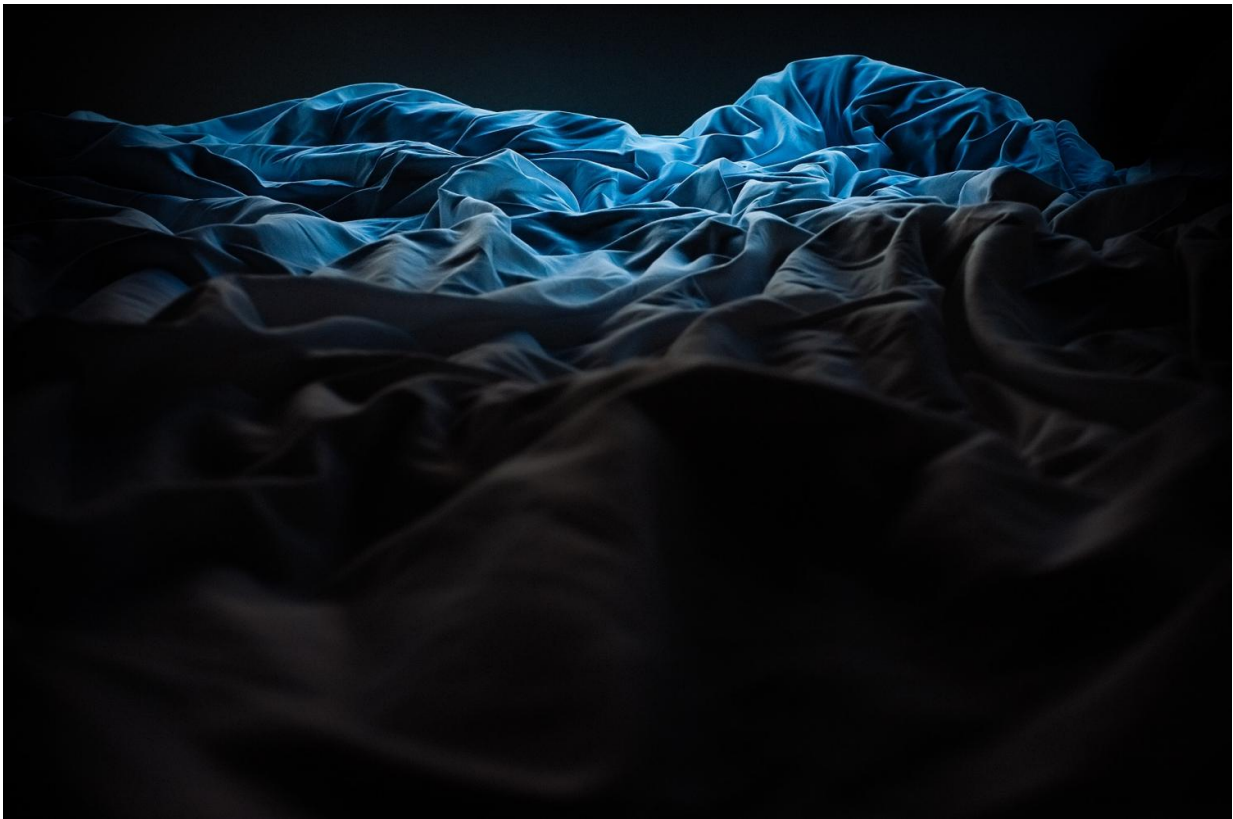


Fun sex is healthy sex—why isn't that on the curriculum?

August 4 2017, by Lucia O'sullivan



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Damn—we forgot to teach our kids how to have fun sex.

Most news covers the sex lives of young people in terms of hookups,

raunch culture, booty calls and friends with benefits. You might think that young people have it all figured out, equating sex with full-on, self-indulgent party time.

Despite my decades as a researcher studying their intimate lives, I too assumed that the first years of consensual partnered sex were pleasurable for most, but got progressively worse over time. How else to explain the high rates of [sexual dysfunctions](#) reported by adults? I was wrong.

Our research at the University of New Brunswick shows that young people (16 to 21 years) have [rates of sexual problems](#) comparable to those of adults. This is [not just a matter of learning to control ejaculation timing or how best to have an orgasm](#). Their sex lives often [start out poorly and show no improvement over time](#). Practice, experience and experimentation only help so much.

This project came to be after a former colleague at my university's health centre told me that many [young women](#) complained of pain from vulvar fissures (essentially tearing) from intercourse. The standard of care is to offer lubricant, but she began to ask: Were you aroused? Was this sex you wanted? They would look at her blankly. They had been having sex without interest, arousal or desire. This type of tearing increases a young woman's risk of STIs, but also alerted my colleague to a more deep-seated issue: Was sex wanted, fun and pleasurable?

