

# Research on **Teenage Sexuality**

For parents and people working with young people, such as youth workers and teachers

December

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## What is This Research Summary About?

This research summary describes key findings from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency research about teenage sexuality. The research findings in this leaflet can help parents and those who work with young people understand more about how young people in Ireland feel about sexuality and relationships, including what it is like to be a teenager growing up in Ireland today, how young people learn about sex and relationships and what influences young people's sexual behaviour and learning. It also describes how parents approach sexuality education with their children.

Research shows that parents' influence is key to a child's emotional and sexual development; however, most adolescents do not discuss sex and relationships with their parents, even when their parents invite them to do so. The Agency hopes that having research findings available in an easy-to-read format will help parents to support their children to develop a healthy and responsible attitude to sex and relationships.

We hope this summary of research findings will provoke thought, discussion and interest among parents and those who work with young people. Readers may use the research as a basis for discussion with young people or they may want to get practical information or advice about some of the issues raised in the research.

## What Does the Research Tell Us?

- Young people learnt about sex in many different ways – from TV, magazines and the internet, as well as from friends and their own experiences.
- Many teenagers felt that school and teachers didn't tell them what they needed to know about managing relationships or practising safer sex.
- Most of the young people did not feel what they saw on TV related to their own lives or influenced their behaviour, but they still used TV to find out about sex and relationships generally.
- Teenagers often refused to discuss sexual matters with their parents and some parents avoided direct communication about sex and relationships. Survey research found that only a fifth of men and over a third of women aged 18-24 had received sex education at home.
- A desire to fit in with their friends influenced young people's decisions about sex and relationships.
- Good communication with parents about relationships and sex has been linked in some studies with better use of contraception at first sex and a lower likelihood that the young person will have sex before 17.
- Many young people in our studies lacked knowledge about contraception, relationships and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which left them at risk of unplanned pregnancy, STIs or sexual experiences for which they were not ready.
- Parents often think they are better at communicating with their pre-teen and teenage children about relationships and sex than they actually are.



# Learning About Sex

## Friends and peers

- The peer group is the most popular source of information about sex.
- Young people in our research lacked accurate knowledge about things like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or emergency contraception, perhaps because information from 'the street' is not always accurate or complete.

## Sex education in school and in the home - The 'facts of life'

- Research shows that sex and relationships education in the home is a reality for a *minority* of young people only; just over one fifth of boys and one third of girls reported having received education about sex and relationships at home.
- Many young people reported not having received sex education at all in secondary school and for those who did, school sex education was often seen as being too biological. Teenagers seemed concerned that they were denied the chance to learn what they needed to know. Far more relevant than the biology details were moral, social and emotional issues, and gaining practical knowledge of contraception, STIs and the sexual health services.
- Some young people were sexually active before the legal age of consent (17 years); many 'older' teenagers expressed concern for the younger teens; they were aware that not only was sex education at school and in the home 'too little', it was also given 'too late'.

## Media

- Young people valued television and magazines/newspapers as sources of information that were easy to get and reflected their interests and concerns.
- Both parents and young people referred to the amount of sexual content that young people are exposed to – from music videos, advertisements and TV programmes to pornographic magazines, films and internet sites.
- Young people did not feel that sex on TV and in films was a reliable portrayal of real-life behaviour; however young people were sometimes confused about messages about sexual behaviour that came from factually presented 'real-life' entertainment programmes.

# Sexual Behaviour

## The legal age of consent is 17 for boys and girls

## Peer influence

- Both boys and girls thought about their friends' reactions when they were making decisions about sex, relationships or contraception. Young people were influenced not only by encouragement or goading from their friends but also by more subtle pressure to fit in with their friends, to appear grown up or experienced, or to please a partner.
- Some described how they had engaged in sexual practices not because they had decided that it was the right thing for them to do or because they were ready but because they found themselves in a situation where they felt under pressure to act in a particular way or because they did not know how to say 'no'.
- Some boys felt unable to ask for advice or information as they felt they had to appear macho and ready for sex at all times.
- Young women were expected to have a good reputation; at the same time they sometimes felt under pressure to lose their virginity.

