

Sex? Sexual intercourse? Neither? Teens weigh in on evolving definitions—and habits

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A young couple sit on the beach in Huntington Beach, Calif., Monday, May 8, 2023. For years, studies have shown a decline in the rates of American high school students having sex. That trend continued, not surprisingly, in the first years of the pandemic, according to a recent survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study found that 30% of teens in 2021 said they had ever had sex, down from 38% in 2019 and a huge drop from three decades ago when more than half of teens reported having sex. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Situationships. "Sneaky links." The "talking stage," the flirtatious getting-to-know-you phase—typically done via text—that can lead to a hookup.

High school students are [having less sexual intercourse](#). That's what the studies say. But that doesn't mean they're having less sex.

The language of young love and lust, and the actions behind it, are evolving. And the shift is not being adequately captured in national studies, experts say.

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The Associated Press took the findings to teenagers and experts around the country to ask for their interpretation. Parents: Some of the answers may surprise you.

THE MEANING OF SEX: DEPENDS WHO YOU ASK

For starters, what is the definition of sex?

"Hmm. That's a good question," says Rose, 17, a junior at a New England high school.

She thought about it for 20 seconds, then listed a range of possibilities for heterosexual sex, oral sex and relations between same-sex or LGBTQ

partners. On her campus, short-term hookups—known as "situationships"—are typically low commitment and high risk from both health and emotional perspectives.



A young couple sunbathe on the beach in Huntington Beach, Calif., Monday, May 8, 2023. For years, studies have shown a decline in the rates of American high school students having sex. That trend continued, not surprisingly, in the first years of the pandemic, according to a recent survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study found that 30% of teens in 2021 said they had ever had sex, down from 38% in 2019 and a huge drop from three decades ago when more than half of teens reported having sex. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

There are also "sneaky links"—when you hook up in secret and don't tell your friends. "I have a feeling a lot more people are quote unquote having sex—just not necessarily between a man and a woman."

For teens today, the conversation about sexuality is moving from a binary situation to a spectrum and so are the kinds of sex people are having. And while the vocabulary around sex is shifting, the main question on the CDC survey has been worded the same way since the government agency began its biannual study in 1991: Have you "ever had [sexual intercourse](#)?"

"Honestly, that question is a little laughable," says Kay, 18, who identifies as queer and attends a [public high school](#) near Lansing, Michigan. "There's probably a lot of teenagers who are like, 'No, I've never had sexual intercourse, but I've had other kinds of sex.'"

The AP agreed to use teenagers' first or middle names for this article because of a common concern they expressed about backlash at school, at home and on social media for speaking about their peers' sex lives and LGBTQ+ relations.

SEXUAL IDENTITY IS EVOLVING

Several experts say the CDC findings could signal a shift in how teen sexuality is evolving, with gender fluidity becoming more common along with a decrease in stigma about identifying as not heterosexual.

They point to another finding in this year's study that found the proportion of high school kids who identify as heterosexual dropped to about 75%, down from about 89% in 2015, when the CDC began asking about sexual orientation. Meanwhile, the share who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual rose to 15%, up from 8% in 2015.

"I just wonder, if youth were in the room when the questions were being created, how they would be worded differently," said Taryn Gal, executive director of the Michigan Organization on Adolescent Sexual Health.

Sex is just one of the topics covered by the CDC study, called [the Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#). One of the main sources of national data about high school students on a range of behaviors, it is conducted every two years and asks about 100 questions on topics including smoking, drinking, [drug use](#), bullying, carrying guns and sex. More than 17,000 students at 152 public and private high schools across the country responded to the 2021 survey.



Condoms are available for free to students at the health center at the University of Oklahoma, Wednesday, May 10, 2023, in Norman, Okla. Credit: AP

Photo/Sue Ogrocki

"It's a fine line we have to try to walk," says Kathleen Ethier, director of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, which leads the study.

From a methodological standpoint, changing a question would make it harder to compare trends over time. The goal is to take a national snapshot of teenage behavior, with the understanding that questions might not capture all the nuance. "It doesn't allow us to go as in depth in some areas as we would like," Ethier says.

The national survey, for example, does not ask about oral sex, which carries the risk of spreading sexually transmitted infections. As for "sexual intercourse," Ethier says, "We try to use a term that we know young people understand, realizing that it may not encompass all the ways young people would define sex."

IS LESS TEEN SEX GOOD NEWS?

