

How was it for you? The quality of young people's sexual relationships

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How was it for you? The quality of young people's sexual relationships

Few studies have investigated young people's own evaluations of their heterosexual experiences or relationships, other than by measuring negative sexual encounters. An evaluation of young peoples' views is important, to provide a more holistic understanding of sexual health and to help target limited resources. This briefing draws on several studies describing young people's experiences of their heterosexual relationships. It examines whether these are influenced by social background and/or early sexual experiences.

Key points

- Most 15 and 16 year olds were positive about their early sexual relationships
- The vast majority currently in relationships indicated that they enjoyed their time spent together, enjoyed their physical contact, and did not find it difficult to show affection
- Most said they discussed contraception with their partner before having sex and four fifths used contraception at their first and most recent intercourse. However, physical risks appear to be less important for the quality of experiences than emotional risks
- Those who delayed sexual intercourse and restricted it to established relationships were most positive about the quality of their sexual relationships
- The quality of sexual relationships was most influenced by circumstances of first intercourse and subsequent sexual history, rather than background social factors
- The earlier first intercourse occurred the more likely it was that young people would experience pressure and regret, particularly for girls
- Targeted interventions are needed for the most vulnerable young people

Background

Current research on young people's sexual relationships is biased towards both public health issues and the negative consequences of sex. This reflects policymakers' and service providers' concerns about unwanted conceptions and sexually transmitted infections. Indeed, those working in the field of young people's sexual health have an obligation, and professional interest, to focus on problematic behaviour. Research has concentrated on physical sexual health, rather than broader emotional and mental wellbeing.

It is often overlooked that for most young people, sex is enjoyable. There is research that suggests that, in general, having boy/girlfriends and sexual interaction broadens friendship networks, increases subjective wellbeing, allows young people to develop autonomy and experiment with their identities, and, for boys, heterosexual experience is important to their self-esteem. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that personal relationships are the most important factor influencing our wellbeing.

Few studies have investigated young people's own evaluations of their sexual experiences or relationships.

How we interpret our experiences is largely shaped by our social context: hence people often adjust their views when their social worlds shift with age. Young people's own evaluations are important, to provide a holistic understanding of their sexual health and to help target resources.

The studies

This project draws on findings from three studies, all conducted in schools. Two large studies, the SHARE (Eastern Scotland, 5854 people) and RIPPLE (Southern England, 6656 people) projects, examined different forms of school-based sex education (Wight 2008). They asked representative samples of young people to complete questionnaires, first at age 14 and again at age 16. Participants were asked how they perceived their:

- first sexual intercourse, in terms of coercion and regret
- most recent sexual intercourse, in terms of coercion and pleasure
- current sexual relationships, in terms of enjoying time together, difficulty in showing affection and enjoying physical contact

These survey findings were complemented with those from a study which involved in-depth interviews with fourteen heterosexual 16 and 17 year old Scottish students (Forrest 2008; 2010). This research focused on exploring young people's experiences of what they termed 'serious' relationships. They talked about how early sexual experiences were influenced by their understanding of, and emotional investment in, various kinds of intimate relationships.

Findings

Positive experiences

In the larger studies, early sexual experiences were evaluated positively. Most young people said they enjoyed their most recent sexual experience (91%) and felt no pressure from the partner at their first time (85%) or their most recent (92%) experience. For those currently in relationships, the overwhelming majority agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed their time spent together (98%) and that they enjoyed physical contact (97%). Over four-fifths did not find it difficult to show affection.

The majority of the young people interviewed also evaluated positively their first time having sex. This was frequently described as an outcome of 'togetherness', where both partners disclosed intimate thoughts and feelings. This might provide a context for the development of trust and processes of negotiation which may in turn underpin the practising of safer and more satisfying sex.

At the end of the day everyone really wants to be loved ... to be in relationship where you trust someone and they trust you and you really know each other. Being like wanted and special is what you're looking for.

Angie

Contraceptive use

In the surveys 46% of girls and 38% of boys reported having had sexual intercourse at 16 years old. This group, who start sex early, are likely to have the riskiest behaviour. However, the vast majority practised contraception and nearly all were positive about their experiences.

The majority (80%) used contraception at their first and most recent intercourse. While this suggests that one-fifth took no precautions against pregnancy, the SHARE study found that many of the remainder practised withdrawal. Most (70%) said they were neither drunk nor stoned at first intercourse. Over half (58%) said they discussed contraception with their partner before having sex.

Contraceptive use did not appear to have an independent effect on young people's assessment of their relationships, although control at intercourse is associated with contraceptive use. This fits with earlier findings from the SHARE study that condom use did not affect regret for first intercourse, and suggests that physical health risks are less important for quality of experience than emotional risks.

Negative experiences and gender differences

Girls were twice as likely as boys to rate their experiences of intercourse negatively, particularly those who were in more casual relationships or younger at first intercourse. Younger age at first intercourse was also associated with poorer quality experiences for boys.

These findings were supported by what young people said in the interviews. Young people reported that relationships that were primarily physical and sexual often preceded 'serious' relationships.

When you're maybe around 14 you're really most interested in sex to be honest. Like now you're looking for a 'serious' relationship but then you not so much thinking about that.

Angus

The young people's ideas about gender identities and differences might help to explain why earlier relationships were, for some, and especially for young women, less satisfactory. An important element of the 'serious' relationship were practises which enabled young people to 'remake' ideas about heterosexual femininity and masculinity. Ideas that men are emotionally inexpressive and fearful of commitment compared to women, and that young women do not, should not or cannot, experience or express sexual desires, could be challenged over the period of the relationship.

