



YOUNG PEOPLE,
SEX AND
RELATIONSHIPS
THE NEW NORMS

Imogen Parker

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REPORT

Institute for Public Policy Research

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POSITIVE IDEAS
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CONTENTS

Summary	3
Young people’s voices	4
Policy recommendations.....	5
Introduction	7
1. Sex and relationships: Where do young people need more support?	10
Ongoing issues	11
Emerging issues	14
2. The new norms: Hearing young people’s voices	19
Attitudes to sex and relationships.....	19
The online space	20
Sexting and pornography.....	20
What impacts do teenagers believe engaging in pornography is having on their generation?	22
Personal concerns	24
Education, guidance and support	25
What do young people want to know?	27
3. Policy recommendations	29
References	31

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relate
the relationship people

SUMMARY

There is rising concern about the sexual activities and relationships of young people. These concerns are not new, but the rapid expansion of technological possibilities has changed the nature of the debate. Teenagers are the most technology-savvy group in the UK, with much of their social lives conducted online, and it is clear that young people have access to a much less moderated world than previously existed. It no longer makes sense to separate online and offline activities – digital activity is an integral part of young people’s relationships.

On the positive side, easy access to digital technologies allows young people to socialise with their friends, find like-minded peers, and access supportive and diverse information and networks in an empowering way, independent of parents and adults. Particularly when it comes to learning about sex and relationships, awkward questions can be easily answered.

But on the negative side, young people are revealing ever more information about themselves, and traditional ‘offline’ occurrences such as bullying, relationship break-ups and social pressures are magnified and recorded online. Relationships can be more intensive, with more opportunities for contact and less visibility or moderation by adults, and relationships and friendships often create permanent digital content. Access to adult or extreme material is fundamentally different and much easier. And quality information, clear social norms, and opportunities for redress are less present in digital spaces than usually exists offline.

These changes have left a widening gap between those who have a responsibility to educate and guide young people and the behaviours and norms created by rapidly evolving technology. Parents and teachers didn’t grow up with the technologies that have become part of young people’s lives, and many teachers lack the guidance and structural support to teach about these issues.

This paper contributes to this debate by turning directly to teenagers to explore how they believe young people could be better supported in developing healthy and positive relationships.

It is not straightforward, with the debate touching on large and difficult issues of gender and sexual politics. Any discussion of how best to support young people negotiating new or emerging social and sexual norms is closely bound up with cultural values, individual maturity and personal attitudes and beliefs about relationships.

Our aim is not to take a stance on the moral rights or wrongs of young people and relationships (where they are within the bounds of legality). We begin by highlighting where the evidence indicates more could be done to support young people’s happiness and safety in formative relationships in a digital world, before turning to young people themselves to canvas their opinions on these issues. Finally we reflect on some of the challenges for policymakers.

Young people's voices

Our findings are based on a representative survey with young people.¹ Key findings include:

- Eight out of 10 say it is too easy for young people to accidentally see pornography online.
- Seven out of 10 say 'accessing pornography was seen as typical' while they were at school; the consensus view is that this is typical between the ages of 13 and 15.
- Almost half (46 per cent) say 'sending sexual or naked photos or videos is part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays'.
- Seven out of 10 (72 per cent) say 'pornography leads to unrealistic attitudes to sex' and that 'pornography can have a damaging impact on young people's views of sex or relationships' (70 per cent).
- Two-thirds of young women (66 per cent) and almost half of young men (49 per cent) agree that 'it would be easier growing up if pornography was less easy to access for young people'.
- Two-thirds (66 per cent) say 'people are too casual about sex and relationships'.
- Almost eight out of 10 young women (77 per cent) say 'pornography has led to pressure on girls or young women to **look** a certain way', while almost as many (75 per cent) say 'pornography has led to pressure on girls and young women to **act** a certain way'.

The survey results also reflect differences in the views of young men and women.

- More young men (45 per cent) than young women (29 per cent) agree that 'pornography helps young people learn about sex'. Young women are more likely to disagree (49 per cent) than young men (28 per cent) with the same statement.
- Half as many young men (21 per cent) as young women (40 per cent) strongly agree that 'pornography leads to unrealistic attitudes to sex'. Half as many young men (18 per cent) as young women (37 per cent) strongly agree that 'pornography encourages society to view women as sex objects'.

On solutions, there was a clear majority view that sex and relationship advice and support should be taught at school and should be high quality and led by experts. This echoes wider research showing that too many young people report not feeling equipped to manage issues they face in sex and relationships. Findings from our survey include:

- More than eight out of 10 (86 per cent) agree that sex and relationship advice should be taught in schools. More than a third (37 per cent) say sex and relationship advice should be taught from the beginning of primary school and almost half (49 per cent) from the beginning of secondary school.
- Seven out of 10 (68 per cent) 18-year-olds think that sex and relationship education should be taught by a trained expert; 40 per cent think that it should be taught by an external visitor who doesn't usually teach at the school, while just 19 per cent think it should be taught by a teacher from the school.

The wider literature highlights concerns about the ease with which pornography can be accessed, that this pornography may be having an impact on shaping expectations and norms and behaviours of young people – especially in the absence of high-quality sex and relationship education – and that 'sexting' (self-generated sexually explicit content) is now the norm. Our results reflect this wider literature and show that, although it is a complex area, the prominence of pornography in shaping norms and behaviours is creating pressures for many young people.

¹ Based on a representative sample of 500 18-year-olds; survey conducted from 19–27 June 2014.

Policy recommendations

The following proposals draw on our research and outline policy challenges and directions.

Sex and relationship education should be taught in every school by specialists, and must be broader in scope

The role of sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools is fiercely debated. There is broad consensus that it should exist, but it is not universally accepted that it should be compulsory. However, the case in its favour remains strong, and the primary research presented here from young people themselves strengthens further the case for making SRE compulsory.

But it is not enough to simply have SRE education in schools. Schools need to be more effective in commissioning and providing high-quality content, delivered by experts. Our survey results show that there is a significant gap between what is being taught and what young people want. SRE needs to be about relationships, not just sex, and it should better reflect the reality of young people's life by covering LGBT issues, digital content, bullying, access to pornography and expectations of sex.

Parents, educators and young people need a single point to access advice and support

Although school is an important source of information for young people, it is not the only one. As our research shows, young people gain their knowledge from a variety of sources and this is likely to remain the case. Parents need to feel better equipped to discuss sex and relationships with their children, and have a better understanding of the impact of technology in this area.

Administered or run by local authorities, family information services (FIS) provide a directory of local services for parents. They provide an existing point of access through which information, links and follow-up services could be provided to young people, parents and teachers. Some local areas already provide good links to support on sex and relationships, but others should follow suit and ensure that information is accessible and easy to find for young people, parents and teachers. Others should improve or expand their current offer.

Local authorities' public sexual health responsibility for young people should be broadened

As health and wellbeing boards become firmly entrenched in the local authority landscape, there is an opportunity to ensure that strategies are developed that provide commissioners with options to deliver appropriate services. Many strategies already include the need to continue to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, there is scope within existing strategies to develop measures on wider health and wellbeing. This could be, for example, to ensure that relationship counselling is available or that extra-curricular activities provide a space for young people to discuss the role of technology and the internet. It is clear from our research and the wider evidence base that young people are facing physical and emotional issues.

Commissioners should be working with young people to continuously evaluate existing provision and identify areas for improvement. There have been rapid changes, and policy and practice have failed to keep pace in providing the most appropriate support.



Of course, these policy ideas must be seen within a wider cultural context. Our research, alongside other evidence, highlights the role of the images, stereotypes

and norms that young people are continuously exposed to. It is clear that there is a relationship between this culture and the way that societal and gender norms are set around sex and relationships. The overwhelming concern – reflected in our research – is that easier and wider access to porn and sexually explicit material creates unrealistic norms and assumptions for young men and women in how they should conduct their relationships. It is clear that young people want to talk about sex and relationships and want more support. The challenge is to provide that in a way that is supportive, builds resilience and allows young people to flourish.

INTRODUCTION

There is rising concern about the sexual activities and relationships of young people. These concerns are not new, but the rapid expansion of technological possibilities has changed the nature of the debate. Teenagers are the most technology-savvy group in the UK, with much of their social lives conducted online (Ofcom 2014), and it is clear that young people have access to a much less moderated world than previously existed. It no longer makes sense to separate online and offline activities – digital activity is an integral part of young people's relationships.

On the positive side, easy access to digital technologies allows young people to socialise with their friends, find like-minded peers, and access supportive and diverse information and networks in an empowering way, independent of parents and adults. Particularly when it comes to learning about sex and relationships, awkward questions can be easily answered.

