

Research on Teenage Sexuality

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

October

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What is This Research Summary About?

This research summary gives key findings from HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme (CPP) research about teenage sexuality. Some of the research studies involved speaking to teenagers about their sexual education, behaviour and beliefs; others were based on young adults reflecting on their past experiences.

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 relationships and sexuality, including what it is like to be a teenager growing up in Ireland today, how young people learn about relationships and sex and what influences young people's sexual behaviour and learning. The leaflet also describes how parents approach relationships and sexuality education with their children.

Research shows that parents' influence is key to a child's emotional and sexual development; however, even when parents feel they have discussed sex and relationships, young people don't always feel they have the information they need. The CPP 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 relationships and sex.

We hope the 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?

- Sex education is linked with safer sexual behaviour.
- 86% of young people have received some form of sex education.
- School-based sex education tends to focus on biological topics, with less emphasis on emotions, sexuality and relationships, which young people are keen to learn about.
- Although most parents say they have spoken to their children about sex, many young people still say that they have not received sex education at home.
- Most young people are 17 or older when they first have sex.
- Having sex before age 17 has been linked to negative outcomes later in life, such as crisis pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- A desire to fit in with their friends influenced some young people's decisions about relationships and sex.
- Some young people have difficulties with discussing, getting or using contraception, which can lead to unprotected sex occurring.
- STIs are on the increase among younger people.



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

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Relationships and Sexuality Education

Sex education in school and in the home

- The vast majority of young people have received some form of sex education (86%). Young people learnt about sex in many different ways – from TV, magazines and the internet, as well as from friends and their own experiences. Of those who had received sex education, 94% of 18-25s received it in school and/or at home.
- People who received sex education at home or school were one and a half times more likely to use contraception at first sex than those who received sex education from other sources.
- Only half of 18-25s who had received sex education reported that they had been given information on sexual feelings, relationships and emotions. 35% of young people were given information on homosexuality, 66% on safer sex and STIs and 70% on contraception. Parents' and teachers' discomfort in talking about these topics may mean young people lack knowledge about them.
- Most people in Ireland support in-depth sex education – not just the 'facts of life' but education on a range of topics such as contraception, STIs and homosexuality.
- Teenagers wanted to learn about moral, social and emotional issues around sex, and they wanted practical information on contraception, STIs and sexual health services.
- While the majority of parents reported that they had spoken to their children about sex, the number fell from 82% in 2003 to 70% in 2010.
- The research reveals that both teenagers and parents can find it hard to communicate openly and effectively about sex and relationships.

Friends and peers

- The peer group was the most popular source of information about sex.
- Young people in our research lacked knowledge about things like STIs and emergency contraception, perhaps because information from 'the street' was not always accurate or complete, or because their formal sex education did not always cover these topics.

Media

- Young people valued media sources of information, as they 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 were exposed to – from music videos, advertisements and TV programmes to pornographic magazines, films and internet sites.

Sexual Behaviour

The legal age of consent in Ireland is 17 for boys and girls

First sex

- Most young people waited until they were 17 or older to have sex.
- Most young people were in a steady relationship and used contraception when they had sex for the first time.
- 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.
- Survey research shows that 37% of men and 26% of women aged between 18 and 25 had first sexual intercourse before the legal age of 17; in a school-based survey with 15–17 year olds, 31% of boys and 23% of girls said they had had sex.

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

Report no. 8

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

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"

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"

Report no. 8

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

Report no. 8

- 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
 - Three times more likely to experience abortion in their lifetime
 - Three times more likely to report having an STI in their lifetime
 - More likely to wish they had waited longer.

Peer influence

- Some young people 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 - to fit in with their friends, to appear grown-up or experienced, or to please a partner - 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.

Alcohol

- Many young people felt that alcohol increased sexual desire and made them more confident with the opposite sex.
- Young people believed that being drunk caused some young people to 'go further' sexually.
- Over 20% of young people had taken alcohol or drugs when they first had sex.
- Some young people believed that alcohol is used as an 'excuse' or justification for engaging in sexual activity.

