A major aim of school sexuality education is to provide students with the information and skills needed to make informed decisions. One of the most important personal decisions that will be made by older students is whether or not to, and when to begin, having sexual intercourse. The issue of abstaining or delaying 'having sex' is an important component of relationships and sexual health education, and a highly relevant consideration for many students.

Recent Australian research clearly shows that a significant proportion of secondary school students have had, or are thinking of having, sexual intercourse and rates of this behaviour have been consistent over time. According to LaTrobe University'sWestern Australian Survey for Secondary School Students[1], 44.2% of students in Year 10, 49.3% of students in Year 11, and 61.7% of students in Year 12 have experienced sexual intercourse (penis in vagina or penis in anus sex).

Learning activities in the GDHR curriculum materials therefore integrate the reality of sexual intercourse in some young people's lives.

Despite the behavioural reality of sexual activity amongst older students, good educational programs also emphasise delaying initiation of sexual intercourse (sexual debut) as the safest choice for young people.

Delaying initiation of sexual intercourse - an important message for school students

The policy framework for the implementation of the Growing and Developing Healthy Relationships (GDHR) program is based on three key principles, one of which is the promotion of abstinence and the postponement of sexual activity for young people.

Facts

- Abstinence is 100% effective against STI and pregnancy if it also includes abstaining from oral, anal and vaginal intercourse that expose a person to semen, pre-ejaculate fluid, cervical or vaginal secretions.
- Research has proven that sexuality/relationships education does not lead young people to become sexually active.
- 'Abstinence only until marriage' programs, popular in the USA, have been shown not to delay the onset of sexual intercourse.[2]
- Comprehensive sexuality education programs which promote delaying sexual intercourse, and also provide information on other forms of contraception, are effective

Definition and rationale

There are varying definitions for the term 'abstinence' but the most common relates to 'choosing not to have sexual intercourse' and also refers to the decision to delay or postpone the initiation of some or all sexual activity, for a certain period of time.

Sometimes young people will experience pressure to 'have sex' (from society, friends, partners, media etc.), and therefore may find it difficult to delay first sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual intimacy - however there are benefits.

In addition to safety, delaying 'having sex' can result in strong benefits for individual relationships. It gives the time and space for young people to get to know each other, share feelings and fears and talk about where the relationship is going before, perhaps, deciding to move forward with sex.

Having students consider delaying sexual intercourse will also encourage thinking about reducing sexual risk behaviours including:

- reducing their number of sex partners
- decreasing levels of unprotected sex
- increasing condom and contraceptive use

Teaching tips

- Avoid preaching abstinence, instead allow and facilitate the opportunity for students to be able to clarify their own values and beliefs.
- Never put a student 'on the spot' to disclose their personal views about sexual activities. Frame questions within the context of "why young people, in general, would..." to help place students in the position of 'objective observer'.[3]
- Discuss the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse including factors such as taking the time to get to know your partner, being able to communicate about where the relationship is going, knowing what they expect out of a sexual experience, and having a chance to consider contraceptive options.

'Being in love' and readiness for sexual activity

The bridge between young people choosing not to engage in sexual intercourse and becoming sexually active, is a complex one. Some of it will relate to each students' notions of ‘being in love' or even perhaps never having thought through the issue of ‘Am I ready for sex?' and 'What do I want?'.

The following is taken from *Talk Soon. Talk Often. A Guide for Parents Talking to their Kids About Sex*.

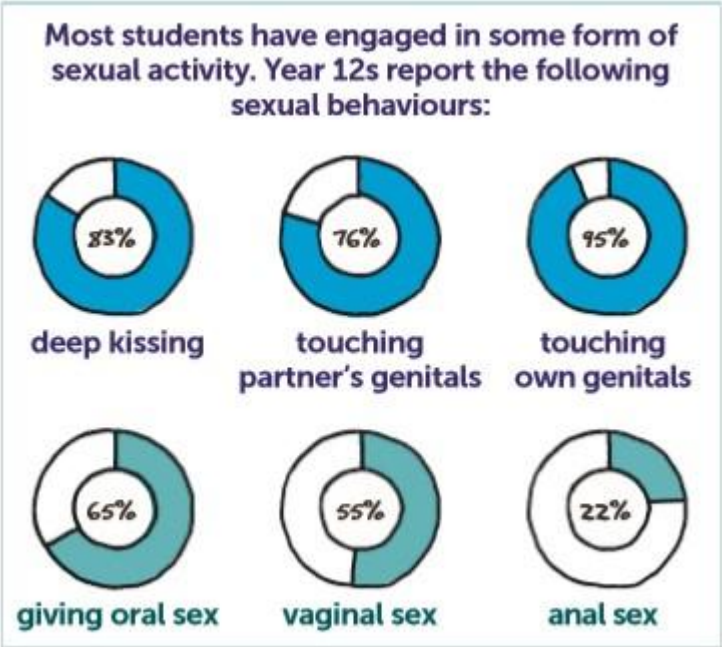
What do young people need to know to decide about having sex?

Some young people will have the skills and the expectation that they will form a connection with someone before they have sex. Those young people are more likely to have happier experiences of sex if and when it does happen. Many others' experiences of first-time sex are characterised by feelings of pressure, disappointment, regret and even necessity.