But on the negative side, young people are revealing ever more information about themselves, and traditional 'offline' occurrences such as bullying, relationship break-ups and social pressures are magnified and recorded online. Relationships can be more intensive, with more opportunities for contact and less visibility or moderation by adults, and relationships and friendships often create permanent digital content. Access to adult or extreme material is fundamentally different and much easier. And quality information, clear social norms, and opportunities for redress are less present in digital spaces than usually exists offline.

These changes have left a widening gap between those who have a responsibility to educate and guide young people and the behaviours and norms created by rapidly evolving technology. Parents and teachers didn't grow up with the technologies that have become part of young people's lives, and many teachers lack the guidance and structural support to teach about these issues.

Developing an adequate social response is hugely difficult. The subject is highly emotive and bound up with cultural and personal values. This is exacerbated by the comparatively small and contested evidence base. In many areas it is difficult to assess how technological freedoms are affecting sex, relationships and young people's development qualitatively. This is partly because of the speed of change – both of technological innovations and social norms – and partly due to the practical and ethical challenges of conducting rigorous research in this area (reporting bias, restriction of content and so on). While there is some emerging evidence on young people's access to pornography and the impact it has on attitudes or behaviours, this is certainly not clear-cut.

As a result, the public and political debate has too often been polarised between equally unsatisfactory positions. On one hand there is 'moral panic' – anxiety about teenage sexuality and young people experimenting with relationships and sexuality in new ways which adults don't understand and find hard to control – accompanied by a political call for parents to police their children's behaviour until they are 18 (see for example Moreton 2013). This position tends to focus on the internet as risky and harmful, overemphasising the negative impacts rather than positive opportunities and dwelling (particularly in the media) on the most extreme cases. A 'just say no' approach to some types of content – in the form of online censorship or blocking software – could be a valuable tool, particularly for younger children, but it can never be nuanced enough to deal with all the personal and social issues that the internet presents to older young people. For this group, heavy-handed blocking

mechanisms can act as harmful interventions, by shutting down conversations that might be positive or by overblocking content that could be useful or supportive (such as sex education resources).

On the other hand, those who advance a more laissez-faire argument are too quick to abrogate responsibility. From this perspective, new technologies are reshaping society and young people are growing up in a fundamentally different age, one that they, as 'digital natives', are better able than 'us adults' to navigate. This position, however, fails to acknowledge the protections enshrined in law for children in the offline world, which demands protection, education and guidance that is appropriate to their level of maturity. It also fails to address high levels of parental anxiety about their ability to make the right decisions in this rapidly changing environment: 60 per cent of parents of school-age children worry about their children encountering pornography, and more than one in five are 'not at all confident' about protecting their children online (NAHT 2013).

To better manage the impact of the online world on young people, the government response has been twofold. First, it has required an automatic opt-in to online filters, both to give parents more control over adult or potentially harmful content and to nudge them into engaging with questions about age-appropriate activities and areas online (IPIOCP 2012). Second, the government has led a crackdown on illegal and sexual exploitative online content (which is an important intervention but not the focus of this paper).

That the government is engaging with these difficult but vital issues is to be applauded. However, its response is not adequate to the challenge of supporting young people in formative relationships that are coloured by and partly conducted in the online world. Removing illegal content and nudging some parents into blocking some types of content fails to address a large part of the experience of young people developing and conducting formative relationships, and the content and norms which shape their attitudes and behaviours remain undiscussed. For example, simply blocking pornography without allowing for critical discussion of highly sexualised mainstream media, with its unrealistic and potentially damaging gender portrayals, fails to equip young people with the critical capabilities they need to confidently develop their own sexual identities. Young people's experience of the digital world at school, which is restricted, can contrast markedly with their experiences outside school gates and at home, where this digital world is often entirely unrestricted.²

Similarly, young people learn to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) with little discussion of the emotional and practical aspects of a healthy relationship. There has been much heated debate and discussion on the importance of sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools, and this is discussed in more detail below.

A more measured, nuanced response is necessary, which incorporates policy, education, technology and parental involvement. Technological innovations have undoubtedly had an impact on the way young people learn, socialise and develop. The feasibility of restricting access to potentially harmful material for all young people has been heavily questioned, particularly regarding parallel concerns about overblocking useful and supportive content and underblocking harmful content³. Nonetheless, a combination of interactive spaces that are less moderated, social norms that are less clear, and teenage behaviour that is more public and

2 In a recent survey, most teachers felt that pupils had the skills and knowledge to use the internet safely at school but fewer than 60 per cent thought they were safe to use it at home (Livingstone and Davidson 2013).

3 BT filters for example include the option to block sex education resources, and have been criticised for blocking gay and lesbian lifestyle content.

permanent together make it more critical than ever that we equip young people with the information, capabilities and social and emotional tools to manage their relationships online and offline.

This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by turning directly to teenagers to explore how they believe young people could be better supported in developing healthy and positive relationships.

It is not straightforward, with the debate touching on large and difficult issues of gender and sexual politics. Any discussion of how best to support young people negotiating new or emerging social and sexual norms is closely bound up with cultural values, individual maturity and personal attitudes and beliefs about relationships.

Our aim is not to take a stance on the moral rights or wrongs of young people and relationships (where they are within the bounds of legality). Rather, we begin by highlighting where the evidence indicates more could be done to support young people's happiness and safety in formative relationships in a digital world, before turning to young people themselves to canvas their opinions on these issues. Finally we reflect on some of the challenges for policymakers.

1. SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS: WHERE DO YOUNG PEOPLE NEED MORE SUPPORT?

A review of the published literature in this area can deepen our understanding of the evidence in this area, and also provide the context for our primary research, which is set out in the next chapter.

As social norms around sex, marriage and relationships evolve, every generation of young people faces a different social context. Young people today face many of the same issues as their parents' and grandparents' generations: sexual health and pregnancy, consent, coercion and respect, and gender dynamics. But they must also navigate challenges emerging from fast-paced technological change: digital reputation, pornography, sexting, and an unprecedented exposure to images and media.

Our survey results echo wider research showing that too many young people currently report not feeling equipped to manage the issues they face in sex and relationships. In terms of formal SRE (see box below) in schools, Ofsted found that, although there have been some improvements in quality, over one-third of secondary schools require improvement, concluding that this leaves 'some children and young people unprepared for the physical and emotional changes they will experience during puberty, and later when they grow up and form adult relationships' (Ofsted 2013). Too many teachers lack expertise in teaching sensitive and controversial issues, which results in topics including puberty, sexuality or domestic violence being avoided. In 20 per cent of the assessed schools, the staff had received no training or support to teach education on sex and relationships (ibid).

This failure is felt by young people. In a UK Youth Parliament survey of 22,000 young people, 43 per cent said they had not been taught about personal relationships in school, and 40 per cent described their SRE as 'poor' or 'very poor' (UKYP 2007). In a more recent Brook and FPA survey, almost half of respondents felt their SRE didn't cover what they really needed to know, and one in four had received no SRE of any kind (Brook and FPA 2013).

Sex and relationship education (SRE) in UK schools

In accordance with the Education Act 1996, the biological aspects of puberty, reproduction and the spread of viruses must be taught in 'maintained schools' (state-funded, non-academy schools) in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. These topics are statutory parts of the national science curriculum which must be taught to all pupils of primary and secondary age. There is no statutory SRE requirement in Scotland.

Forms of relationship education are compulsory in Wales and Northern Ireland but not in England and Scotland, although they are strongly recommended by the government. In the UK, primary and secondary schools are legally obliged to have an up-to-date SRE policy that describes the content and organisation of SRE taught outside the science curriculum. In England and Scotland, parents can withdraw their children from this provision.

Academies are not legally required to follow the national curriculum, and so are not required to teach any form of SRE. The only reference in their funding agreements to SRE states that guidance on sex and relationship education should be taken from the Education Act 'to ensure that children at the Academy are protected from inappropriate teaching materials and they learn the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and for bringing up children' (DfE 2014: s2.53).

Of course, young people don't learn about sex and relationships only in formal education – they cite friends and peers, parents, carers and digital media as their main sources of information, as well as school. However, formal education is the only way of ensuring that all young people are provided with the knowledge they need, from reliable sources.

Formal and informal SRE has brought some important gains. According to the latest ONS figures, the under-18 conception rate for England and Wales in 2012 was the lowest since 1969 (ONS 2014a). There is less stigma attached to sexual health tests and a greater understanding of sexual health risks, a greater and safer variety of contraceptive options, a greater acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality, and arguably more sexual freedom and validity given to differing values and norms. The internet, while bringing challenges, has also brought the ability for young people to educate themselves about intimate or embarrassing issues, meet like-minded people, explore their sexuality and identity, and conduct virtual and long-distance relationships.

