

Research on Teenage Sexuality

for parents

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH SUMMARY ABOUT?

Listening to the views and experiences of teenagers is key to our work in the Crisis Pregnancy Agency. We have published a number of research reports on teenagers and sexuality in Ireland. We believe that the findings from these reports are of great interest and importance to parents. The research describes what teenagers in Ireland are saying about relationships, sexual learning and the influence of television.

Parents as a group are very important to the Crisis Pregnancy Agency because, more than anyone, you give young people the confidence they need to develop mature attitudes to sex and relationships.

Parents need to talk openly about sex and sexuality with their children. This helps to protect them from having sex too early and prevent crisis pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

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

The back page of the summary lists sources of information and advice for parents and describes how to get copies of the reports.

This is a summary of our research on teenage sexuality designed especially for parents or people working with young people, such as youth workers and teachers.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

Some of the main points from the research are:

- 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 being involved in a relationships or practising safer sex.
- Many young people in our studies lacked knowledge about contraception, relationships and sexually transmitted infections.
- Teenagers who didn't know how to deal with relationships and sexual situations were more likely to be influenced by their friends or to have sex before they were ready; lack of information also left them at risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- A desire to fit in with their friends influenced young people's decisions about sex, relationships and contraception.
- Most of the young people did not feel what they saw on TV related to their own lives or influenced their behaviour. They knew that TV was fictional and yet some young people felt they had no other means to find out what is true and normal in the world of sex and relationships.



LEARNING ABOUT SEX

Teenagers see, hear about and experience all kinds of sexual behaviour. Information from friends and the media is easy to get, but young people don't trust this information completely. Many young people felt that parents and teachers – reliable sources of information – didn't give them the chance to talk about their concerns or check out the information they were getting 'on the street'.

Sources of information about sex:

Friends and peers

- Many young people felt at ease discussing sexual issues among themselves, without being condemned.
- Some young people (mainly boys) were afraid to open up to friends or ask questions, because they feared ridicule, or gossip that would damage their reputation.
- Perhaps because information from 'the street' is not always accurate or complete, young people in our research lacked knowledge about things like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or emergency contraception.

School sex education - The 'facts of life'

- Teenagers saw school sex education as being too biological, and they seemed angry that they were denied the chance to learn what they needed to know. They felt other things were far more relevant; these 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; not only was sex education 'too little' it was also given 'too late' for some teenagers.

Parents

- Although research has shown that open communication about sex in the home can delay first sex and help young people to practise safer sex, most adolescents in our research did not discuss sex with their parents.
- When parents spoke about sex the focus was on not having sex and, to a lesser extent, the use of contraception.
- The unwillingness to discuss sexual matters fully and/or parents' embarrassment meant that young people looked to other sources of information.

Media

- Young people valued television and magazines/newspapers as sources of information that were easy to get and reflected their interests and concerns.
- Many girls looked to teenage magazines – particularly problem pages – as a useful source of information about sex and relationships.
- While young people are 'clued up' about what they see on TV, the sex documentary poses problems for some young people - the way information is presented in such programmes can lead to confusion about how 'real' the subject matter is.

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

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

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

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

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Many young people had strong beliefs about the importance of contraception and the 'right' age to have sex, but they sometimes acted contrary to what they believed was the right thing to do: some young people 'went further' when drunk, some were afraid to carry condoms because they did not want to appear too eager to have sex, some were influenced by having a sexually experienced partner or friends who were sexually active. The legal age of consent to heterosexual sex is 17 years of age for girls and 15 for boys.

Peer influence

- Both boys and girls thought about their friends' reactions when they were making decisions about sex, relationships or contraception.
- Boys felt unable to ask for advice or information - they felt they had to appear macho and ready for sex at all times.
- Girls were expected to have a good reputation; at the same time they felt under pressure from boys to lose their virginity.

Alcohol

- Many young people felt that alcohol increases sexual desire and made them more confident with the opposite sex.
- The studies found that girls who normally set limits on sexual activity, go further when they are drunk.

First sex

- Most young people had some sexual experience in their teens; many young people in the surveys said they had experienced some sexual activities, such as masturbation or oral sex.
- For most young people who reported having sex, intercourse was unplanned and often unexpected.
- Survey research on teenagers in Ireland suggests that between 20% and 30% of teenagers report having had sex. The average age of first sex reported in these surveys is estimated at around 15.5 years. The majority of teenagers wait until they are 17 or 18 to have sex.

Boys want sex, girls want love?

- Boys were generally keen to have sex as soon as possible, with or without a steady girlfriend. Their loss of virginity usually made them feel proud, grown-up or relieved that they would no longer be ridiculed for their inexperience.
- Girls were far more interested in emotions - having someone special. Having sex was more about pleasing their partner than themselves. After first sex most early school leavers reported feeling worried, disappointed or upset.

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

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

"The first time wasn't done properly... I didn't remember the next morning"

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

CONTRACEPTION AND SAFER SEX

Most young people in the studies understood that contraception protects against unplanned pregnancy and STIs, but some sexually active young people described times when they had had unprotected sex in the past.