Contraception

- Young people generally understood the importance of using contraception to protect against pregnancy and STIs. 89% of young people aged 18-25 used contraception the first time they had sex, and among sexually active 15-17 year olds in a school-based study 93% used condoms as a contraceptive at last intercourse.
- Some of the reasons why young people didn't use contraception were:
 - Not planning to have sex
 - Difficulty / embarrassment 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
 - Not thinking to use contraception.
- Young people sometimes 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.

STIs and sexual health services

- Avoiding pregnancy was the main reason for using contraception; many young people didn't feel at risk from STIs. Health Protection Surveillance Centre data reveals that STIs are on the increase in Ireland. The proportion of all STI notifications among those aged less than 20 years increased to 12.7% in 2009, from 10.3% in 2008.
- 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"

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"

Report no. 9

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

Report no. 8

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

Report no. 9

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

Report no. 8

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

Report no. 8

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

Report no. 10

What Parents Say

Communicating about relationships and sex

- Parents often thought they were better at communicating with their pre-teen and teenage children about relationships and sex than they actually were.
- Research found that when parents spoke about sex they tended to focus on abstinence and, to a lesser extent, the need to use contraception. In some cases vague phrases such as 'be careful' were used.
- Parents reported that children were more likely to ask questions about sex when they were younger.
- Parents who discussed relationships and sex openly with their pre-teen children found it easier to communicate with them when they became teenagers.
- Some parents were reluctant to discuss sexual intercourse with younger children for fear of compromising their innocence. Parents who waited until their children were teenagers to raise sexual issues reported that their attempts to open up discussion were often blocked by the young people, who were reluctant to talk about the topic.
- Many parents who saw themselves as open and liberal about sex and relationships and willing to talk to their children had often 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.
- Parents who felt that school was providing their child with sufficient information about relationships and sexuality often didn't know what sort of school-based sex education their child was receiving, especially at secondary level.

What parents THINK and what teenagers DO

The beliefs that parents have about their children are often contradicted by research findings. Below are some beliefs commonly held by parents, which are **not always true**:

BELIEF	FACT
Parents often feel that their child has good sense and will not act in a sexually irresponsible way.	Every year teenagers from all backgrounds get pregnant without intending to, or get an STI. In 2011 there were 1720 births to teenagers (CSO) and 443 abortions to women under 20 giving Irish addresses in UK clinics (UK DoH).
Many parents of children younger than 18 years assume that they will not have experienced penetrative sex. Reasons for this include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The belief that the adolescent doesn't have a boyfriend / girlfriend • The belief that he/she is too young to be interested in a sexual relationship • The belief that he/she never has the opportunity to have sex. 	While the majority of young adults reported being 17 or older when they first had sex, survey research reveals that 37% of young men and 26% of young women had sexual intercourse before age 17. The trend emerging from recent research is that the proportion of young women (18-25) who had first sex before the legal age of consent has increased, from 21% in 2003 to 26% in 2010.
Many parents assume that their children already have enough knowledge on contraception and safer sex through various sources, such as school, the media, books, and friendship networks.	Parents can only be sure that their child has enough knowledge by talking to the young person and being informed about what their child has been taught during his/her school-based sex education. Research has found varying degrees of knowledge about school-based relationships and sexuality education among parents.
Parents believe that they communicate 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; research with teenagers suggests that such messages can close down communication.

Our research shows parents found it challenging to give young people specific or detailed information on how to handle themselves in difficult situations or 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 out the 'Tips for Talking about Sex' and 'Helpful Resources' sections for help and 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"

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"

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?"

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"

Report no. 21

Tips for Talking About Sex – Based on our Research

- Talk to children to find out what they know and what they want to know, and don't assume they know it all already.
- Start early – ideally try to discuss relationships and sex with pre-teenage children and don't close down communication when younger children ask questions about sex – being open when children are young can lay the foundation for good communication and help ensure young people get the information they need before becoming sexually active.
- Parents should find out what their child has been taught by talking to others involved in their child's relationships and sexuality education – teachers, youth workers, a partner or other family member. This can help to ensure a young person gets all the information they need to make healthy decisions.
- Parents should monitor what their child is doing and who his/her friends are – both out and about and online.
- Teenagers are often under pressure when it comes to sex and relationships – from friends, peers, partners and media messages. Parents and adults working with young people can help them resist these pressures, develop responsible attitudes to sexual activity and delay sex until they are ready by encouraging them to develop their own values and limits.