In discussion of our report's findings, a counsellor at relationship services provider Relate reflected on the diverse range of issues that experts need to cover in teaching SRE.

'Relationship education at school should be about sex, homosexuality, reproduction, etc, but also about emotional abuse, physical abuse, separation, divorce, reformed families, alcoholism, and how to understand emotionally healthy relationships. These are all big issues needing expert input and resources to cope with any fallout. School counsellors play an important role here.'

Nevertheless, there are some areas where, despite ongoing improvement, more could be done to support young people. A harmful, ill-informed or distressing experience in an adolescent relationship can be upsetting for a young person and have a lasting impact on their future wellbeing.

Concerns have also been raised about the context young people are growing up in, of a highly sexualised 'wallpaper' of influences (Bailey 2011). As a society, we need to consider the pressures encouraging the premature sexualisation of children, with younger children increasingly exposed to provocative and overtly sexualised images in mainstream media (from advertisements to music videos) as well as easy access to pornography, which encroaches into the sexualised or highly gendered clothing products and services aimed at children. The pressure for young people to aspire to unrealistic or unachievable body ideals and the widespread use of sexual language and images that influence behaviour are of widespread concern.

This chapter briefly lays out where the evidence indicates more could be done to support young people's happiness and safety in formative relationships in a digital world. The following chapter then presents the findings of our new primary data from teenagers about these ongoing and emerging issues.

Ongoing issues

Young people are engaging in under-age sex and 'risky' sexual behaviour

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle (Natsal) shows that for younger generations (16–24 and 25–34), the average age of 'sexual debut' hasn't changed significantly in a decade. Almost one in three 16–24-year-olds had sex under the age of 16 (the legal age of consent). Natsal also found increasing numbers of sexual partners compared to previous generations, with 16–24-year-olds reporting an average of six sexual partners (Mercer et al 2013).

Findings related to use of contraception, safe sex practices and sexual health services show more change and raise some concerns: 15 per cent of 16–24-year-olds had

at least two partners in the past year with whom no condom was used, and young people (aged 16–24) account for more than half of the diagnoses of STIs (ibid). They are also the group least likely to access sexual health services (Sex Education Forum 2014).

In terms of protection against sexually transmitted disease, among those surveyed between 2010–2012, 43.8 per cent of women and 31.4 per cent of men aged 16–24 reported attending a sexual health clinic in the last five years, a massive increase for this age-group from 2000 (9.4 per cent of women and 8.5 per cent of men) and 1990 (4.7 per cent of women and 5 per cent of men). However, this may well indicate greater responsibility by young people about their sexual health, decreased stigma about check-ups and seeking treatment, and a greater availability of sexual health services and clinics, rather than an indication that young people are taking greater risks with their sexual health.

Despite rising proportions of young people engaging in same-sex acts and relationships, or identifying as homosexual or bisexual, sex education is largely based on a heterosexual norm

The education system is failing to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people. According to Stonewall, 85 per cent of gay young people are never taught anything about the biological or physical aspects of same-sex relationships, despite the fact that same-sex marriage is legal and anti-discrimination legislation exists (Guasp 2012). More than half of lesbian, gay or bisexual young people are never taught about gay and bisexual issues at school (ibid), and more than half of those that identify themselves as transgender, lesbian or gay are likely to describe the SRE they did receive as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ – far higher than among those who identify themselves as heterosexual (Martinez and Emmerson 2008).

Several individuals in our survey highlighted this gap when providing ideas of how their own education could have been better:

‘We were not taught about sexuality, I wish we had been as I’d have had an easier time accepting who I am, and maybe my fellow students would have been more open and accepting. This will help children in the future.’

‘Other sexual orientations should be portrayed as equal. I did not learn about other sexual orientations at my Catholic secondary school and I feel this led to reinforcing the way people viewed ... other sexual orientations with suspicion.’

This failure to discuss and support non-heterosexual individuals contributes to a non-supportive educational culture: over half of young lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils have experienced direct bullying; three in five gay pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that teachers who witness it never intervene (Guasp 2012).

Failure to discuss same-sex relationships also poses health risks, as discussions of sexual health and protection focus on male-female sexual relationships. This is particularly troubling as gay men remain the group at greatest risk of becoming infected with HIV. As Stonewall points out, young gay men may face specific barriers to practicing safe sex, like being reluctant to purchase or be in possession of extra-strong condoms (Stonewall 2014).

In our sample, substantial proportions of teenagers identified themselves as homosexual (8 per cent of male and 2 per cent of female respondents) or bisexual (6 per cent and 15 per cent respectively). The latest Natsal survey identified increasing numbers of people (aged 16–44) who have had a same-sex experience, with 5 per cent of men and 8 per cent of women having had an experience with genital contact (Natsal 2014).⁴

4 Compared to 7 per cent and 16 per cent (respectively) who have had ‘any same-sex experience’.

There is, therefore, a significant and growing section of society who are inadequately served by a primarily heteronormative discussion of sex, sexuality and relationships.

Young people do not fully understand consent, and experience pressure, coercion, violence and harassment

Campaigns for comprehensive and statutory SRE have long argued the importance of including relationship education in guidance given to young people. These calls argue that the pleasure and importance of healthy relationships and sex lives should be celebrated, while recognising that young people in the UK are growing up in the context of a wider society in which intimate partner and sexual violence is commonplace. In 2011/12, it is estimated that approximately 1.2 million people experienced domestic violence (Howard et al 2013), that 57,900 police calls regarding domestic abuse are deemed to represent a high risk of serious harm or murder (HMIC 2014) and that, on average, two women a week are killed by a violent partner or ex-partner (ibid). While the male victims of rape, sexual and intimate partner violence must not be overlooked, these crimes are most typically committed by men against women.

Sexual violence against women is still vastly under-reported, and the police force and legal system often fails to intervene effectively, prosecute or convict. The latest Crime Survey data found that only 27 per cent of female victims and 10 per cent of male victims said they would tell the police (ONS 2014b); of those who did report, a third of victims felt no safer or less safe after the initial response (HMIC 2014). While the reasons for this are complex, attitudes which normalise and condone violence, including sexual violence, are still commonplace. Government polling has shown that 36 per cent of people believe that a woman should be held wholly or partly responsible for being sexually assaulted or raped if she was drunk, and 26 per cent if she was in public wearing sexy or revealing clothes (Home Office 2009).⁵ Furthermore, one in five people think it would be acceptable in certain circumstances for a man to hit or slap his female partner in response to her being dressed in sexy or revealing clothing in public (ibid).⁶

These attitudes need to be challenged and actively addressed with young people, not least because research suggests that those who suffer sexual abuse early in life are more likely to be victimised again later. There are also correlations between those who see or experience domestic violence and those who go on to be perpetrators themselves.

A report by the children's commissioner (Coy et al 2013) explored understanding and attitudes towards rape among young people. It did so using short films that described sex acts which are legally defined as rape but which do not fit young people's stereotypical view of 'real rape' as forced sexual activity among strangers. In every instance, not all young people correctly identified the situation as being rape; in some scenarios as many as a third of respondents identified it as not being rape. The qualitative follow-up research exposed some troubling attitudes (particularly but not exclusively from male respondents) which held the victim to be partly responsible, or having granted consented, because of alcohol, or tight or revealing clothing.

'I think she [an actor, 'aged 14'] would [sic] be more responsible because she had that top on, and it [sic] wasn't for that top. Because it started off with that top saying...'

'Yes, big flashing sign saying come to me. It's like a sign on your head saying "shag me".'

'It gives out the wrong idea, the way you're dressed.'

Young men, year 11

5 Figures relate to England and Wales only.

6 Figures relate to England and Wales only.

Another area of huge concern is the high proportion of young people experiencing violence in early relationships. In a recent NSPCC study of young people who had been in relationships, more than one in five (22 per cent) had experienced partners using physical force such as ‘pushing, slapping, hitting or holding you down’; in one-third of cases, this had happened with more than one partner. Eight per cent had experienced more severe physical force (‘punching, strangling, beating you up or hitting you with an object’), rising to 11 per cent among young women (Barter et al 2009). Significant numbers report a partner ‘constantly checking up on what you were doing by phone or text’; 12 per cent had experienced a partner using a mobile phone or the internet to humiliate or threaten; and 31 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys had been pressured or physically forced to do something sexual (ibid).

