

# Research highlights differences in how young men and women learn about sex and relationships

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More young people than ever are getting most of their information about sexual matters from school, but the majority feel they are not getting all the information they need, and men in particular are missing out, according to new research published in *BMJ Open*.

The findings come from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3), the largest scientific study of [sexual health](#) and lifestyles in Britain. The research was carried out by UCL (University College London), the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and NatCen Social Research. The research was funded by the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust, with additional funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department of Health and the National Institute for Health Research's School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR).

Researchers compared data from nearly 4,000 [men and women](#) aged between 16 and 24, taken from Natsal-3, conducted 2010-2012, with that from previous surveys in 1990-91 and 1999-2001, to see how sources of information about sex have changed. They also analysed data from Natsal-3 to identify associations between where young people get most of their information, and [sexual behaviour](#) and outcomes such as at what age they first had sex.

They found that for both men and [women](#), school is now the most commonly reported main source of information about sexual matters, having risen from 28% in 1990 to 40% in 2012. Parents were the main source of information for just 7% of men and 14% of women, and health professionals for only 1% of men and 3% of women. Around half of men and women reported getting most of their information from less authoritative 'other' sources

such as their first sexual partner, friends, siblings, media sources, and pornography.\*

Both men and women who learned about sexual matters mainly from school experienced first sexual intercourse at a later age than those who got most of their information from 'other' sources. They were also less likely to report unsafe sex, or to have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Additionally for young women, school was associated with them being less likely to have felt distressed about their sex life or experienced sex against their will. But this was not the case for young men.

Most people in the study (70%) said they felt they 'ought to have known more' when they first felt ready for some sexual experience. Importantly, the findings indicate a gap between the types of information young people wanted, and what they currently received. They specifically said they wanted more information about 'sexual feelings, emotions and relationships', as well as STIs, and for women, contraception.

Study author, Wendy Macdowall, Lecturer at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: "Our results suggest we need a broader framing of sex education in schools that addresses the needs of both young men and women, with a move away from the traditional female-focused 'periods, pills and pregnancy' approach.

"Our research from Natsal is timely with the current debate on sex and relationships education in schools, but it's also important to remember that introducing statutory SRE in schools won't solve everything. The factors influencing poor sexual health are multiple and complex and so too must be

the solutions to them.

"When asked for their preferred source of additional information, young people most commonly reported school, followed by parents, and health professionals."\*\*

Study author Dr Clare Tanton, Senior Research Associate at UCL, said: "Although our findings show there has been progress in sex and relationships education over the past two decades, we still have a long way to go to meet the needs of young adults.

"The terrain young people have to navigate as they are growing up has changed considerably over the past 20 years and it will inevitably continue to do so. This means that whilst we need a more structured approach towards sex and relationships education, we must also be able to adapt to these changing needs.

"The fact that many [young people](#) told us they wanted to get more information from a parent shows that parents also have an important role to play. There needs to be a combined approach which also supports parents to help them take an active role in teaching their children about sex and wider relationship issues."

Dr Neha Issar-Brown, Programme Leader for the Population and Systems Medicine Board at the Medical Research Council, said: "Sexual behaviour, or rather risky sexual behaviour, can have a negative impact on several other areas of a young adult's life, including their general well-being and health.

"Not only does this research highlight the importance of responsible sexual [information](#) from all sources, but also the urgent need to tackle the current gender disparity."

**More information:** \*Sources of information: First sexual partners were reported by 12% of men and 5% of women, friends by 24% of men and women, siblings by 2% of men and women, media sources 7% of men and 8% of women, and pornography 3% of men and 0.2% of women.

\*\*Preferred sources of additional information:

School was reported by 46% of men and 49% of women, parents by 37% of men and 46% of women, and health professionals by 22% of men and 27% of women.

Provided by London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

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