Important messages about sex for young people

- A lot of ‘messages' suggest that everyone is having sex but this is not true. By the end of Year 12, approximately 50% of students will have had sexual intercourse, approximately 50% have not.
- One reason that people enjoy sexual activity is because it feels nice, good or great. You can feel excited, beautiful and powerful; you can feel close, loved and loving. Sex can also be uncomfortable, disappointing, boring, a chore. At its worst it can make you feel lonely, sad, unloved and unvalued.
- You have a right to choose not to have sex, or to wait until you feel really ready.
- People have sex for a range of reasons, including to become closer, to feel loved, to feel good, to get it over and done with, to be popular, to fit in or to rebel. Not all of these reasons are ideal.

- If getting someone to love you is your goal, then ask yourself whether you think that person likes you. If you don't think they like you, then they are not going to hang around to love you.
- There are lots of different ways to enjoy sexual feelings. Some people do nothing. Some masturbate (and have been, off and on, since they were babies). Some people decide to do some sexual behaviours and not others.
- Everyone has the right to decide what sexual behaviours they are happy to engage in, if any. They can also expect their friends and sexual partners to respect those decisions.
- Every young person has a right to information that will help them keep safe and healthy, which includes information about avoiding pregnancy and STIs.
- Everyone, whatever gender or sexuality you identify with, married or not, can choose not to have sex at any time
- Having sex once does not mean you have to do it again.
- Sex can lead to getting or giving an STI, or pregnancy. It's important to protect yourself and your partner.
- Oral sex wont cause pregnancy but it can still spread some STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and herpes. Using a condom for oral sex can help prevent giving or passing on STIs.
- Making good sexual decisions can be nearly impossible if a person is drunk or high.



How do you know you are ready for sex? A checklist for young people

Young people need to have their own personal list of indicators (everyone is different). Some of the following statements may help provide a good starting point for young people to consider if they are ready to begin having sex. It's crucial they decide for themselves and know that no-one else has the right to decide for them!

- Do I want to have sex? Have I said so?
- Does this feel right?
- Am I sure the other person wants to have sex with me? Have I asked them?
- Am I over 16? Is my partner over 16?
- Have I pressured my partner to 'give in'? Has my partner pressured me?
- Do I feel pressured by anything or anyone else?
- Am I doing it to gain acceptance from my friends?
- Is anyone coercing me? Is anyone forcing me?

- Am I doing it just to keep my partner?
- Am I doing it because everyone else is?
- Do we both want it for ourselves, not just to please the other person?
- Do we care for each other and agree that we want to take this next step?
- Do I respect my partner? Does my partner respect me?
- Do I understand how to get consent? Do I know how to communicate my consent?
- Do I feel comfortable with the person I want to have sex with?
- Do I feel I could say no at any point, and that would be OK?
- Do I have any anxieties or fears?
- How will I feel about this decision tomorrow?
- Do I know how to prevent a pregnancy?
- Do I know how to get contraception, and which one is best for me? Have I discussed contraception with my partner?
- What would I do if my partner and I got pregnant?
- Am I ready to be a parent if my partner and I get pregnant?
- Do I know how to protect myself and my partner from getting an STI? Do I have condoms and know how to use them?
- Do I know how to get an STI test?

The above checklist may not fit everyone's values and beliefs; the aim is simply to provide a starting point with some discussion triggers

Safer sex

Safer sex means preventing the body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids) of a sexual partner from entering into your body. It can also mean covering up parts of the body that might be infectious (e.g. herpes sores or warts) when engaging in sexual activity.

Having safer sex will protect your health and your partner's health by preventing STIs and unplanned pregnancy. It is important to use condoms and water-based lubricant when having sex including oral sex. Other ways to have safer sex include engaging in non-penetrative sex such as kissing, stroking and mutual masturbation that do not put a person at risk of an STI or unplanned pregnancy. Safer sex practices may be different for different people. It is important to know what safer sex practices are important for you, and to communicate these to your partner.

Teaching tips

- Before providing a lesson on safer sex, it's helpful to review information on reproductive anatomy, menstruation and sperm/semen production and ejaculation.
- Emphasise that no assumptions are being made about students' sexual activity or experience.
- Focus on the most commonly used contraceptive methods, such as abstinence, condoms and the pill
- Australia has no regulations about age requirements relating to youth obtaining contraception, including condoms.
- Be conscious of diversity within your student group, knowing that some cultures/religions do not approve of contraception.

Relevant resources

Guidelines

Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education K-12, SIECUS, USA

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, UNESCO

Guidelines

"When is the right age to be in a sexual relationship?", GDHR student FAQs

"Where can I find more information on sexual health?", GDHR student FAQs

Fact sheets/booklets/videos

Abstinence (not having sex), Get the Facts

Being ready for sex, Get the Facts

Condoms and contraception, Get the Facts

How to use a condom animation; Get the Facts

Talk Soon. Talk Often, a WA Department of Health booklet.

References

1. Fisher, C. M., Kauer, S., Waling, A., Bellamy, R., Ezer, P., Kerr, L., Brown, G. & Lucke, J. 2019. Western Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 115). Bundoora: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University, 2019.

2. Haberland, N., Rogow, D. 2015. Sexuality education: Emerging trends in evidence and practice. Journal of Adolescent Health, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 15-21.

3. SIECCAN. (2019). Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education. Toronto, ON: Sex Information & Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Ready vs not ready (for sexual activity)
- Safer sex - condoms

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