A separate report for the NSPCC argued that, because of the influence of pornography and sexting, children and young people have become normalised to acts of sexual aggression and sexual exploitation and highlighted how intricately these have become embedded in their peer culture. The research indicated that because of these sexualised practices, children are entering adulthood with a skewed impression of what is appropriate sexual behaviour (Ringrose et al 2012).

And these behaviours, while at the extreme end, are on a continuous spectrum with the everyday experiences of sexual harassment of young women and girls. In a recent Girlguiding survey of young women (aged 13–21), 70 per cent reported experiencing sexual harassment at school or college, and over a quarter reported groping or unwanted touching in schools (Girlguiding 2013).

Young people are under gendered pressure around body image and attitudes

The massive challenge that is gender equality and how it relates to body image intersects with young people’s ability to have healthy and respectful relationships. While a detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, attitudes are repeatedly linked to presentations of stereotypical masculine and feminine gender norms in mainstream media, as well as highly sexual portrayals of women.

A huge number of younger girls (and to a lesser extent boys) report anxiety about these portrayals. The social impacts of this are gendered, creating double-standards for young men and women, particularly in sex and relationships. In the Girlguiding survey, for instance, 76 per cent of respondents said that girls are judged harshly for sexual behaviour that is seen as acceptable in boys; 77 per cent of 11–16-year-olds shave or wax their legs and 44 per cent shave or wax their bikini line; 40 per cent wear a padded bra (Girlguiding 2013). Increasingly, these attitudes and behaviours are extended to primary school-age children: one in five primary school-age girls have been on a diet, and almost one-third of 7–11-year-olds have experienced gender-based harassment, such as being whistled at or something about their appearance shouted about (ibid).

These issues tie into wider problems concerning body image, eating disorders and the magnifying role played by the internet and popular media generally. Although there has been much focus on the pressure this places on young women, it also places pressure on young men. In both cases, it undermines young people’s ability to engage in respectful, confident relationships.

Emerging issues

A brave new (digital) world

Looking at the context in which early relationships take place, one key change between this generation of young people and their predecessors is the development of new technology that facilitates new behaviours. Young people in relationships have unprecedented opportunities for digital engagement (texting, calling, emailing, messaging, creating and sharing digital content, and location tracking); entire long-distance relationships can be conducted virtually. Crucially,

this is not confined to relationships of attachment: the same range of new behaviours plays a role in romantic or sexual relationships, friendships and loose social relationships in similar ways.

As a rapidly evolving area of study, there isn't a clear evidence-base on the extent and effect of digital technologies on relationships. What we do know is that young people are saturated with technology. The digital age is shaping social norms, and alongside new opportunities for young people to learn about and conduct relationships, it raises new challenges. At the sharpest end, technology has facilitated illegal activities, such as paedophilia and grooming, child pornography, and exploitation (critical issues which are beyond the scope of this paper).

Short of illegality, however, there are a range of new 'grey-area' issues confronting young people growing up with technology, which have implications for their emotional and sexual relationships.

Pornography: distress and discomfort

One of the biggest issues facing this generation is the widespread presence of pornography, which is easily accessible by children and young people. Digital evolution, and particularly the development of internet-enabled smartphones and tablets, most of which have cameras built in, mean young people now have easy access to view and produce content – some pornographic – on a scale which simply wasn't possible for previous generations.

While as a society we permit this type of content but place restrictions on minors, these fail to extend to the international internet sites, many of which face no practical restriction or even warning when straying into adult areas. Of the 25 most commonly accessed adult websites in the UK, 23 are from offshore providers, showing unregulated, free and unrestricted access to hardcore pornography to visitors of any age (ATVOD 2014).

The internet not only increases the ease of access to pornography, it allows for rapid navigation between a variety of different sexual practices, with little signposting as to whether the content could be considered explicit, extreme, violent or misogynistic.

The evidence-base around access and impact of pornography is not conclusive. Primary research, particularly with young people, faces ethical issues and problems of reporting bias. The rapid development of both technology and the porn industry mean that studies swiftly move out of date, as internet connection speeds and access to portable devices increase. Nonetheless, based on the evidence, we can be reasonably confident that a significant proportion of children and young people are exposed to or are accessing pornography online.⁷

In terms of extent, the picture is more complex. Data from across Europe shows that 14 per cent of children aged 9–16 have seen sexual images online (Livingstone et al 2013). More recent ATVOD research found that one in 35 of children aged 6–11 had accessed pornography in a given month in 2013, rising to one in 10 of those aged 6–18. Access was particularly pronounced for teenage boys, at one in five among under-16s, for whom access should be prohibited (ATVOD 2014). As this study was only based on computer access and did not monitor use of tablets or smartphones, the proportion is likely to be substantially higher.

The literature also shows that there are gender differences. Young men and boys are more likely than young women and girls to encounter pornography – both inadvertently and intentionally.⁸

7 See Brown and L'Engle 2009; Flood 2007; Häggström-Nordin et al 2006, 2009; Hasebrink et al 2009; Weber et al 2012; Wolak et al 2007.

8 We need to take into account that there is a strongly gendered reporting bias, with it being seen as more acceptable for men to access (and admit to accessing) pornography than women; for more, see Flood 2007, Brown et al 2009, Häggström-Nordin et al 2009, Hasebrink 2009.

Research in this area has not yet captured what exactly young people are seeing when they are exposed to pornography. Regardless of the more subtle or long-term potential effects of pornography (discussed below), a straightforward issue is the sizable proportion of people who report being distressed or upset by encountering pornography. In a recent EU Kids Online survey speaking to 9–16-year-olds about what bothers them online, pornography (including violent pornography) was the most commonly cited concern (Livingstone et al 2013). ChildLine has reported a notable increase in calls from teenagers and children worried about online abuse and pornography, with young people describing how ‘guilty and disgusted’ they felt about what they had seen and how they were extremely worried about getting into trouble for accessing these sites (NSPCC 2013).

Access aside, there is also evidence of gender differences in attitudes to pornography. Girls and young women seem consistently to view pornography more negatively than their male peers, and seem more likely to report feeling uncomfortable and upset by the sexually explicit material they have encountered (Bryant 2009, Häggström-Nordin et al 2006). The most extensive research into the gendered attitudes of young people to pornography has been done in Sweden. There, in a survey of almost 1,000 young people aged 15–25, 46 per cent of females described pornography as ‘degrading’, compared with 23 per cent of males. The majority of males surveyed (63 per cent) had positive responses to pornography, describing it as ‘stimulating’, ‘cool’, and above all ‘exciting’ (Wallmyr and Welin 2006). In another survey of 1,389 students aged 17–21, female students were, compared with male students, ‘more concerned and gave more negative examples of how pornography could create a distorted picture of sexuality’ (Häggström-Nordin et al 2009).

The internet, as mentioned, fails to signpost or restrict adult content, creating a glaring inconsistency between what is considered acceptable for children and young people in offline and online spaces.

Pornography: harmful impacts on attitudes and behaviour

Much of the emotional heat in public debates around pornography (beyond the morality of the industry) rests on the question of pornography’s impact on its viewers’ sexual beliefs, attitudes and practices. Concerns have also been raised about how porn may be affecting young people’s self-esteem, body image, development, sexual activities and attitude to gender.

Despite the high levels of concern, the impact is not clearly evidenced; research is often based on small sample sizes and dependent on varying definitions of pornography and access. While there isn’t a clear picture from across the evidence base, some studies have found links between accessing pornography and a variety of impacts, including:

- unrealistic attitudes to sex and relationships
- more sexually permissive attitudes
- greater acceptance of casual sex
- beliefs that women are sex objects
- more frequent thoughts about sex
- sexual uncertainty (the extent to which children and young people are unclear about their sexual belief and values)
- less progressive gender role attitudes.⁹

Other research has picked up on the idea of a normative ‘pornographic script’ that is reinforced by consumption of sexually explicit material (Löfgren-Martenson and Mansson 2010). Young men have reported anxieties in relation to their ability

9 See Brown and L’Engle 2009; Häggström-Nordin et al 2006, 2009; Rogala and Tydén 2003.

to perform sexually and women have reported anxieties about body image (ibid). As well as linking exposure to sexually explicit material to less progressive gender roles, participants in Häggström-Nordin's Swedish qualitative study also picked up normative messages from sexually explicit material about ideal body shape for men and women: 'the girl should be small, thin, and you know ... inferior ... while the guy should be muscular and superior' (Häggström-Nordin et al 2006).

As described in the previous section, these concerns intersect with a broader set of issues related to increasing pressure from gender portrayals in popular media (Bailey 2011) and the younger age at which girls are feeling the need to diet and remove body hair (GirlGuiding 2013) in order to conform to a perception and stereotype of 'womanhood'.

