taught me anything that internet or friends hadn't and they overlay focused of contraception and STIs STDs and barely talked about anything else if at all."

Another respondent (who ranked their education 7 out of 10) noted:

"...while it missed a lot, it was not hostile, and there was no shaming. I feel like most students don't get that"

RVES TO BE

L HISTORY



Who taught it cont.

A student (who ranked their education 8 out of 10) noted:

"I think my sex ed was great compared to a lot of my peers but I do still think there's room for improvement. E.g. would've been nice if I didn't need to be the one to say that asexuality exists."

This informs our understanding of the quantitative results received. We provided participants with no guidance as to how they might approach the rating system.



Sexually Explicit Communication Discussion

In response to the open-ended question, "what do you think about sending and receiving sexual or nude photos, videos or texts?" a clear majority feel that it is acceptable to send or receive such materials, provided there is consent. There was still some aversion to this form of communication, with 15 participants identifying it as "gross" but this was often as a response to unsolicited messages.

"Kinda gross honestly, especially when it's unexpected. Different when you're in a relationship though, I guess"

The digital world does bring its own risks for young people in negotiating sex. In this, trust is essential: 138 participants said that they protect themselves by "only messaging trusted people". Consent was identified as being an imperative part of sending these messages.

"Each to their own. I personally do not condone the action but I do hope that the education system can better educate young people about consent and the risk and dangers of sexual interactions with other young people through social media. This is because I personally have seen some friends being subjugated to a nude sent by a person without asking for consent or being confused and distraught about receiving a sext and not knowing how to appropriately respond to the situation"

"I don't think people realise that they need someone's consent before sending these things which is something we're not taught about"

"They should never be sent without consent and if received consensually, should not be shared without consent."

Some participants noted that this was a necessary part of the modern dating experience, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication in sexual relationships has become increasingly prominent.

"I think it is fine and is a natural progression in our modern society as the way individuals connect sexually is constantly changing. It needs to be significantly less stigmatised particularly for women, men need to be taught that consent extends to photos and women need to not be stigmatised as lesser beings for sending a photo to a loving partner."

However, this was often a negative experience, as participants felt harassed or pressured, or received non consensual pictures, leaving them confused and upset.

"As someone who is not sexually interested in men I have been fortunate enough to not receive sexually harassing messages or photos. However, it has happened to every single one of my friends who is sexually interested in men"

"Why should I have to completely guard my entire social media presence in order to protect myself from getting nudes".

YWAG

THE
EVERYDAY

SUPERHERO

SHIELD

ESSENTIAL FOR THE
SAFETY OF ALL WOMEN*
WALKING HOME

@evietouz

Artwork created by Evie (@evietouz)



Impact

participants provided insight into how the quality and quantity of their sex education has impacted how they think, feel and behave when engaging with sexual health and sex.

Students are not comfortable asking for further information

Students experience of sex education at high school was disempowering and misleading. They did not feel comfortable using sex education as an opportunity to ask questions that were relevant to them, instead they have been left with a sense of shame and sought knowledge privately. Students told us:

"I feel that my high school sex ed has really failed me. I have learned pretty much all I know from the internet. It shouldn't have to be like that. Learning from the internet is pretty isolating and made me feel abnormal and different."

"I felt that I've had to rely on personal experiences, friends and google for a number of things because I did not receive great education on the matter."

Responses indicated that students are not confident in their knowledge of sex, dating and/or relationships;

'I'm too scared to have sex because I feel that I wasn't taught how to properly protect myself.'

Students experience shame due to their identity, experiences or desires

Sex education was not safe or inclusive of LGBTIQ+ youth. YWAG acknowledges the discrimination LGBTIQ+ young people has devastating impacts on mental health throughout their lives. Students are currently experiencing sex education that entrenches shame.

"UGH! LGBTIQ+ is not discussed enough! I felt so left out and shunned and if I had any hope to come out to my friends or even teachers it was crushed because my teacher taught us 'It's forbidden in The bible' and other comments like that that are blatantly homophobic, transphobic and made me and other girls feel ashamed of our sexuality! Please get professionals to teach sex Ed, because mine sucked"

Reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates power imbalances

Some participants noted that the negative experiences of sexual health education and in some cases the trauma that resulted, overshadowed the educational experience:

'sex ed didn't save me, or too many of my friends, from having negative and damaging experiences, it didn't stop the behaviour if boys taking part in rape culture, it didn't help me reach out for help or recourses, it made me too scared to even get help, at risk of being forced to take action I wasn't ready for or for people to know, it did not help me beyond understanding basic biology why not. it should have. it's meant to.'



Based on our findings, YWAG believes while developments are being made to include relevant topics into school curriculums, this is not significantly enhancing students' experiences. Students remain disheartened that they are not being provided with the information necessary to care for their physical, sexual, social and emotional wellbeing. Education remains focused on normative assumptions about youth experience. At best, this is done by excluding materials which capture diverse experiences. At worst, diverse experiences are spoken about in a derogatory and unsafe manner. Young people believe sex education could be taught in an empowering and informative manner. Young people want this education to be provided by their school. Revisions to content and implementation must be made for this to become a reality.

Support Services

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732

24-hour national sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

Lifeline

13 11 14

Provides 24-hour crisis counselling, support groups and suicide prevention services.

QLife

1800 184 527

Provides nationwide telephone and web-based services for LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about a range of issues including sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800.

24/7 confidential and private counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 – 25.

eheadspace

1800 650 890

Provides free online/ telephone support and counselling to young people 12 – 25 and their families and friends.

13YARN

13 92 76

Provides 24/7 crisis support for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.