Developing Improved Sexual Health Education Strategies

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Abstract

There has been increasing concern in Australia about young people and their sexuality. This concern has stemmed from both the ongoing sexualisation debates, and the rapidly climbing positive notifications for sexually transmitted infections in young people. This thesis examines knowledge levels and sources of information about sex and sexuality in young people in Australia today in order to establish; what information young people are receiving from their four main sources; schools, parents, media, and peers; and how they process that information and apply it to their own lives. This thesis finds that young people are overwhelmingly not being supported in healthy sexual development by their two most trusted sources, parents and schools, while the media is providing them with good messages that they discount due to viewing those messages as being ‘not real’.
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Chapter 4. Data Analysis — Sexuality Information — Schools

- Schools provide the most information about puberty
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- Schools rarely or never communicate about relationships
- Information from schools about consent is limited or conflated with other issues
- Safe sex is taught in schools with a focus on risk, science, and danger, and is often delivered too late
- The possibility that sex can be good is not discussed within the school curriculum

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Key Findings

1. Public discourses around young people’s learning about sexuality do not match young people’s experiences

2. Parents and schools fail to provide young people with a comprehensive account of how and why sex might be a healthy part of their lives as adults

3. The media provides young people with positive information and messages in some areas of their sexuality where parents or schools do not

4. Young people are still subject to gendered differences in many areas of their lives and particularly in their education about sexuality, and this is true for all sources of information

5. Young people are overwhelmingly not being supported to develop negotiation, assertiveness, and consent skills

6. Self-esteem, something that many young people struggle with, is an area in which young people are receiving highly contradictory messages from all of their sources

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For ACARA HPE curriculum developers

For schools

For parents

For entertainment media producers addressing young people or including sexual content in their productions

For young people

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed: QUT Verified Signature

Date: November 2014
Chapter 1 — Introduction

Teaching children about sex without thinking of the real consequences is like teaching them to shoot firearms and kill. At 9 or 10 years, they can't possibly comprehend the more intricate mechanisms of a rifle, let alone the actual harm that it can do. And, just like the child soldiers of Congo, they can more easily be brain washed into thinking they can be invincible. It is the same with sexual education, the responsibility is upon us, as adults, to protect children, not to enable them to harm themselves and others. I remember one of my children when she was four or five, and came home from pre-school with a new word, 'vagina'. Shortly after we caught her trying to insert something in the cat's back-orifice! (Ng 2012).

Research questions

Recent public debates in Australia have seen increasing concern about young people, their sexual behaviour and knowledge levels (Agius et al. 2010), and in particular the perceived ‘sexualisation’ of children. The comment that opens this thesis comes from an article on the news and commentary site, The Conversation (Walsh 2012b). It illustrates the key concerns that are raised in these discussions: an uncertainty about what kinds of information young people should receive about sex; a concern about the correct age to provide this information; and the worry that providing information can have negative effects, encouraging young people to experiment sexually in ways that they would not otherwise think to. This idea that young people need to be ‘protected’ from information about their changing bodies and developing sexuality is increasingly at the forefront of these sexualisation debates (Faulkner 2010). The comment raises a number of questions, the most pressing of which is: can giving young people information about sex cause them harm?

This thesis is therefore concerned with the way that young people currently acquire information about sex. In particular, it is based around two questions:
1. What do young people (14–16 year olds) know about sex and sexuality?
2. Where are they getting that information?

**Project background**

The data for this thesis was gathered as part of a larger project funded by the Queensland State Government. This project — Developing Improved Sexual Health Education Strategies — is the education component of the National and International Research Alliances Program (NIRAP) grant: Improved Surveillance, Treatment and Control of Chlamydial Infections. The education component of this grant exists due to concern over the rising numbers of positive notifications for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) — and particularly chlamydia — in young people in Queensland and around Australia aged 15—24. While positive notifications are rising, previous research has shown that young people have high levels of knowledge about safe sex and STIs (Smith et al. 2009) but, as evidenced by these growing positive notifications, young people appear to be disregarding this information. Researchers have traditionally talked about a ‘knowledge/practice gap’. However, Louisa Allen (2001) has rejected this approach, arguing instead that the reason young people do not always practice safe sex, despite knowing the risks, is due to the way that safe sex information is delivered, which they see as having no relevance to their own lived experiences. In order to develop effective sexuality education, it is therefore necessary to understand how young people process this information, and how it can be made relevant to their lives (Kesterton and Coleman 2010).