There is consensus in the literature that young people can learn sexual behaviour from what they see in pornography (Owens et al 2012), and sizable numbers of young people in our sample said that they learned about sex (and in some cases relationships) through viewing porn.

Much of the academic research exploring the relationship between exposure to sexually explicit material and young people is focused around whether pornography correlates with 'risky behaviour'. What is considered 'risky' differs across cultural contexts. However some studies find positive relationships between (early or frequent) exposure to or consumption of pornography and:

- unprotected anal or oral sex
- sex with multiple partners
- the involvement of drugs and alcohol in sex
- engagement in sexual practices from a younger age
- 'sexting'.¹⁰

While we therefore have an idea of the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours associated with pornography, whether it has a causal link is, from an academic perspective, not clear, and whether these impacts are considered to be harmful or lasting is to some extent subjective.

Pornography: problematic or 'addictive' use

At the most extreme end, there has been a rise in young people seeking counselling for problematic pornography use. There are concerns that this is, in part, due to the convenience and variety of digital pornography, leading to an escalating interest in more explicit or extreme content and more time spent consuming it. In many cases, this appears to be linked to escapism from stress or distress, so it is unclear whether there is a rise in the number of people who are willing to seek treatment, or in the number who are turning to pornography as an alternative way of coping with stress, or whether pornography is linked to a real deterioration in sexual function or mental health.

Upon being presented with the evidence, a Relate counsellor reflected that:

'Young people today live their lives online, so much of their lives and connections are made through social networking and accessing information through Google and the like. So it's only natural that pornography is a part of that online world. The worrying thing about pornography is that it takes intimacy out of sex and sets up unrealistic expectations for young people who may be using this as a reference point for their sex education.'

10 See Brown and L'Engle 2009, Häggström-Nordin et al 2006.

Sexting: self-generated sexually explicit content

One development directly related to technological changes is the increasing number of young people involved in self-generating pornographic content or 'sexting' – the 'exchange of sexual messages or images' (Livingstone et al 2011). Quantitative studies have put rates of participation in sexting at between 15 and 40 per cent of young people, depending on age and definition (Ringrose et al 2012). The 2013 ChildLine survey of 13–18-year-olds found that 60 per cent had been asked for a sexual image or video of themselves (NSPCC 2013). In our sample, almost half described sexting as 'part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays'.

In its most straightforward sense, sexting is a legal issue: sexuality explicit content of under-18s is defined as child pornography.

Beyond the purely legal issue, there is some evidence to suggest the practice of sexting often occurs as 'pressurised yet voluntary' (Ringrose et al 2012). In the small-scale qualitative study by Ringrose et al, the authors found that many images were obtained through coercion, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence. There appears to be a strongly gendered aspect to this phenomenon, with young women being pressured by young men to participate. The social impact of participation is also highly gendered, with the role of men being celebrated and women's part being denigrated (ibid).

Between 2011/12 and 2012/13, ChildLine saw a 28 per cent increase in calls from young people about being made to post sexually provocative images online, or to share them via a mobile phone at the behest of someone online. These calls were almost all from young women, with female callers outnumbering male by nine to one (NSPCC 2013). Three-quarters of callers were aged between 12 and 15, and many callers were distressed to find their images or content had been shared, leaving them vulnerable to bullying and ridicule (ibid). The recent Girlguiding survey of girls and young women found that one in 20 11–21-year-olds had reported photos of sexual nature had been circulated without their permission (Girlguiding 2013).

The problem of creating and sending explicit content is exacerbated by how easy it is to transfer, share and widely distribute online content, which can lead to loss of control over intimate images, bullying or blackmail.

Young people see sexting and sharing to be a normal activity, and tend to reinforce the highly gendered nature of participation (see Coy et al 2013):

'If a girl's going out with a boy and then sends it and then they break up, it's kind of natural for a boy to be quite upset and then show one of his mates. Then the rumour spreads and they all want to see it.'

Young man, year 10

'It's like you fall out with a girl and some boys put it on Facebook or Twitter or something like that just to get back at them. And sometimes show their mates and send them around.'

Young man, year 11

While clearly more extreme for young people, sexting and its consequences aren't limited to teenagers. Sites trafficking in 'revenge porn' – adult content shared without consent in the aftermath of a sexual relationship – are on the rise, some of which are explicitly linked to financial extortion.

2. THE NEW NORMS: HEARING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES

This chapter presents our findings based on a survey of young people. The aim of the survey was to explore young people's attitudes to sex and relationships in a digital age. We were keen to ensure that the voices of young people informed this research, and to explore the effect of the internet and new technology in more detail.

These findings are based on a representative sample of 500 18-year-olds. While the sample size does allow us to make meaningful comparisons between male (48 per cent) and female (52 per cent) respondents, it is not large enough to break the data down further (for example by sexuality). The research was conducted online by Opinium Research for IPPR between 19–27 June 2014. Unless otherwise stated, all percentages refer to the full sample of 500 respondents.¹¹

There are some methodological limitations which we should highlight. We decided to approach young people who were aged 18 years because of the ethical issues surrounding asking minors about their attitudes, education and behaviours. However, the technological experience of today's 18-year-olds will differ from that of younger teenagers. For example, smartphone use is seeing exponential growth, particularly among teenagers, as prices fall and internet access improves.

From a methodological viewpoint, other studies have cautioned against the 'third-person effect', where a person shows greater concern about issues affecting others than themselves, with the implication that 18-year-olds reflecting on their past experiences are more likely to raise concerns or be more conservative in their outlook. And, given the sensitivity of the subject matter, there is particular risk of reporting bias and respondents mimicking a public discourse around some of the issues. Lastly, we have asked young people about their perception of impacts: this of course does not equate to findings about actual or statistical impacts.

Accepting these caveats, then, these findings provide important, up-to-date and timely insights into an immensely complex debate. If young people are reporting the changes they would like to see, the areas where they feel distress or pressure, and the issues they need more information or guidance about, that provides a mandate for policy action.

Attitudes to sex and relationships

A large majority of young people believe that people are more open-minded about sex and relationships nowadays. This belief is more pronounced among women than men, with 90 per cent and 80 per cent respectively agreeing (or agreeing strongly).¹²

A smaller majority believe that this liberalism has gone too far, with 66 per cent stating that people are too casual about sex and relationships. This is again more

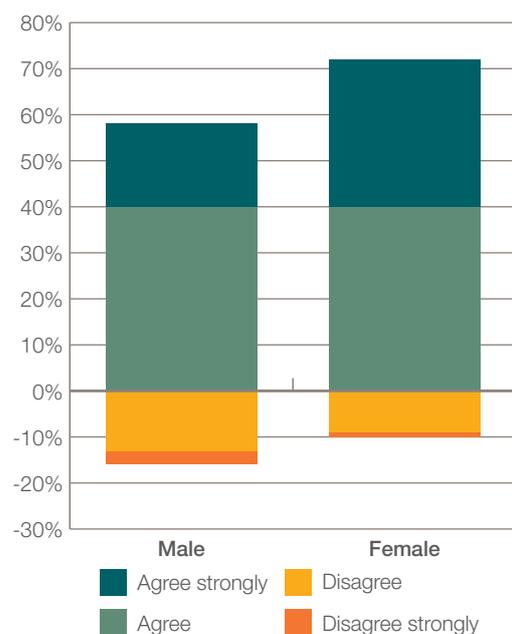
11 A full summary of survey responses is available to download from <http://www.ippr.org/publications/young-people-sex-and-relationships-the-new-norms>

12 In this chapter, unless otherwise specified, the colloquial 'agree' includes responses of 'strongly agree'.

pronounced in women than men: almost three-quarters of young women believe people are too casual about sex in relationships, and one in three strongly agree (compared to 59 per cent and 18 per cent in men).

Figure 2.1

Responses to statement ‘People are too casual about sex and relationships’, by gender



Note: ‘Don’t know’ and ‘Neither agree not disagree’ are excluded.