"I learned on the pitch with all me friends talking about sex an' all"

CPA report no. 8

"They don't talk about the emotional side of it. They talk about the facts"

CPA report no. 9

"Like they told ya how to...make a child, but, like, they didn't say, like, how long you have to be with a fella before you do anything"

CPA report no. 8

"They just give out all the time. Like, 'be careful' ... They don't have a clue what is going on these days"

CPA report no. 8

"I learned about AIDS off Eastenders and teenage pregnancy off Coronation Street"

CPA report no. 8

## Alcohol

- Many young people felt that alcohol increased sexual desire and made them more confident with the opposite sex.
- Girls, who normally set limits on sexual activity, sometimes reported that they went further when they were drunk.
- Over 20% of young people had taken alcohol or drugs when they first had sex.
- Some young people used alcohol as an 'excuse' or justification for engaging in sexual activity.

## First sex

- Most young people had some sexual experience in their teens; many young people in the research studies said they had experienced non-penetrative sexual activities, such as mutual masturbation or oral sex.
- 53% of men and 59% of women were 17 or older when they first had sex.
- Most young people were in a steady relationship and used contraception when they first had sex.
- Population survey research shows that 31% of men and 22% of women aged between 18 and 24 years had sexual intercourse before the age of 17.
- Those who had sex before 17 years were:
  - Less likely to have used contraception at first intercourse
  - 70% more likely to experience crisis pregnancy later in life
  - 3 times more likely to experience abortion in their lifetime
  - 3 times more likely to report having a sexually transmitted infection (STI) in their lifetime
  - More likely to wish they had waited longer.
- 50% of first sexual encounters were not planned.

## Contraception

- Young people generally understood the safer-sex message, but they didn't always use contraception. Some of the reasons why contraception wasn't used were:
  - They had not planned to have sex
  - Embarrassment / difficulty in getting contraception, or the expense involved
  - Worries about using condoms correctly in the heat of the moment or a dislike of condoms
  - Being drunk or having taken drugs
  - Feeling 'invulnerable' to pregnancy
  - They didn't think to use contraception.
- Young people often found it hard to speak about using contraception, either before or during an intimate encounter.
- Young women feared that buying or carrying condoms would give them a 'bad' reputation.
- Young people were less concerned about STIs if they felt they 'knew' the other person; they 'trusted' the other person not to have an STI.

## Sexual health

- Avoiding pregnancy was the main reason for using contraception. STIs are on the increase in Ireland, yet many young people didn't feel at risk from STIs at all, and most had poor knowledge about STIs.
- Many young people felt nervous about going to sexual health services, which they believed were there for adults. Girls were concerned about using GP services and wanted greater anonymity and confidentiality than they believed was provided for them there.

"I was just doing stuff to fit in with the crowd"

CPA report no. 9

"If a girl came up...and said, 'Let's have sex' it would be a bit weird but if you didn't do it you'd get a lot of stick over it"

CPA report no. 9

"If you weren't able [to perform]...you'd be afraid she'd tell your friends, her friends"

CPA report no. 8

"It [first sex] wasn't planned. I was just drinking..."

CPA report no. 9

"Get the leg over – tell all the lads about it"

CPA report no. 8

"They really knew I was definitely doing it so they wouldn't be slagging me off then no more"

CPA report no. 8

"Fellas mostly just want sex out of a relationship but most girls just want a bit of attention"

CPA report no. 10

# What Parents Say

## Communicating about relationships and sex

- When parents spoke to their children about sex the focus was on abstinence and, to a lesser extent, the need to use contraception, and vague phrases such as 'be careful' were often used.
- Parents reported that younger children were more likely to ask questions, but parents were reluctant to discuss sexual intercourse with younger children for fear of compromising their innocence.
- Parents who felt that school sex education would provide their child with sufficient information about sex often didn't know about what sort of school-based sex education their child was receiving, especially at secondary level.
- Parents who saw themselves as open and liberal about sex and relationships and willing to talk to their children had usually given very little practical information or advice to their children, often because they left it up to the young person to come to them if they had questions or concerns, and this rarely happened.
- While parents didn't always respond fully to questions from their younger children, they reported attempting to raise sexual issues with their teenage children. However, these attempts were often blocked by the young people who were reluctant to talk about the topic.
- Parents don't always communicate *with each other* about discussing sex and relationships with their children; this can lead to missed opportunities for good communication with their children.