It is important to note that the word ‘sexuality’ — particularly within the term ‘sexuality education’ — is used throughout this thesis in reference to education about all aspects of human sexuality — including relationships, assertiveness skills, pleasure, consent, and so on. The term ‘sex education’ is avoided because research has shown that this is often understood to involve a more biological or risk-related approach to teaching about sex. The term ‘sexuality education’ is not used in this
context to refer specifically to education about a person’s sexual identity (such as whether they identify as LGBTIQ), although this can be encompassed in this broader approach.

This thesis aims to establish the knowledge levels and sources of information for sex and sexuality in 14—16 year olds. This age group was selected because it simplified recruitment of participants — typically Year 10 high school students fall within this age range — and it encompassed the youngest age (15) for high positive notifications for STIs, and chlamydia in particular. This thesis explores the relationship between the information received about sex and sexuality from four key sources of information — media, parents, school, and peers — and examines how young people engage with and synthesise that information.

This qualitative, culture-centred approach is the first to compare and contrast the information young people glean about sex and sexuality from these four key sources, and is what makes this research distinctive. This research, which sits within a systems approach (Dolcini et al. 2012) (explored further in Chapter 3), contrasts with the dominant approach to research about young people and sexuality which usually examines only one or two sources of information. When researchers look at parents or schooling as sources they are often privileged as better sources of information over peers and the media. Much research is conducted into the ‘effects’ of ‘exposure’ to the media on young people and their sexuality, but who examines the ‘effects’ of ‘exposure’ to information from parents or schools? Why are parents and schools privileged in this way when, as will be demonstrated in Chapters 3 to 5, they are often ill equipped to deliver this information to young people? This thesis is important in expanding the range of sources of information about sex and sexuality for young people, from the perspective of young people themselves.

The importance of understanding how young people synthesise information about sexuality is also clear when looking at the approaches to health communication in relation to young people. The disconnect between knowledge and practice
identified by Allen (2008b) when looking at young people and sexuality information is common in health communication: Vaughan et al. (2000) have recognised that when it comes to health, knowledge does not automatically lead to changes in behaviours. Nowhere is this gap between knowledge and practice more evident than in the ‘holy four’ of health behaviours associated with disease as identified by McQueen (1987 cited in Crossley 2002, 48): ‘smoking, alcohol “misuse”, poor nutrition, and low levels of exercise’, with Bennett and Murphy (1997, 8) adding ‘high risk sexual activity’ to this ‘risk factor’ list. The difficulty in attempting to understand why people would choose to engage in behaviours that are considered unhealthy or risky comes from both the ‘wider social and structural variables such as gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity’ (Bennett and Murphy 1997, 12–16 cited in Crossley 2002, 48) and the ‘latent emotional, social, cultural and value-laden meanings that individuals incorporate into their ways of thinking and are not necessarily consciously aware of’ (Crossley 2002). This tendency to engage in behaviours that are potentially unhealthy can be attributed in part to a motivational state that Brehm (1989) coined as ‘psychological reactance’. Essentially, this theory asserts that when personal freedoms relating to choice are threatened — in this context by health professionals or educators advocating safe sex — individuals will sometimes react by doing the opposite of what they are counselled or told to do. Crossley (2002, 49) contends that ‘directive education’ — in the case of young people’s sexuality education, this ‘directive education’ that entreats them to have safe sex — can cause a ‘reactive’ attitude that makes people defy any proscriptions that they ‘feel are being imposed upon them.’ This has meant that, traditionally, the approach to health communication has been adversarial, with target groups seen as opponents whose ‘resistance’ to health-related messages is something to be ‘overcome’ (Moyer-Guse and Nabi 2010).

It is clear from the rising positive notifications for STIs in young people that this adversarial approach rarely works. This is where the recent ‘culture-centred’ approach to health communication (Dutta 2008) proves useful: a culture-centred
approach asks the members of the target audience for their point of view, thereby ‘identifying problems and accompanying solutions from within the culture’ (Dutta 2008, 255). Culture-centred approaches to young people and their sexual development are becoming increasingly common: a number of researchers are talking to young people and engaging with them as individuals in control of their sexuality and sexual development (Halstead and Reiss 2003a, 31; Hirst 2008; Yu 2010, 194). Given that this approach allows for a different way to think about the gap between knowledge and practice — instead of thinking about it adversarially and in terms of something to be overcome, we can begin to think instead about information in terms of its relevance to young people and their sexual lives.