The online space

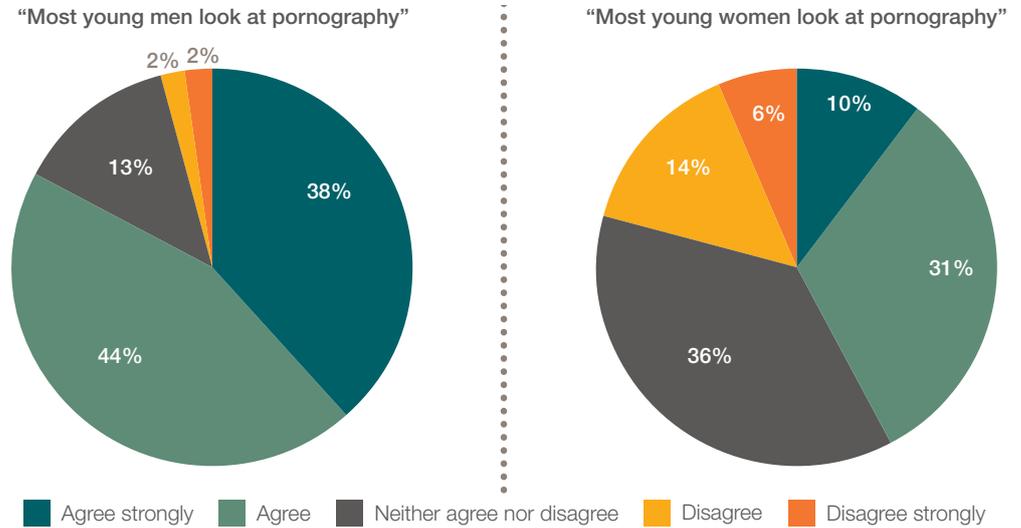
When it comes to support and education, young people recognise high levels of concern among adults – two-thirds agree that adults worry too much about what happens online. However, they also report that the level of adult understanding doesn’t match up. More than half (56 per cent) feel that the adults in their lives (parents, teachers and guardians) find it hard to understand or help with online issues, and a similar proportion (61 per cent) believe that adults are out of touch with young people’s relationships and friends. In both instances, this is slightly more pronounced among women than men.

Sexting and pornography

Four of five teenagers (81 per cent) agree that ‘most young men look at pornography’, and this belief was conveyed by only very slightly more men than women. However, just 40 per cent believe that ‘most young women look at pornography’, and more men than women agreed. Among women, there were a far higher proportion of individuals who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 2.2

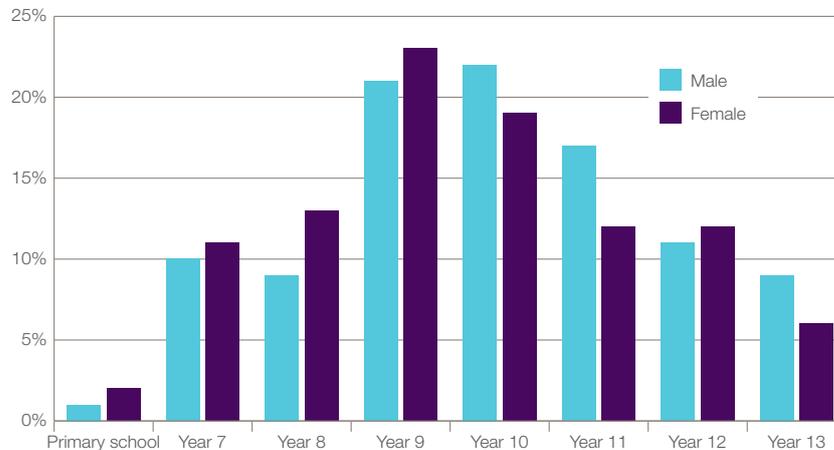
Responses to statements regarding pornography, all respondents



A sizeable majority report that accessing pornography is seen as typical or common for people in their year-group at school; this was higher among men (79 per cent) than women (62 per cent). Of those who reported that accessing pornography was typical, we asked in which school year this was perceived as typical. These findings must only be seen as indicative of people’s perceptions: we know, particularly around issues of sex and sexuality, and particularly in teenage years, reported behaviours are not necessarily the same as actual behaviours. However, these results do demonstrate that the issue of pornography enters into peer groups for the majority of people several years before the age of legal access to adult content, highlighting the inconsistency between offline and online restrictions of pornography.

Figure 2.3

Responses to question ‘In which school year did accessing pornography become typical?’



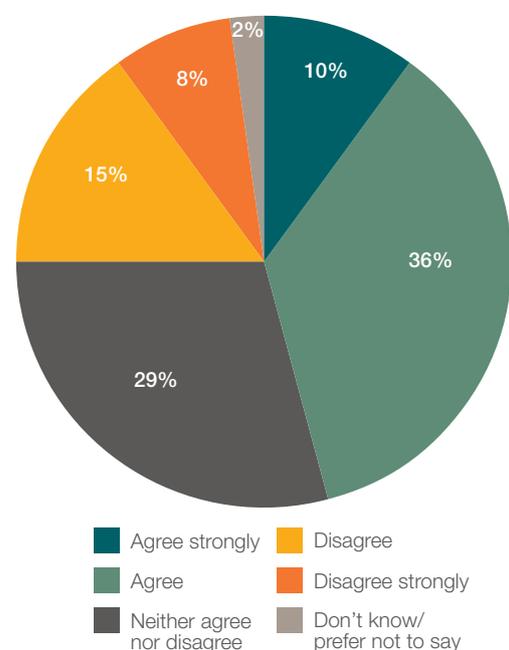
Note: Based on those who previously reported that pornography was seen as typical or common at school. N = 352 (189 male, 161 female).

More than one in five report pornography being seen as typical or common in year 7 (11–12-year-olds) or younger, and almost half (45 per cent) report it as typical by year 9 (13–14-year-olds).

Despite the illegality of the practice, almost half (46 per cent) of young people agree that sexting – sending sexual or naked photos or videos – is ‘a part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays’. Less than one in four disagreed, and proportions were very similar between young men and young women. Similar proportions (40 per cent of men and 43 per cent of women) reported it was ‘common or typical’ practice among their year-group at school.

Figure 2.4

Responses to statement ‘Sending sexual or naked photos or videos is part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays’, all respondents



What impacts do teenagers believe engaging in pornography is having on their generation?

Teenagers’ attitudes to pornography and its impact are somewhat ambivalent, albeit with marked gender differences. While a high proportion have worries about the impact of pornography (particularly among young women), sizeable numbers believe there is nothing wrong with watching pornography, and that it can be a valuable source of information.

In line with their belief that people are more open-minded about sex and relationships, almost half said there was nothing wrong with watching pornography. This attitude was more commonly held among men than women. Around a third (36 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women) neither agreed nor disagreed, which could reflect broad conceptions of ‘pornography’. Almost all respondents held an opinion on porn: only 2 per cent of the sample either didn’t know or did not want to say.

Figure 2.5

Responses to statements regarding pornography, by gender



Note: 'Don't know' and 'Neither agree not disagree' are excluded.

Overall, almost equal proportions agree and disagreed (37 and 39 per cent respectively) that pornography helps young people to learn about sex. However, agreement was substantially higher among young men (45 per cent agreement) than young women (29 per cent). Women felt more strongly than men, with 21 per cent strongly disagreeing.

Far fewer respondents believe that pornography helps young people to learn about relationships, with 58 per cent disagreeing; this is slightly more pronounced among women than men (62 per cent and 53 per cent respectively). Still, almost one in four (23 per cent) do believe that pornography helps young people learn about relationships, with similar proportions across both genders.

One in six young people selected pornography as one of the three main places where they had learned about sex and relationships (see figure 2.7); this is more pronounced among men (almost one in five) than women (one in eight).

In terms of perceived effects, less than 10 per cent disagree with the idea that pornography could have a damaging impact on young people's views of sex or relationships. This is more pronounced among young women, with only 3 per cent of young women disagreeing, compared to 16 per cent of young men. Seven in 10 believe that pornography could be damaging, rising to 78 per cent among young women. Women felt more strongly, with 36 per cent strongly agreeing (compared to 22 per cent of men).

In terms of pornography's effect on body image, more than three-quarters of young women believe that pornography has led to pressure on girls to look a certain way. Similarly, three-quarters believe that it has led to pressure on girls and young women to act in a certain way. While a smaller proportion, the majority of young men agree: 56 per cent believe that pornography has led to pressure on the way young women act, and 58 per cent that it has led to pressure on the way women look.

A slightly smaller majority agree that pornography had also led to pressure on boys or young men: 63 per cent of women and 49 per cent of men believe pornography has led to increased pressure on boys to look a certain way; 68 per cent of women and 54 per cent of men believe it has led to pressure on behaviour.

Two-thirds of men (66 per cent) and more than three-quarters of women (77 per cent) believe that pornography has led to unrealistic attitudes to sex, with 61 per cent of men and 78 per cent of women believing that pornography encourages society to view women as sex objects.

On a more positive note, 64 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women believe pornography has made people more sexually explorative and open-minded. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that pornography has a significant impact, often negative, on the way that young people – especially women – are perceived.

In summary, despite being fairly open-minded about accessing pornography, more than half of teenagers believe it is creating pressure on the way young people think they should look and behave.

