

Addressing teenage girls' shame about pleasure

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Young people have a lot of questions about sex. I answered hundreds of them over 23 years for the [Dolly Doctor](#) magazine column, until the [magazine closed](#) at the end of 2016.

Many questions from girls suggested they needed information about desire and experiences of sexual pleasure. Those discovering [sexual arousal](#) and masturbation often seemed ecstatic (pun intended), although, even from a young age, these desires were often seen as problems and silenced.

Somewhere between the delights of sexual self-discovery during [early puberty](#) and becoming sexually involved with a partner later in adolescence, I had a sense [young women](#) fell into a chasm of sexual repression, objectification and instruments for male pleasure.

Is it 'normal' to like sex?

In my analysis of Dolly Doctor questions, I found girls asking about masturbation regularly made up 5-10% of questions about sexuality. For instance, here is a question from the 1990s:

"I have a problem; I masturbate ALL the time! Even when I'm in class I ask the teacher if I can go to the toilet and when I get there I finger myself. Can you tell me if there is something wrong with me and how can I stop!?"

The concerns expressed about whether this is normal could, of course, signify typical developmental preoccupations with peer comparison: asking whether an observation or experience is "normal" was common regardless of the topic.

But concerns could also emerge because [adolescent girls](#) received no information about female sexual desire, so their curiosity was mixed with alarm about the intensity and power of their urges.

Here is another question from the 2000s: "I always get horny! Everytime I see something about sex I get horny! But it feels good! Is this common

or am I just not normal?"

My view is that together with a lack of relevant information, these girls had absorbed messages of gendered shaming. Here is a question from from the 2010s:

"Ok I need some help, I started getting interested in watching pornography and I used to touch myself while I watch it I knew it was wrong but my body craved it and it was pleasure like I was a magical feeling I cant explain it but I cant talk to my family and I cant talk to my friends. is this normal?? Dolly doctor please help me. "

The shaming of girls' and young women's sexuality has been found in studies about diverse topics, such as [sexting](#), [sexually transmitted infections](#), [seeking contraception](#) and [sexual violence](#).

Philosopher, Bonnie Mann, [writes](#) gendered shame may be "the mechanism [...](#) [...] subordination of women across class and race (occurs)."

Early adolescence marks a critical juncture in [young people](#)'s lives, powered by the intensity of puberty which marks the transition from childhood to adolescent sexuality.

Expressions of partnered interactions (such as kissing, sexting, oral sex and intercourse) in adolescence are similar to the way sex is [experienced in adulthood](#) and throughout life for most people.

This makes sex education that empowers young women with the appropriate knowledge about pleasure all the more important.

Is it normal to feel nothing?

The questions to Dolly Doctor from young women about sex with a partner were fewer in number—most Dolly readers were quite young adolescents.

A [small proportion of these questions](#) were concerned with lack of pleasure or orgasm. Such as this one from the 1990s

"Dear Melissa, I am 17 [...] and [...] been sexually active since last year and every time I have had sex with my boyfriend I have never had an orgasm and I feel like he is getting all the fun and I get none."

Here is another one from the 2000s

"i have had sex with my boyfriend a number of times but it seems to give me no pleasure. All my friends talk about how good it feels and i dont know this great feeling [...] i have talked to my boyfriend and he feels it why dont i?"

And another from the 2010s

"[...] recently with my boyfriend we went to seconds but when he fingered me I didn't feel anything at all. I have tried doing i myself but I dont feel any pleasure. Is there something wrong with me? What can I do to fix it? Thanks"

Other questions included experiences of painful intercourse (with a male) or fear of pain despite a wish to begin a sexual relationship.

How can I better please him?

Questions about oral sex suggested adolescent women were keen to please. For instance:

"I am wanting to give my boyfriend oral sex. I was wondering how to do it and for some techniques that he would enjoy and so my boyfriend is pleased."

and

"How do you give a better blow job? Please help me."

Questions about receiving oral sex (by the young women) were very few in number and were often about girl-on-girl sex that was pleasurable, "She [...] gave me [oral sex](#), I liked it and I didn't stop her."

There is more analysis that could be done on Dolly Doctor questions that speak to constructions of female sexuality. But the analysis so far has provided me with unique insights about how young women respond to messages about their roles in heterosexual encounters.

Teachers must be supported to talk about sex

Good school-based sex education means providing teachers with the training and support they need without fear of backlash. In the [first Australian study](#) among health teachers about sex education, less than half had received [sex education](#) training during their undergraduate degree and 15.5% had received no training.

The topic areas where teachers felt they needed most assistance related to discussions about behavior, emotions and feelings. And yet, teaching consent in sexual encounters needs to include truthful discussion on these exact topics.

Parents, teachers and young people need to find the right language and create safe spaces to allow teaching and learning about sexual consent, which by definition means talking about sex and pleasure in its various

forms. This includes the normality, right and importance of female pleasure.

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