**Project focus**

Researchers in the area of sexuality agree that access to information about sexuality is an important part of healthy sexual development (McKee et al. 2010; Halstead and Reiss 2003a; Carmody 2009; Allen 2001). This project is interested in establishing the best way to reach young people with information about sexuality. The first step in addressing this issue is using a culture-centred approach to understand what kinds of information young people are currently receiving and where they are getting that information. With this knowledge in place, it will be possible to better design programs that will reach young people with appropriate material that includes information they want to know about.

Young people, their sexuality, and their sources of information about sex and sexuality have been researched extensively. This research has examined sources including: formal schooling (Byers et al. 2003a, 2003b; Buston and Wight 2006; Cohen et al. 2004; Formby et al. 2010; Gerouki 2011; Lupton and Tulloch 1996; Mason 2010; McKay, Pietrusiak and Holowaty 1998; Meaney et al. 2009; Ninomiya 2010; Pearson 1999; Pick, Givaudan and Brown 2000; Selwyn and Powell 2007; Westwood and Mullan 2007), parents (Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis 2008; Byers et al. 2003b, 2003a; Campero et al. 2011; Diiorio, Pluhar and Belcher 2003; Dyson and
Anne-Frances Watson

Introduction


Aggleton and Campbell (2000) examined the dominant discourses surrounding young people and their sexual health, and found that there were a number of factors that influenced this view of young people as needing to be protected from themselves and others. The first of these factors is the term ‘sexual health’. The World Health Organization (WHO), in conjunction with a team of international experts, has developed a working definition of sexual health as:

a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and
respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (Cook 2012, 5)

This definition of sexual health is widely accepted. However, when sexual health is discussed in practice — and particularly in relation to young people — the use of the term is often distant from — or even in direct opposition to — this definition. In practice, ‘sexual health’ is rarely spoken about in terms of the healthy aspects of sex and sexuality:

the social changes that have made it easier to talk about sex have made it harder to articulate a coherent vision of what ‘sexual health’ might mean. Now, perhaps more than ever before, sex has become linked (in the public health imagination at least) to infection and disease and, in the case of young people, to unintended pregnancy. We are encouraged, therefore, to view sexual health in largely negative terms—as the absence of infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV, as the avoidance of pregnancy among teenagers, and as the avoidance of sexual violence and abuse. (Aggleton and Campbell 2000, 284)

The second major factor of influence on discourses around young people and sexuality is the way in which policy-makers and researchers tend to view adolescents and young people. Aggleton and Campbell (2000, 285) point to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the provisions within this convention that allow young people ‘the right to express their views, and have them considered,’ including having their own views about ‘the manner in which they are treated by adults as well as society’ and provision of services that they have access to. The problem here, as noted by these researchers is that:

This view of young people as sentient beings, meaning givers and construers of their own reality, is very much at odds with some of the dominant tendencies in policy making today. It poses major challenges for those who wish to listen more actively to what young
people say, and to ensure that health programmes more genuinely work for the young people whose needs they purport to meet. (2000, 285)

Historically,

Since the turn of the [twentieth] century ‘adolescence’ has been seen as a period of storm and stress linked to biological changes and their behavioural correlates. According to such a view, young people can barely be treated as rational, still less as individuals whose perspectives on events should be taken as equal to those of older generations. (2000, 285)

This is not helped by a tendency of policy makers to ‘vilify and pathologize young people’ viewing them as ‘problems’ for adults — wayward individuals whose behaviour ‘needs to be brought into line’ (2000, 286) in order for them to fit properly into society. Therefore, the overarching problematic theme when thinking about adolescents is that of ‘homogenization, whereby all young people are assumed to be the same, regardless of social background, gender, culture, ethnicity, etc.’ (2000, 286) This again speaks to the traditionally adversarial nature of health promotion with young people, in which they are viewed as irrational people who need to be controlled and told what to do for their own good.