## What parents THINK and what teenagers DO

The beliefs that parents talk about in research about their children were often contradicted by research done on teenagers. Below are some beliefs commonly held by parents which are simply **not always true**:

BELIEF	FACT
Parents often felt that their child had good sense and would not act in a sexually irresponsible way.	Hundreds of teenagers every year, from all backgrounds, get pregnant without intending to or get a sexually transmitted infection (STI).
Most parents assumed that if their child was younger than 18 years he/she would not have experienced penetrative sex. Reasons for this included: The belief that their adolescent didn't have a boyfriend or girlfriend. The belief that he /she was too young to be interested in a sexual relationship. The belief that he or she would never have the opportunity to have sex.	While the majority of young adults report first sex at 17 years or older, population surveys have found that 31% of young men and 22% of young women had sexual intercourse before the age of 17.
Many parents assumed that their children already had enough knowledge on contraception and safer sex through various sources, such as school, the media, books, and friendship networks.	Teenagers complain about the lack of reliable knowledge they receive about sex and relationships and are aware of the negative effects of this.
Parents believed that they had communicated moral and safer-sex messages to their children by giving vague warnings or by making innuendos and suggestions about appropriate behaviour.	There is no evidence that vague moral messages protect children, rather research with teenagers suggests that they can close down communication with them.

Our research shows parents found it challenging to give young people specific or detailed information on how to handle themselves in difficult situations or how to avoid getting into them. Few parents talked about risks such as STIs and unplanned pregnancy or about how contraception works and where to get it. Check our Tips and Practical Help for Parents section for information.

"Now I think they are all bombarded with it all so young ... maybe we forget to talk about it now because it is so in your face, really"

CPA report no. 21

"My eldest is very reserved, and I thought that maybe he'd feel embarrassed if I spoke to him. Very often, you know the way, in your head you sort of say, 'Oh I'll tell him that, I'll tell him that', and then I never actually did"

CPA report no. 21

"I think I just thought that the school had it sorted for me. Thinking of it now, I must have brushed it aside: 'Ah sure the school will sort it out,' do you know what I mean"

CPA report no. 21

"He was very capable of letting you know, "Okay, too much information now and I'm heading off". Even, like, the famous sex talk they get at school and, "How did it go today?"

"Fine, I'm not talking to you about it"

CPA report no. 21

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## Tips for Parents - Based on our Research

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- Do not assume your child knows it all.
- Talk to children to find out what they know, and what they want to know.
- Start early – ideally try to introduce discussion about relationships and sex with pre-teenage children.
- Parents should talk *to each other* about communicating about sex and relationships to children and to teenagers.
- Parents should know that there is widespread support in Ireland for sex education – not just the ‘facts of life’ but education on a range of topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and homosexuality.
- Take the initiative in discussions about relationships and sex. Waiting may mean that the young person might not get the information he or she needs before becoming sexually active.
- Parents can approach the child’s teacher or school to find out what is being taught in the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme and discuss this with their child.
- Parents should monitor what their child is doing and who his/her friends are – both out and about and online.
- Parents should know that teenagers are often under pressure – from friends, peers, partners and media. Parents should take into account the effect these influences might have on their child’s behaviour.
- Parents should encourage a child to reflect on his or her own values and beliefs - to be their ‘own person’; this helps a child develop his or her own limits and be less vulnerable to negative pressures.

### USEFUL INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

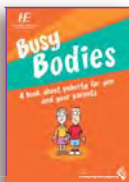
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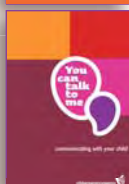
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## Practical Help for Parents

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**Busy Bodies** – an illustrated guide to help parents and teachers provide basic information to young people between the ages of 10 – 14 years on the physical and emotional changes that they may experience during puberty in an age-appropriate and positive way. Freetext BUSY followed by your name and address to 50444 for a free copy.