Personal concerns

More than half of the sample reported that they (by accident or intentionally) had personally come across pornographic content online that made them feel worried or uncomfortable. This was higher among young women than men (63 and 47 per cent respectively).

High numbers of young people are worried about the pornography they have seen online: 43 per cent are worried about the content of what they have seen, and this is more pronounced among young women than men (47 and 39 per cent respectively). Two in three teenagers agree that pornography could be addictive, and 8 per cent of respondents reported being personally worried about the frequency or length of time they have spent looking at pornography.

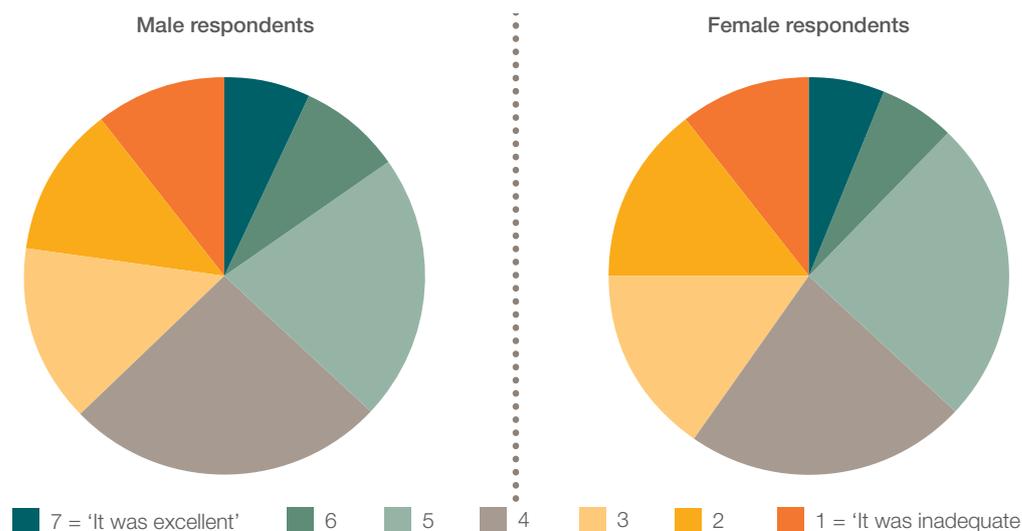
Overall, four-fifths of teenagers agree that it is too easy for young people to accidentally see pornography online. This was slightly more pronounced among women than men; only one in 20 disagreed. Half of young men (49 per cent) and two-thirds of young women (66 per cent) say it would be 'easier growing up' if pornography was less easy to access for young people. And when thinking about their own experiences, a sizable minority (43 per cent of young men and 40 per cent of women) would have felt more comfortable if accessing pornography was less normal or easy.

Education, guidance and support

Given these concerns, which reinforce the previous findings outlined in chapter 2, it is clear that there is room for improvement for sex and relationship education (SRE) in our schools. A minority of young people were positive about the SRE they had received at school – overall, just 36 per cent of respondents rated their experience as a 5 or better, on a scale of 1 to 7.

Figure 2.6

Responses to question ‘How would you rate the sex and relationship education you received through your school?’, by gender



The lack or low quality of SRE was reinforced in many of the qualitative comments.

'I only really had two sex ed classes in year 4 and 5 then I had no more.'

'I went to a Catholic school, so the information I received was next to none, except for one talk we had from an external visitor in year 9. I think it would be important to have yearly visits from external organisations and in-school teaching.'

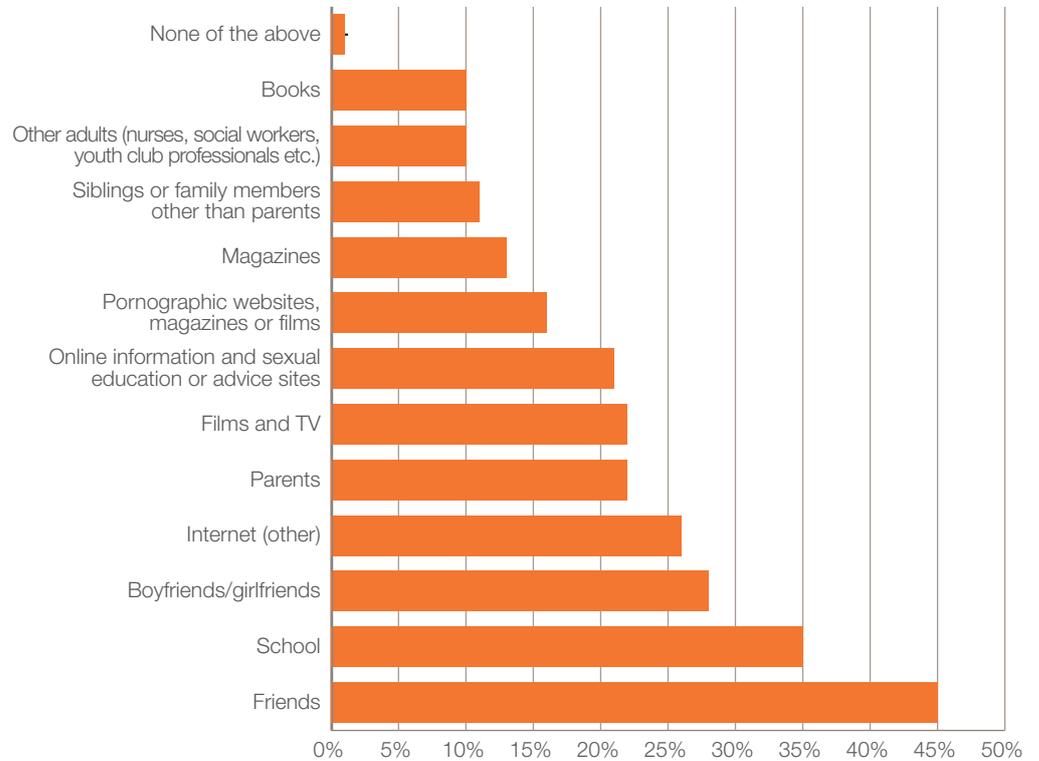
Despite these middling or negative ratings, school plays a very important part in how young people learn about sex and relationships. In these rankings, there was little difference between genders, apart from pornography, which was selected by 19 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women.

It is evident that despite the advance of new technology and media, traditional sources are still important when it comes to learning about sex and relationships: school, friends and parents all play an important role in informing young people.

The internet is also a major source of information, and so it is important that content filters do not block access to material on educational sites that young people consult.

Figure 2.7

Responses to ‘Which were the three main sources where you got most of your information about sex and relationships?’, all respondents



Nonetheless, significant numbers of young people selected pornography as one of their main sources of information about sex and relationships. In the qualitative comments, some individuals thought that education ought to cover pornography, so that it is clear that pornography is not the same as sex.

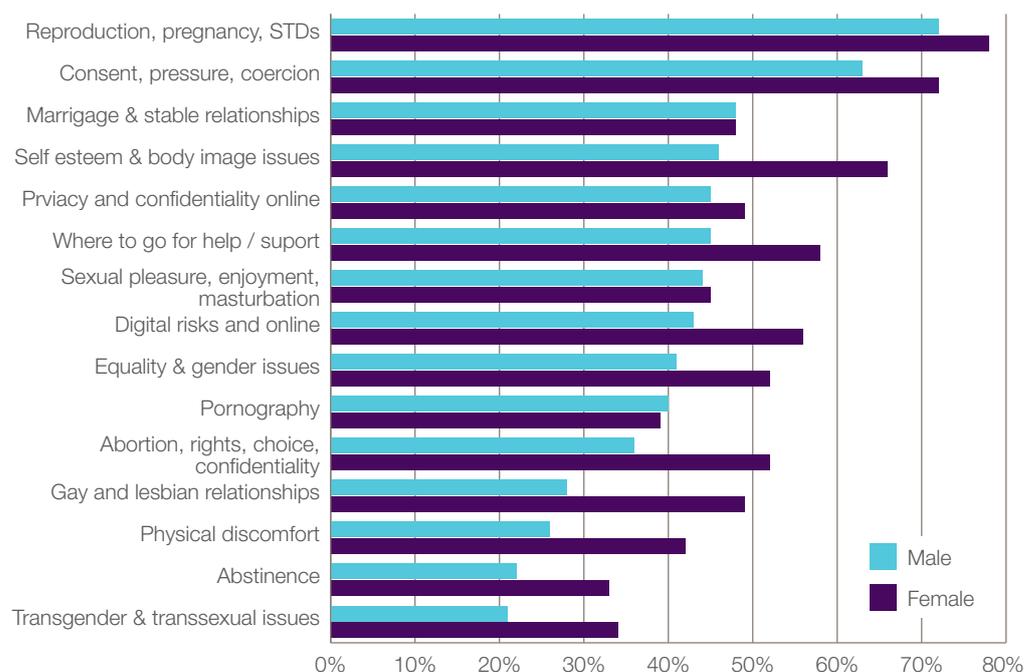
‘Teaching kids that pornography is almost fantasy is a good idea as well, the amount of plastic surgery, and drugs (viagra, enemas etc) that are given to the people in the videos should be explained, so that there are no false images in their minds growing up.’