Taking this protective discourse approach to research can be problematic when considering the focus or the angle the researcher takes in relation to young people and their sexuality. Somers and Surmann (2005) examined young people’s sources and timing of sexuality education and the ‘comparative contribution’ (2005, 37) that this had to their sexual attitudes and behaviours. This research lists ‘desired outcomes’ for young people’s sexual attitudes and behaviours, which they define as ‘less risk-taking and more conservative attitudes’ which, according to Somers and Paulson (cited in Somers and Surmann 2005, 48) relate to ‘lowered pregnancy and STI rates’ with one indicator of these ‘desired outcomes’ being derived from the survey topic asking where they learned about ‘whether premarital sex is right or wrong’ (2005, 41). The researchers in this study often use the words ‘impact,’
‘effect,’ and ‘influence,’ (Somers and Surmann 2005) when discussing the various sources of sex education in relation to young people, and for young women in particular, the authors spoke about ‘resisting sexual pressure instead of succumbing to it.’ (2005, 50). What these and other researchers in this area often fail to address is the idea that young people may be sexual beings who have formed, or are forming their own differing ideas about their sexuality that are not tied to traditional ideals such as whether it is right or wrong to have sex before marriage.

A third problem with research into young people and their sexuality information is that each piece of research has tended to focus on one or two sources of information on this topic — such as the media (Bleakley et al. 2011; Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009; Brown and Bobkowski 2011; Brown, Keller and Stern 2009; Brown and L'Engle 2009; Chandra et al. 2008; Collins, Martino and Elliott 2011; Collins et al. 2011; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005; Eyal and Kunkel 2008; Eyal et al. 2007; Hennessy et al. 2009; Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999; Manganello et al. 2010; Peter and Valkenburg 2009; Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010; Ward 2005; Ward, Day and Epstein 2006; Ward and Friedman 2006), parents (Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis 2008; Campero et al. 2011; Diiorio, Pluhar and Belcher 2003; Dyson and Smith 2012; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009; Elliott 2010; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006; Hadley et al. 2009; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011; Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus 2002; Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon 2000; Jerman and Constantine 2010; Jordan, Price and Fitzgerald 2000; Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman 2002; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Martin and Luke 2010; Martino et al. 2008; Miller et al. 2009; Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010; Parkes et al. 2011; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008; Sneed 2008; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011; Wilson et al. 2010; Wyckoff et al. 2008) or formal schooling (Buston and Wight 2006; Cohen et al. 2004; Formby et al. 2010; Gerouki 2011; Lupton and Tulloch 1996; Mason 2010; Meaney et al. 2009; Ninomiya 2010; Pearson 1999; Pick, Givaudan and Brown 2000; Selwyn and Powell 2007; Westwood and Mullan 2007) — with very little research looking at the larger picture and taking into account that young people may not learn about sex and sexuality
from one source; instead, they piece together information from a number of sources to form their opinions and knowledge base. A focus on singular sources of information can be problematic when considering that the information received from different sources may work in direct opposition to each other. For this reason, this project examines all of the sources of young people’s sexuality information and how young people synthesise that information. Researchers are beginning to conduct projects that compare and contrast different sources of information; however, these authors have predominantly worked in the quantitative domain (Somers and Surmann 2004, 2005) with the exception of Dolcini et al. (2012) who looked at urban African American youths in the US.

**Thesis outline**

Chapter 2 comprises literature reviews in the areas examined in this thesis. These include literature reviews of work conducted in media effects theory, the place of pleasure in the classroom, and the place of parents and peers in sexuality education.

Chapter 3 outlines the stages of data collection and analysis for this research, and examines the methodologies used, and the underpinning methodological approaches to this thesis.

Chapters 4 to 7 of this thesis will analyse the data gleaned from the young people in the focus groups. Chapter 4 will look at the information received from school, young people’s most formal source of information. The primary focus of sexuality education in schools has often been on ‘puberty, procreation, and penetration’ (Sorenson and Brown 2007, 34) with a particular focus on scientific information about the body, STIs, and pregnancy (Carmody 2009) and a distinct lack of information about the areas that young people are interested in —pleasure and relationships:

*When sexuality education fails to take young people’s content suggestions and perceptions of their own sexuality seriously it risks
their disengagement from its messages. Content that does not address the questions and issues young people deem important may be dismissed as irrelevant and unhelpful. Ultimately this means that young people are unlikely to act on the knowledge and messages offered by sexuality education (Allen 2008b, 589-590).

The questions that need to be asked here are: how much and what do young people actually learn in a classroom setting, and what do they disregard and why?

