

New research focuses on teen sexual health in Northern Ireland

June 11 2012

Sex education at school is young people's preferred source of information about sex, according to a new report from Queen's University and the University of Ulster.

Forty-two per cent of 16 year olds from across Northern Ireland who completed the 2011 Young Life and Times Survey identified sex education at school as the source of the most helpful information about sex. It is seen as the most reliable and trustworthy source of information, with many [respondents](#) saying that they would have liked more lessons.

1,434 [teenagers](#) across Northern Ireland completed the Young Life and Times Survey, an annual survey of 16-year olds undertaken by ARK, a joint initiative by Queen's and the University of Ulster. The survey gives an insight into lives of 16-year olds across Northern Ireland, addressing a number of key issues.

The key findings relating to [sexual health](#) have been published in a new report, entitled Messed up? Sexual Lifestyles of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. They include:

- 26 per cent of respondents reported that they had had sex.
- Around one half (46 per cent) of those who had had sex were 16 years of age when they first had sex, 31 per cent were 15 years old whilst the remaining 22 per cent were younger.
- 30 per cent said that this had happened on the spur of the

moment, while 29 per cent said they had planned it together with their partners.

- 62 per cent of respondents felt that the first time they had sex came at the right time; however, 34 per cent felt it happened too early. The older respondents were when they first had sex, the more likely they were to say that the timing was right.
- [Curiosity](#) (54 per cent) and the feeling that sex seemed like a natural follow-on to the relationship (46 per cent) were the two main reasons why they first had sex, for both [males and females](#). Females were much more likely than males to say that they had sex because they were in love – 43 per cent of females compared to 29 per cent of males.
- About three in ten were still in a relationship with their first sexual partner.
- 54 per cent of those who had had sex only ever had one sexual partner. Eight per cent had more than five sexual partners.
- Whether they'd had sex or not, 62 per cent said they would find it easy to access contraception.

Dr Dirk Schubotz from the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's, and author of the publication said: "All these findings are myth-busters in the face of those who portray young people as irresponsible, promiscuous beings who don't think about the consequences of entering a sexual relationship.

"However, the findings also show that those teaching sexuality education with a 'no sex before marriage' agenda need to acknowledge that at least one in four young people don't make this choice.

"School-based sex education is clearly young people's preferred source of information. However, many of the respondents were critical of the negativity with which sexuality education is taught in school, and few felt at ease talking to their teachers about sex. Despite the fact that

Relationship and Sexuality Education now forms part of the compulsory post-primary curriculum, some respondents reported that they had received none. This would suggest that a more open and positive approach to [sex education](#) is required."

A second publication from ARK, entitled Young Men and Sexual Health, has been published to coincide with Men's Health Week (11-17 June). Drawing on information from a number of sources, it highlights that:

- Young men found it easier to talk about [sex](#) to their girlfriend/boyfriend and close friends, than to their parents.
- 24 per cent of males in Year 8, but 80 per cent of those in Year 12, said they would find it easy to get contraceptives. When asked where they would get contraceptives, 53 per cent said from a shop or chemist, and 35 per cent said public places, such as bars or public toilets. Only one in ten said they would go to a family planning clinic or doctor.
- Knowledge of some sexually-transmitted infections was high among 11-16 year old boys, although some diseases were less well-known.
- The number of diagnoses of some diseases in [Northern Ireland](#), such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea, are higher among males than females, particularly among those aged 20-24.

Report author, Dr Paula Devine from the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's, said: "The fact that high number of diagnoses of some sexually transmitted diseases, especially chlamydia and gonorrhoea, are particularly high among young men shows that there is a need for more education in this area."

More information: Full reports: [Messed up? Sexual Lifestyles of 16](#)

year olds in Northern Ireland is available at www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update80.pdf Young Men and Sexual Health is available at www.ark.ac.uk/services/MINI8.pdf

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

Citation: New research focuses on teen sexual health in Northern Ireland (2012, June 11)
retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-06-focuses-teen-sexual-health-northern.html>

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