I was surprised how emotional my boyfriend can be. I guess I kinda knew that men felt things but when you talk about it, it makes you closer. You see they can have the same worries and problems.

Hayley

In contrast, both young men and women had regarded the gender 'gap' as much wider when they were younger, making it more difficult to achieve closeness and levels of trust and intimacy. This 'gap' may produce more negative outcomes around sexual intercourse for young women than men, because it is more acceptable for young men to have sex without intense emotional involvement, and loss of virginity can be prized as enhancing their masculine identity.

In the surveys the factors associated with negative first intercourse could be linked to a lack of control: younger age, an older partner, a casual partner, lack of planning, being drunk or stoned, and being under pressure. Similarly, feeling under pressure was the most important factor associated with not enjoying most recent sexual intercourse, making it nearly five times less likely. Girls appeared particularly vulnerable to the effects of less control and intimacy at first intercourse.

Although in surveys the majority of young people assess their sexual experiences and relationships very positively, it is important not to overlook a minority who do not. The concerns of this group were highlighted in analysis of calls to ChildLine Scotland (CRFR 2007). What young women say about their first intercourse is investigated in CRFR Research Briefing 16 (CRFR 2009).

Parental influence

Nearly 40% of girls reported that they regretted their first intercourse. Regrets were more likely among those who had young mothers or were not living with both biological parents. The reasons for this pattern are unclear, but they possibly relate to sexual relationship values within those families.

Some interviewees saw links between their sexual relationships and their parents' relationships. For example, Stephanie portrayed herself as a 'diehard romantic', prone to forming serially unsuccessful relationships because, after her parents' separation, she had been seeking a substitute father figure. Other interviewees attributed lack of confidence in forming relationships to strained parental relationships. As Julie explained, experiences of hearing arguments between her parents when she was a child made her feel anxious and uncomfortable about disagreements. She felt that this had influenced the way that she managed stress in her relationship with her boyfriend.

How young people perceived the quality of their parent's relationships and how parents were thought to perceive their children's relationships, were crucial in determining how young people managed and understood their experiences. In general, parental recognition validated young people's relationship and sometimes amplified its 'seriousness'.

She stays at my bit one week and then we just arrange it I'm back at her bit the next...and I've got really, really close to her dad ... because her dad wanted a son but he ended up with three, three girls, so he's got nobody to ... do things he maybe wanted to do with a son so I'll just step in.

Shane

Relationships matter

The quality of sexual experiences and current boy/girlfriend relationships seems to be improved by greater physical and emotional intimacy, although the reverse is also possible. Delaying intercourse within a relationship was associated with less pressure at both first and recent intercourse. Having sex with a boy/girlfriend (not casual partner) was associated with greater enjoyment of most recent intercourse. Having sex more often in the last year, having oral sex, enjoying most recent intercourse and communicating about contraception were all associated with better quality relationships.

This is consistent with research showing that adolescents are more positive about both oral and vaginal sex if in a committed relationship rather than a casual one. Furthermore, having had more than one sexual partner was associated with greater difficulty in showing affection in one's current relationship. These associations were not significantly stronger for girls. In fact, the interviews suggested that young men were at least as interested in commitment and emotional intimacy as young women. Although a few struggled to speak about it, either in interviews or with girlfriends, their experiences tended

to confirm that sexual satisfaction was enhanced by monogamy and emotional involvement with their partner.

Sexual history more important than social background

Young people's accumulated sexual histories were more important than background social factors in shaping their evaluation of most recent sexual experiences and current boy/girlfriend relationships. There was some evidence that those who had negative experiences at first intercourse continued to have negative sexual relationships. This was particularly likely where the partner was the same. However, even with a change of partner, regret at first intercourse remained associated with lack of enjoyment of most recent intercourse.

The in-depth interviews also highlighted the importance of sexual histories. Through the accumulation of experience, reflection and discussion (with friends and sometimes family), young people acquired a greater understanding of their past and current relationships, the emotions associated with them and clearer ideas about what they were looking for in the future.

Interestingly, regret about past sexual experiences was rare. Rather it was dealing with breaking up or, in the few cases where it had happened, being cheated on, that interviewees talked about as upsetting. These experiences were perceived to have had an impact on more recent relationships both in terms of expectations and practices.

Socio-economic background seemed to have limited influence once aspects of young people's sexual histories were taken into account. However, it is worth noting that deprivation, black or 'other' ethnicity, truancy, drug use, low self-esteem, anticipated difficulty communicating with boy/girlfriend, poor condom self-efficacy and attitudes, and anticipated difficulty in saying no to something sexual were all significantly associated with one or more negative outcomes when analysed separately.

Policy and practice implications

Rather than despair at the difficulty of reducing risk behaviours amongst the minority least responsive to health promotion, these findings might be interpreted as showing that many years of progressive interventions, of various kinds, are having a beneficial effect.

If so, this implies that evaluation needs to be of much longer duration than is common today. It also needs to establish the relative contribution of the diverse interventions and influences to which young people have been exposed.

Teenagers should be encouraged to delay first intercourse and restrict it to established relationships.

Intensive sexual health interventions should be targeted towards the highly vulnerable minority, to develop assertiveness, negotiation, planning and communication skills to delay premature sexual intercourse, improve control of sexual encounters and help maintain longer-term relationships. The difficulty in identifying the vulnerable minority, as well as that of stigmatisation, might be avoided with drop-in clinics which can be accessed when adolescents need them.