What do young people want to know?

Young people have a broad definition of the type of issues they believe should be discussed to be fully informed about sex and relationships.

Figure 2.8

Responses to ‘What do young people need to know about, discuss or understand to have healthy, happy and positive relationships?’, by gender



These results show that a greater proportion of women thought it was important for young people to have information and guidance on almost every topic. This was particularly marked on self-esteem and body image issues, physical discomfort during sex, and transgender, transsexual, gay or lesbian relationships and issues.

‘I would have liked my parents to teach me about sex and relationships. I learnt everything about this through peers and friends at school, and had my first sex ed class in year 5. It was half an hour where a nurse came in and taught us about puberty. We had the exact same talk a year later. The first proper sex ed lesson I had was when I was in year 9, but it was really only about sex and how to put on a condom etc. I feel the way I got my education on these matters is inadequate. I would have rather been taught it gradually throughout my schooling (right from the beginning) ... I also thought it was inappropriate not to teach us about sex and relationships. I wish we had also been taught at a younger age about ... homosexuality and things like being transgender. I only really understood this because I watched episodes of [US television show] Dr Phil.’

‘I would have liked more information on the actual relationship side of things rather than just the science of sex. I would have liked to learn about different types of contraception rather than just condoms. It would have been better if we had discussed LGBTQ relationships more, and what a healthy relationship is, in contrast to an unhealthy or unstable one.’

Every topic was selected by at least a quarter of the respondents as essential for discussions about healthy and happy relationships. Many commented on the need for SRE to go beyond ‘sperm meets egg’ and ‘how to put a condom on’, and to provide ‘more information on the emotional side’.

‘I would have preferred to have been taught from a much younger age about sex ... it would have become a less embarrassing and easier thing to talk about. Introducing it to a class of teenagers is wrong – no one learns anything because half the class are already sexually active and the other half are embarrassed to talk about it. I only received sex education in the form of talking about how it physically works. The relaxation, enjoyment and the privacy of it should also be part of the education, so that both the male and female know how to treat the other.’

These results send a strong message about the importance of comprehensive SRE within formal education. Over half of those we surveyed believe that all children should have a right to education about sex and relationships, and half believe that SRE should be on the curriculum. Fewer than a quarter of young people support the idea that parents should have a choice about whether their child learns about sex and relationships in school; nearly half (48 per cent) believe that responsibility for teaching children about sex and relationships should be shared between parents and teachers, and almost a quarter (22 per cent) believe it is primarily the school’s responsibility.

Our respondents also highlighted the importance of SRE being delivered by a trained expert. The need for teachers who are confident and up-to-date on the issues came up repeatedly in the qualitative comments.

‘I would have somebody knowledgeable and less self-conscious teaching it.’

‘The school seemed too embarrassed about everything. I think that teachers should be more up-to-date about current issues and more straight-to-the-point.’

‘Do not use teachers that are a part of the school as they are not very useful and do not offer students all the information that they may be seeking. Get an external visitor who has a great understanding of the subject and is able to answer all questions.’

‘Get someone better in – the school nurse was quite old and so quite conservative in her views.’

The clear majority of young people (81 per cent) believe that SRE should be taught in a way that gives young people an opportunity to set the curriculum and cover what they need to know (only 3 per cent disagree with this prescription).

‘I would change the way guidance is given so that young people can feel free to ask questions. It isn’t always helpful simply lecturing young people. There needs to be some interaction and group discussion so that they can feel free to talk about it as well as feeling more at ease with the subject.’

Three-quarters of young people feel that there ought to be resources provided for parents, which ties into the earlier finding that young people believe adults in their lives worry too much but are out of touch with their relationships and new norms.

3.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following draws on the research evidence and outlines some policy challenges and directions.

Sex and relationship education should be taught in every school by specialists, and must be broader in scope

The role of sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools is fiercely debated. There is broad consensus that it should exist, but it is not universally accepted that it should be compulsory. Policy debates in the last few years reflect this division. In 2010, the Labour government failed to get compulsory SRE through parliament in the face of opposition from the Conservatives. More recently, the Conservative-led Coalition government has supported SRE but has been clear that it should not be a mandatory part of the curriculum.

However, the case in SRE's favour remains strong, and the primary research presented here from young people themselves strengthens further the case for making it compulsory (although parents and individual young people should have the right to opt out).

Campaign groups and charities specialising in this area continue to highlight the importance of compulsory SRE, and the *Telegraph* newspaper has led an active campaign to update the statutory guidance. For example, Relate cites evidence to suggest that compulsory SRE could encourage greater use of contraception, encourage some young people to delay having sex for the first time, provide the opportunity to understand concepts of consent, and allow for a discussion of the role and risks of the internet (Relate 2014). Brook, the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum have together produced guidance to support schools and educators to best understand how to deliver effective SRE education, covering the evidence, how to tackle difficult questions and links to useful resources (Brook et al 2014).

However, it is not enough simply to have SRE education in schools. Schools need to be more effective in commissioning and providing high-quality content, delivered by experts. Our survey results show that there is a significant gap between what is being taught and what young people want. SRE needs to be about relationships, not just sex, and it should better reflect the reality of young people's life by covering LGBT issues, digital content, bullying, access to pornography and expectations of sex. This seems to reflect parents' demands as well: a recent survey of parents of school-aged children found that 83 per cent supported their school covering issues around pornography as part of sex education (NAHT 2013). Of course, there are some schools where this is the norm – where good-quality SRE is being delivered by experts – but these instances are too few and far between.

Parents, educators and young people need a single point to access advice and support

Although school is an important source of information for young people, it is not the only one. As our research shows, young people gain their knowledge from a variety of sources and this is likely to remain the case. Parents need to feel better equipped to discuss sex and relationships with their children, and have a better understanding of the impact of technology in this area.

Already, there are lots of useful resources available to parents, youth workers, and young people themselves. However, many of them – CEOP, Childline, Beatbullying¹³ – focus on internet safety rather than providing a space for young people, parents and teachers to openly discuss concerns and access resources and information.

Administered or run by local authorities, family information services (FIS) provide a directory of local services for parents. They provide an existing point of access through which information, links and follow-up services could be provided to young people, parents and teachers. Some local areas already provide good links to support on sex and relationships, but others should follow suit and ensure that information is accessible and easy to find for young people, parents and teachers.

Others should improve or expand their current offer. This could mean providing links to existing resources that support parents to talk to their children about sex and relationships, as well as providing information about services. In many areas parents will be aware of and may have used their local FIS to identify childcare options. Extending this provision would mean that parents can come back to a familiar place to support their teenagers.

Local authorities' public sexual health responsibility for young people should be broadened

As health and wellbeing boards become firmly entrenched in the local authorities landscape, there is an opportunity to ensure that strategies are developed that provide commissioners with options to deliver appropriate local services. Many strategies already include the need to continue to reduce incidence of teenage pregnancies and STIs. However, there is scope within existing strategies to develop measures on wider health and wellbeing. This could be, for example, to ensure that relationship counselling is available or that extra-curricular activities provide a space for young people to discuss the role of technology and the internet.

It is clear from our research and the wider evidence base that young people are facing physical and emotional issues. Some call for direct intervention; others need to be seen within the wider remit of early intervention and prevention.

Commissioners should be working with young people to continuously evaluate existing provision and identify areas for improvement. There have been rapid changes, and policy and practice have failed to keep pace in providing the most appropriate support.



Of course, these policy ideas must be seen within a wider cultural context. Our research, alongside other evidence, highlights the role of the images, stereotypes and norms that young people are continuously exposed to. It is clear that there is a relationship between this culture and the way that societal and gender norms are set around sex and relationships. The overwhelming concern – reflected in our research – is that easier and wider access to pornography and sexually explicit material creates unrealistic norms and assumptions for young men and women in how they should conduct their relationships. It is clear that young people want to talk about sex and relationships and want more support. The challenge is to provide that in a way that is supportive, builds resilience and allows young people to flourish.

¹³ See, respectively, <http://ceop.police.uk/>, www.childline.org.uk and <http://www.beatbullying.org/>

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