Chapter 5 will examine the messages and information that focus group participants receive from their parents. When it comes to sex and sexuality, the societal ideal is that parents should be the primary educators for their children (Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch 2007; Elliott 2010). This works well in countries such as the Netherlands where there is less of a stigma and taboo around discussions of sex and sexuality (Weaver, Smith and Kippax 2005). However, in Australia, the UK, and the US, embarrassment and discomfort tend to be associated with discussions of sex, and therefore parents are usually less likely to have these conversations with their children (Dyson and Smith 2012; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011; Wilson and Koo 2010). Instead, parents often wait until they think their child is ready or will be engaging in sexual behaviours to broach the topic (Dyson and Smith 2012; Jerman and Constantine 2010; Miller et al. 2009; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008; Wilson et al. 2010) — with the lack of previous discussion increasing the discomfort felt by both parties.

The media’s place in sexuality education is important to examine due to a number of factors. Traditionally, the media has been seen to have an effect on young people’s sexual behaviours and attitudes, encouraging them to engage in these behaviours before they are ready (Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005) or going so far as to suggest a causal relationship between young people seeing sexual content in the media and becoming sexually active (Escobar-Chaves et al. 2008, 304). Chapter 6 examines whether this is the case; are young people seeing teen characters on television and in the movies and using this as a marker for their own sexual development (Collins et al. 2004; Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010)? Does reading about other
young people having sex in magazines encourage them to mimic these behaviours? This chapter will look at the information and messages young people in our focus groups recounted as receiving from the media about sex and sexuality, and how they engaged with that information.

Chapter 7 examines peers as a knowledge source to see what kinds of information young people are sharing with each other. Young people regularly list peers as one of their most important sources of information when it comes to sex and sexuality (Steele 1999, 339). It stands to reason that the information gleaned from peers will be a combination of information that they have received from their other sources, in addition to personal experiences, so this chapter will examine how much young people privilege their peers’ experiential knowledge over perceived book knowledge or information that they have gathered from their other sources.

Chapter 8 will then outline and discuss six key findings that emerged from this research:

1. Public discourses around young people’s learning about sexuality do not match young people’s experiences.

2. Parents and schools fail to provide young people with a comprehensive account of how and why sex might be a healthy part of their lives as adults.

3. The media provides young people with positive information and messages in some areas of their sexuality where parents or schools do not do so.

4. Young people are still subject to gendered differences in many areas of their lives and particularly in their education about sexuality, and this is true for all sources of information.

5. Young people are overwhelmingly not being supported to develop negotiation, assertiveness, and consent skills.

6. Self-esteem, something that many young people struggle with, is an area in which young people are receiving highly contradictory messages from all of their sources.
Finally, Chapter 9 will conclude with a look at the outcomes from this research, and recommendations for best practice for reaching young people with the information about sex and sexuality that they require — and want — in order to have healthy and happy sex lives when they are ready.

**Conclusion**

In modern Australia, many people are concerned about the sexualisation of young people. For some of them the question of what young people are learning about sex, and how they are learning about it, is a key element of their concern. And yet we have remarkably little knowledge about what young people know about sex, beyond numerical information about safer sex (Smith et al. 2009) and anecdotal journalism claiming that young people now know too much about sex. This thesis makes an important intervention into these debates, gathering reliable qualitative data for the first time about what young Australians know about a variety of domains of healthy sexual development, from what sources they gather that information, and how those sources of information interact with each other. In order fully to understand the innovative nature of this research, it is necessary first to review the existing literatures on sex education from a variety of sources — parents, schools, peers, and the media — to show how each of these research traditions has tended to limit itself by studying a single source in isolation and ignoring the ecological systems of information within which young people learn about healthy sexual development. This is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 2 — Literature Review

Introduction and history

Extensive literature exists about the various sources from which young people find information about sexuality — schools, parents, peers, and the media. This chapter will explore the literature and examine the dominant discourses and ideologies surrounding sexuality education and sexual learning for young people. In order to examine the ways in which young people learn about sexuality, it is first important to understand the origins of modern sexuality education, as we know it.