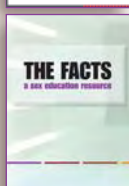
**‘You can talk to me’** booklet and DVD to assist parents in communicating with their children on sexual health and relationships. Freetext PARENT followed by your name and address to 50444 for a free copy.



**‘Parents, Tips for Talking to Older Teenagers’** – a supplement designed to help parents of older adolescents in talking to their teenagers about relationships and sexuality. Freetext TALK followed by your name and address to 50444 for a free copy.

**The Facts** – DVD for parents, teachers and youth workers. It contains information on fertility, contraception, a condom demonstration, STIs and crisis pregnancy. Freetext FACTS, followed by your name and address to 50444 for a free copy.

All of the above are available free of charge from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, or download booklets at [www.crisispregnancy.ie](http://www.crisispregnancy.ie)



[www.b4udecide.ie](http://www.b4udecide.ie) is an interactive website for young people and their parents, providing information on topics such as relationships, self-esteem, decision-making and peer pressure. It was developed by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency as a result of a wide consultation with teenagers, parents, teachers and youth workers.



## Parenting Courses and Support

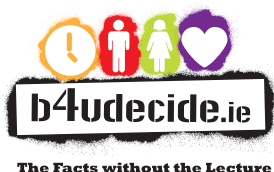
**National Parents Council - Primary** runs workshops for parents on talking to your child about relationships and sex. Call 01 887 4475 or 01 8874481 for more information.

**Parentline** runs courses about parenting teenagers in schools, community groups or places of employment. For more details see [www.parentline.ie](http://www.parentline.ie) or call 01 8787230

**Parentline** have a confidential helpline offering support, guidance and information for parents and guardians. Tel: 1890 927 277

**National Parents Council - Primary** has a helpline number: 01 887 4477

## Relationships and Sexual Health Information for Young People



[www.b4udecide.ie](http://www.b4udecide.ie)  
[www.cluedup.ie](http://www.cluedup.ie)  
[www.nehb.ie/youthhealthne](http://www.nehb.ie/youthhealthne)

## Contraception and Sexual Health for Adults



'**Think Contraception**' leaflet and website.

Information for men and women who want to learn more about sexual and reproductive health, especially contraception.

Leaflet available from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency or visit [www.thinkcontraception.ie](http://www.thinkcontraception.ie)

## Crisis Pregnancy Counselling and Support



**Positive Options** leaflet and website.

Positive Options is a directory of agencies skilled in the area of crisis pregnancy counselling and support. Leaflet available from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency or visit [www.positiveoptions.ie](http://www.positiveoptions.ie) or freetext LIST to 50444

## Want to Read More?



Five pieces of research are summarised here:

- Crisis Pregnancy Agency **Report 8** used individual interviews and group discussions to investigate the sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of 41 early school leavers.
- Crisis Pregnancy Agency **Report 9** investigated teenagers' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors and pressures that influence their sexual knowledge and behaviour.
- Crisis Pregnancy Agency **Report 10** recorded and analysed the amount and type of sex on Irish television, and interviewed teenagers to find out their views about sex on television.
- Crisis Pregnancy Agency **Report 21** interviewed 43 parents about how they educated their pre-adolescent and adolescent children about sexuality.
- The **Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (ISSHR)** is a large-scale survey that interviewed 7,441 adults (aged 18-64) in Ireland on their sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

In addition, we draw on the findings from a research report by Dr Gráinne Cousins and Professor Hannah McGee, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and Professor Richard Layte, Economic and Social Research Institute, titled 'Alcohol and unsafe sex in young Irish adults - Findings from a national survey and implications for policy and practice'. HRB 2009.

## Who is the Crisis Pregnancy Agency?

The Crisis Pregnancy Agency is a Government body that was set up to plan and implement a strategy to address crisis pregnancy in Ireland. There are three main parts to the Agency's work: 1) reducing crisis pregnancy by the provision of education, advice and contraceptive services; 2) reducing the number of women who opt for abortion by offering services and supports which make other options more attractive and 3) providing counselling and medical services after crisis pregnancy.