What emerged from our first study was verified in our larger study: Low desire and satisfaction were the most common problems among [young men](#) followed by erectile problems. Trouble reaching orgasm, low satisfaction and pain were most common among young women.

Was this a select group? No. Overall, 79 per cent of young men and 84 per cent of young women (16-21 years old) reported one or more persistent and distressing problems in sexual functioning over a two-year

period.

Parents focus on disaster

Despite what you might think from their over-exposed social media bodies, today's youth start sex later and have fewer partners than their parents' (and often their grandparents') generation did. A recent U.S. national survey found that young people [have sex less often](#) than previous generations.

Did years of calamity programming in the form of "good touch/bad touch," "no means no," and "your condom or mine" take a toll? Perhaps that was intended as so much of our programming is designed to convince young people of the blame, pain and shame that awaits them in their sexual lives. If we really believe that young people are not supposed to be having sex (that it should just be reserved for adults in their reproductive years and no others, thank you), it might as well be unpleasant, dissatisfying or painful when young people have sex, right?

Young people are over-stressed, over-pampered and over-diagnosed. They are also under-resourced for dealing with challenges in their sexual lives. This is how a bad sex life evolves.

Parents make efforts to talk to their children about sex and believe they get their messages across. Yet, their children typically report that parents fail to communicate about topics important to them, such as jealousy, heartbreak, horniness and lack of horniness. Parents' messages are usually unidirectional lectures that emphasize avoiding, delaying and preventing. Young people dismiss these talks, especially in light of media portrayals of sex as transformative and rapturous.

Sex in Canada's schools

Canada's schools deliver [fairly progressive sex education](#) across the provinces. But they do not resemble the comprehensive approaches offered in countries such as The Netherlands and Switzerland. Those countries have [teen pregnancy rates](#) as low as 0.29 per cent of girls aged 15 to 19. Canada's rate is 1.41 per cent, far higher than many European countries (such as Italy, Greece, France and Germany) but consistently lower than the United States. Thankfully.

These rates are a general metric of youth sexual health and key differences in the socialization and education of young people. They reflect the extent to which we are willing to provide a range of sexual information and skills to young people. More progressive countries reinforce messages that sex can be a positive part of our intimate lives, our sense of self, our adventures and connection. Young people in those countries have healthier and happier sexual lives. They know how to enjoy sex while preventing infections and unwanted pregnancy.

Many countries, including Canada, are swayed by a vocal minority who strongly believe that teaching young people about the positive components of sexuality will prompt unhealthy outcomes, despite all evidence to the contrary. When parents and educators fail you, and peers lack credibility, where else are you to turn?

Porn - lessons in freak

Enter porn. Young people turn to porn to find out how things work, but what they learn is not especially helpful. Porn provides lessons in exaggerated performance, dominance and self-indulgence. The relationships are superficial and detached. Producers rely heavily on shock value and "freak" to maximize viewer arousal, distorting our understanding of what is typical or common among our peers.

Of course young people turn to porn to find out how sex happens. It's

free, easily accessible and, for the most part, private. One young man in our interviews said, "I learned a lot about what goes where, all the varieties from porn, but it's pretty intimidating. And, I mean, they don't look like they're loving it, really loving it."

Our research makes painfully clear how few messages young people have learned about how to have fun, pleasurable, satisfying sex. They may seem self-indulgent to you, but then nobody took on the task of saying, "Sex should be fun, enjoyable and a way to connect. Let's talk about how it all works."

Fun sex as safe sex

Did anyone teach you these lessons? A friend and esteemed fellow researcher told me that he learned how sex worked by viewing his dad's porn magazines. The only problem was that in his first sexual encounter he did not realize that there was movement involved.

Without a platform of positive communication with our youth about sexuality, and specifically about how sex unfolds and can brighten life and improve health and well-being, there is no room for them to address new challenges in the sexual realm. The World Health Organization's alarming report of the [rise of antibiotic resistant gonorrhea](#), for instance, will sound like another dire warning from an endless stream. Nobody is consistently motivated by threats.

We must talk to young people about how to have fun sex. This will help to offset the chances that [young people](#) struggling with problems in their sexual lives now will develop [sexual dysfunctions and relationship strain](#) that distress so many adults. These lessons will arm them with the information and skills required to keep them safe and to seek effective solutions when problems emerge. Best of all, they will be healthier and happier now and as adults as a result.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Fun sex is healthy sex—why isn't that on the curriculum? (2017, August 4) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-08-fun-sex-healthy-sexwhy-isnt.html>

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