USEFUL INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

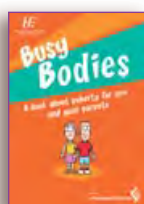
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Go to the website to sign up for our newsletter.

Helpful Resources

Resources for Parents, Teachers and Youthworkers



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 **PARENTS** followed by your name and address to **50444** for a free copy.



'Parents, Tips for Talking to 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, STIs and crisis pregnancy, plus a condom demonstration Freetext **FACTS** followed by your name and address to **50444** for a free copy.

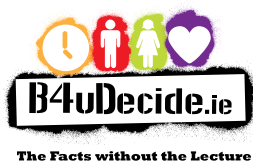
The **B4uDecide.ie** education initiative is a relationships and sexual health education initiative that was developed to support teenagers, specifically 14-16 year olds, to make healthy, responsible decisions about relationships and sexual health with the ultimate aim of delaying early sex. There are two elements to the initiative: a website and education resource packs for teachers and youth workers.

All of the above are available free of charge from www.healthpromotion.ie

TRUST resource – This DVD and set of 21 senior-cycle lesson plans is available to teachers. For further details visit www.sphe.ie. TRUST is available to youth workers through the National Youth Council of Ireland training (visit www.nyci.ie) and through training carried out by local health promotion departments.



Relationships and Sexual Health Information for Young People



www.B4uDecide.ie – Information for young people on forming healthy relationships, dealing with peer pressure and why it's better for young people to wait until they are older before having sex for the first time.

www.spunout.ie – Youth issues website, including sexual health and relationships information and links.

Contraception and Sexual Health for Adults



Think Contraception leaflet, or visit www.thinkcontraception.ie

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

Crisis Pregnancy Counselling and Support



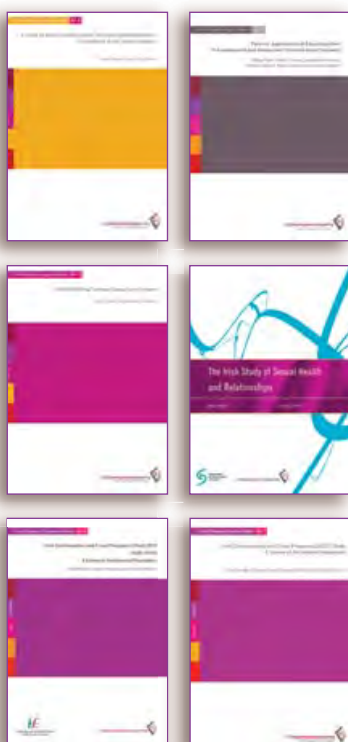
Positive Options leaflet, or visit www.positiveoptions.ie

Positive Options is a directory of agencies skilled in the area of crisis pregnancy counselling and support.

Freetext **LIST** to **50444** for a list of free, trustworthy and non-judgemental counselling services.

Think Contraception and Positive Options leaflets available to order from www.healthpromotion.ie

Want to Read More?



Crisis Pregnancy Programme Research Reports

Full research reports are available online for download at www.crisispregnancy.ie/research-policy/research-reports

About the Research Reports

Six Crisis Pregnancy Programme (formerly Crisis Pregnancy Agency) research reports are summarised here:

- **Report 8** used individual interviews and group discussions to investigate the sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of 41 early school leavers.
- **Report 9** investigated teenagers' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors and pressures that influence their sexual knowledge and behaviour.
- **Report 21** interviewed 43 parents about how they educated their pre-adolescent and adolescent children about sexuality.
- The 2006 Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (**ISSHR**) and the Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy Studies (**ICCP 2003 and ICCP 2010**) are nationally representative surveys on the sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of people living in Ireland.
- In addition we draw on findings from *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2010* (Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway 2012). STI data comes from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre.

About the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme

The HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme is a national programme tasked with developing and implementing a national strategy to address the issue of crisis pregnancy in Ireland. Visit www.crisispregnancy.ie for more information, news and to sign up to our newsletter.