Beyond semantics, there are a multitude of theories on why the reported rates of high school sex have steadily declined—and what it might say about American society.

"I imagine some parents are rejoicing and some are concerned, and I think there is probably good cause for both," says Sharon Hoover, co-director of the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland. Health officials like to see trends that result in fewer teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

"But what we don't know is what this means for the trajectory of young

people," Hoover says.

This year's decrease, the sharpest drop ever recorded, clearly [had a lot to do with the pandemic](#), which kept kids isolated, cut off from friends and immersed in [social media](#). Even when life started returning to normal, many kids felt uncomfortable with face-to-face interaction and found their skills in verbal communication had declined, Hoover said.

The survey was conducted in the fall of 2021, just as many K-12 students returned to in-person classrooms after a year of online school.



Abby Tow, a Sexual Health Peer Educator at the University of Oklahoma, displays some of the sexual health pamphlets available at the health center on campus, Wednesday, May 10, 2023, in Norman, Okla. Tow said she wonders if helicopter parenting has played a role in what she calls the "baby-fication of our

generation". Credit: AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki

Several teens interviewed said that when schools reopened, they returned with [intense social anxiety](#) compounded by fears of catching COVID. That added a new layer to pre-pandemic concerns about sexual relations like getting pregnant or catching STIs.

"I remember thinking, 'What if I get sick? What if I get a disease? What if I don't have the people skills for this?'" said Kay, the 18-year-old from Michigan. "All those 'what ifs' definitely affected my [personal relationships](#), and how I interacted with strangers or personal partners."

Another fear is the prying eyes of parents, says college student Abby Tow, who wonders if helicopter parenting has played a role in what she calls the "baby-fication of our generation." A senior at the University of Oklahoma, Tow knows students in college whose parents monitor their whereabouts using tracking apps.

"Parents would get push notifications when their students left dorms and returned home to dorms," says Tow, 22, majoring in social work and gender studies.

Tow also notices a "general sense of disillusionment" in her generation. She cites statistics that fewer teenagers today are getting driver's licenses. "I think," she says, "there is a correlation between students being able to drive and students having sex."

Another cause for declining sex rates could be easy access to online porn, experts say. By the age of 17, three-quarters of teenagers have viewed pornography online, with the average age of first exposure at 12, according to a report earlier this year by Common Sense Media, a

nonprofit child advocacy group.

"Porn is becoming sex ed for young people," says Justine Fonte, a New York-based sex education teacher. She says pornography shapes and skews adolescent ideas about sexual acts, power and intimacy. "You can rewind, fast forward, play as much as you want. It doesn't require you to think about how the person is feeling."

IS THERE AN EVOLVING DEFINITION OF CONSENT?

Several experts said they hoped the decline could be partly attributed to a broader understanding of consent and an increase in "comprehensive" sex education being taught in many schools, which has become a target in ongoing culture wars.



Abby Tow, a Sexual Health Peer Educator at the University of Oklahoma, dumps condoms into a container at the health center on campus, Wednesday, May 10, 2023, in Norman, Okla. Tow said she wonders if helicopter parenting has played a role in what she calls the "baby-fication of our generation". Credit: AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki

Unlike abstinence-only programs, the lessons include discussion on understanding healthy relationships, gender identity, sexual orientation and preventing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Contrary to what critics think, she said, young people are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity if they have access to sex education.

Some schools and organizations supplement sex education with peer counseling, where teens are trained to speak to each other about relationships and other topics that [young people](#) might feel uncomfortable raising with adults.

Annika, 14, is a peer ambassador trained by Planned Parenthood and a [high school](#) freshman in Southern California. She's offered guidance to friends in toxic relationships and worries about the ubiquity of porn among her peers, especially male friends. It's clear to her that the pandemic stunted sex lives.

The CDC's 2023 survey, which is currently underway, will show if the decline was temporary. Annika suspects it will show a spike. In her school, at least, students seem to be making up for lost time.

"People lost those two years so they're craving it more," she said. She has

often been in a [school](#) bathroom where couples in stalls next to her are engaged in sexual activities.

Again, the definition of sex? "Any sexual act," Annika says. "And sexual intercourse is one type of act."

To get a truly accurate reading of teen sexuality, the evolution of language needs to be taken into account, says Dr. John Santelli, a Columbia University professor who specializes in adolescent sexuality.

"The word intercourse used to have another meaning," he points out. "Intercourse used to just mean talking."

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