Contraception

- Sex was often unplanned. 'It just happened' was how many young people described their first sexual experience. Not being prepared for sex affected use of contraception.
- Over half the early school leavers who said they had sex used no contraception the first time.
- Young people generally understand the safer-sex message, but they don't always use contraception. Some of the reasons why contraception isn't used are:
 - They are afraid their parents will find out they are sexually active
 - Embarrassment/difficulty in getting contraception, or the expense involved
 - Worries about using condoms correctly in the heat of the moment or a dislike of the feel of condoms
 - A feeling that they are safe from STIs with someone they know
 - Being drunk.

Sexual Health

- Young women were reluctant – and many refused – to buy or carry condoms. They feared they would be seen as 'easy'. Fear of a bad reputation was greater than the fear of STIs and even pregnancy for many young women.
- Avoiding pregnancy was the main reason for using contraception. Many young people didn't feel at risk from STIs at all, and most had poor knowledge about STIs.
- Most young people felt nervous about using sexual health services, which they believed were designed for adults.

Communication

- The research described how teenagers often found it hard to speak about using contraception, either before or during an intimate encounter.
- Boys and girls didn't always trust the other person to provide and/or use contraception. Some girls felt that because boys are not at risk of pregnancy they don't really care about contraception; some boys were suspicious that a girl might deliberately get pregnant to 'trap' them.
- Young men were often anxious about using condoms correctly, but they found it difficult to get any information: they were frightened that their friends would tease them, and many said that school sex education didn't cover practical matters such as condom use.

"I wouldn't go into a chemist and buy them [condoms]. Everyone would know"

"I never buy [condoms]. I wouldn't have the guts..."

"If you know her it's OK to do it without condoms"

"People my age think [...] 'AIDS, it's the far side of the world'"

OUR RESEARCH, YOUR PRACTICE – WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

The role of parents is very important – Parents need to talk openly about sex and sexuality with their children to protect them from having sex too early and prevent crisis pregnancy and STIs.

Teenagers need more than information – They need the confidence and skills to make sound and healthy decisions – despite what their friends are doing. You are very important in helping your child to gain the confidence necessary for them to develop mature attitudes to sex and relationships.

Learning about sex – Our research shows that by talking to their children parents can close the gap between what young people need to know and what they are learning from friends and the media.

Peer influence – By supporting and helping their children in a non-judgmental way, parents can help their children rely less on the approval of their friends.

Young people and the media – TV can be a useful tool in opening communication lines with young people; parents can use stories/issues from TV programmes to help their children think about sexuality and relationships.

WANT TO READ MORE?

Crisis Pregnancy Agency Research Reports

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

Printed copies of the reports may be obtained from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

About the Research Reports

The three pieces of research are summarised in this update:

- Crisis Pregnancy Agency Report 8 used individual interviews and group discussions to investigate the sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of 41 early school leavers. (Mayock & Byrne, Trinity College Dublin)
- Crisis Pregnancy Agency Report 9 investigated teenagers' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors and pressures that influence their sexual knowledge and behaviour. (Hyde & Howlett, University College Dublin)
- 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. (MacKeogh, Dublin City University)

*Full research reports
are available online
for download at
www.crisispregnancy.ie*

THE CRISIS PREGNANCY AGENCY

The Crisis Pregnancy Agency is a Government body that was set up to address the issue of 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.

USEFUL INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

4th Floor
89-94 Capel Street
Dublin 1

Tel: 01 814 6292
Fax: 01 814 6282
Email: info@crisispregnancy.ie
Web: www.crisispregnancy.ie

Practical help for parents

'You can talk to me' booklet and DVD to assist parents in communicating with their children on sexual health and relationships. They are available free from the **Crisis Pregnancy Agency** or download the booklet at www.crisispregnancy.ie

www.cluedupparents.org is an information and support website for parents in teaching their teens about sex and relationships.

Parenting courses

Parentline runs courses about parenting teenagers in schools, community groups or places of employment. For more details see www.parentline.ie or call 01 878 7230.

If you want to talk to somebody...

Parentline has 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

Advice for young people

www.cluedup.ie

Website aimed at providing sexual health information and support for young people, mainly aged 16-24.

Contraception and sexual health for adults

The 'Think Contraception' leaflet and website provides information for young men and women who want to learn more about sexual and reproductive health, especially contraception. The leaflet is available from the **Crisis Pregnancy Agency** or log on to www.thinkcontraception.ie

Crisis pregnancy advice and counselling

Positive Options leaflet and website.

Positive Options is a directory of agencies skilled in the area of crisis pregnancy. The Positive Options leaflet is available from the Crisis Pregnancy Agency or log on to www.positiveoptions.ie or freetext the word LIST to 50444

Your Feedback

If you have any comments on this summary we would like to hear them. Please contact the Agency or email info@crisispregnancy.ie