Only in recent history, in the US, UK, and Australia, have advocates for sexuality education — in a number of forms — started to gain leeway in their struggle against the religious and moral puritans who would rather this topic not be discussed. Some of the first forms of sexuality education for children and young people came about due to the social and sexual hygiene movement that was in part a reaction to the outbreaks of post-war venereal diseases brought back by returning soldiers from the Anglo-Boer War [1899—1902] onwards to the First World War [1914—1918] (Egan and Hawkes 2010; Nelson and Martin 2004). This brought together purity reformers and hygienists who, through ‘increasing societal concerns over dysgenics’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 53) conveyed the importance of sexual hygiene to adults. It was not long before the importance of also conveying this information to children was recognised — although for many this was largely due to a discourse of eugenics, or a desire to keep the race pure. As a result, a shift in focus occurred from viewing sex and sexuality as an ‘individualistic, moral, and familial endeavor’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 52) to something that was a societal concern. Within this sexual hygiene movement, activists and academics began to argue that sexuality education should not be left in the hands of parents who were ill-equipped to give the required information to their children, and indeed, were ‘a hindrance if they failed to draw on the capabilities of hygiene experts’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 59). This argument
extended to Sydney, Australia, in 1916 (Swain, Warne and Hillel 2004) in a ‘conference on “The Teaching of Sex Hygiene”’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 59) where heated debate fell on both sides as to whether parents should have a place in this instruction.

Aside from hygiene, the focus of much earlier sexuality education was driven by a moralistic imperative to control ‘the sex impulse’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 61) and keep children from external negative influences. Jumping forward to the 1980s, the concern over the HIV/AIDS epidemic, STIs, and teen pregnancy in the US (and Australia and the UK) was a driving force in implementing sexuality education as we know it in schools (Kendall 2012, 1). Although the need for this sexuality education was recognised, the forms of its’ delivery was still hotly contested. The two main forms of sexuality education — abstinence only versus comprehensive — are still being fought over to this day.

**Schools as a source of sexuality education**

This literature review will focus largely on the marginal aspects of school based sexuality education, it will look to the aspects of sexuality education that are currently missing — such as the pleasurable aspects of sex, and the discomfort faced by many teachers in communicating about such a taboo subject. What is being communicated to young people in schools is addressed further within the section looking at what young people want to know.

The classroom can be a key site for learning about sexuality. When the phrase ‘sex education’ is mentioned, this is perhaps the most obvious source. However, schools may be the site of learning about sexuality in a more general sense — not just in formal sex education classes:

> It’s inevitable: every teacher is a sexuality educator. In every classroom teachers give sexual messages as students learn how the teacher acts as a male or female; how the teacher responds to sex-related jokes, and what is expected of them because they are male or female. (Brick 1991, 51)
The classroom is a significant site of learning for childhood and adolescent sexuality, and the teacher directs that learning — wittingly or not; this can be complex when ‘every classroom is an eroticized space’ (Litvak 1995, Mitchell and Webber 1999, cited in Gerouki 2011, 3). Messages about sexuality are imparted to the class at every moment of the day, with every interaction that takes place. Coleman, Kearns and Collins (2010, 62) suggest that the school is a ‘key site in which messages about sexual health are conveyed and understandings of sexuality produced,’ and this happens in the politics of the playground as much as in the classroom. Sexuality is also a factor that is at play in the relationships between teacher and pupil (Gerouki 2011, 3).

Gerouki (2011) interviewed primary school teachers who recounted children declaring their love for them and proposing marriage. This could be understood as a childhood infatuation, but there is a growing recognition of primary schools being ‘far from asexual environments’ and that primary school children ‘cannot be presumed [sexually] innocent’ (Renold 2003, 189, cited in Gerouki 2011, 3). This research is not suggesting that children want to have sex with their teachers — or that they even have a solid notion of what that means. Rather, it is saying that children experience feelings of attraction and desire toward their teachers and other students that should not be discounted. When the topic of sexuality arises in the classroom, students ‘observe the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of their teachers’. This means that teachers’ behaviours will have in turn been influenced by their own experiences when they were students (Klein and Breck 2010, 2). A teachers’ personal outlook on sex education is a ‘core element for the potential application of any such programme’ (Gerouki 2011, 1).

Many teachers responsible for the delivery of sexuality education have very little formal education in teaching sexuality (Eisenberg et al. 2010, 338). Teachers’ sources of information were assessed in a study in which they were asked to complete the question, ‘I learned about sex from...’. Four main sources for information emerged: parents, friends/peers, school, and the media. Four of those interviewed mentioned
pornography such as *Playboy* magazine as their primary learning material (Klein and Breck 2010, 4).

When asked to evaluate their own sex education, 71% of the teachers gave a negative evaluation of their experiences (Klein and Breck 2010, 6). Klein and Breck (2010, 7) found that teacher candidates were unlikely to have health education training, and even less likely to have specific sexuality education training. This lack of explicit training, teamed with teachers’ own poor sexuality education from childhood will perpetuate ‘the cycle of inadequate sexuality education.’ Researchers call for more thorough and wide-ranging teacher training as an essential for positive sexual learning (Brick 1991, 51; Eisenberg et al. 2010, 338). Teachers in a variety of subject areas reported that ‘the higher level of knowledge and skills they possessed regarding health education, the more prepared and competent they felt to teach it’ (Eisenberg et al. 2010, 338). These teachers need this assistance in order to ‘become comfortable with and confident in their abilities to foster healthy sexual development’ (Brick 1991, 51).

**The place of pleasure and desire in sexuality education**

Currently young people are not being told about pleasure in school-based sexuality education, and the possibility that they may be desiring subjects is not recognised by the educational system.

This is a problematic state of affairs. Researchers hypothesise a connection between adolescent girls’ sexuality and their sense of self:

> Sexual subjectivity (the ability to feel confident in and in control of one’s body and sexuality) shapes one’s ability to be agentic (the ability to act, accomplish, and feel efficacious in other parts of one’s life) and vice versa. (Martin 1994, 50; cited in Welles 2005, 35)

A ‘missing discourse of desire’ has been identified in adults’ discussions of girls’ sexuality (Fine 1988, 35). This silence on the subject of desire does not cause teen pregnancy, but acknowledging adolescent female desire allows the young person to
feel a sense of agency as described by Martin that would let her feel in charge of her own sexuality.

Fine’s (1988) study centred on females, but with positive and empowering incorporation of desire and pleasure in sexuality education:

A discourse of erotics would involve the acknowledgement that all young people, whatever their gender and sexual identity...are sexual subjects who have a right to experience sexual pleasure and desire. (Allen 2007, 582)

Using pleasure as a ‘means of reframing sexuality education is based on it being central to life, adding meaning to who we are, what we feel and what we value’ (Allen 2007, 582).

This is not an argument for a society in which young people are ‘encouraged to engage in sexual activity’ (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 72). ‘Young people’s views, experiences and needs’ in learning about sex and sexuality must be acknowledged. (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 72). Accepting young people as legitimate sexual beings in this way may assist in increasing the ‘relevance and effectiveness of sexual health education...’ (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 72)

Teens with a positive view of sexuality were more likely to:

  admit to themselves that they were sexually active and take all of the steps necessary to protect themselves, including communication with their partner and the acquisition and consistent use of contraception. (Fisher 1990, cited in Fay 2002, 14)

Furthermore:

Sexuality education informed by an ethics of pleasure may benefit young people beyond equipping them to successfully negotiate intimate relationships and help transcend normative sexual identities and practices. (Allen 2004, 152)

The framework of sexuality education has always been based on one of two ‘divergent sexual ideologies’ according to McKay (1997, 286) — ‘restrictive’ and
‘permissive’. The restrictive ideology is framed from a historically religious perspective that views all sexuality outside of marriage as sinful and shameful. Permissive ideology has evolved from the restrictive to acknowledge sex as a pleasurable act that does not need to be solely procreative. A permissive sexual ideology allows for desire to be included as a topic in sexuality education. The differences between these two ideologies can particularly be seen in the debate surrounding the place of desire in young people’s sexuality.

Developmentally, an increase in sexual desires and interests during adolescence is a normal and ‘inherent part of the physical maturation processes that occur during this period’ (Udry 1988; cited in Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2011, 2). Following a Permissive ideology, adolescents’ exploration of sexuality should be considered normal and healthy. Sexual exploration can allow teenagers to experience pleasure and satisfaction, or help them to build ‘positive personal characteristics, such as autonomy, confidence, and connectedness’ (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2011, 2).

*Masturbation*

It is thus not surprising that one aspect of sex that formal sexuality education has traditionally not covered is masturbation. Masturbation is an extremely safe sexual practice and would therefore easily sit within dominant paradigms of formal sexuality education. But the difficulty of schools in dealing with pleasure has meant that it has not traditionally been a topic that is included in sexuality education curricula. The stigma attached to masturbation has made it a topic that schools and parents are uncomfortable discussing. But it is a sexual activity that young people want more information about.

Masturbation has been called, among other things, evil, unnatural, and degenerate (Shapiro 2008, 143). Concerns about masturbation were based on thoughts that it was sinful, shameful, and unnatural (Kaestle and Allen 2011, 8). Until the middle of the 20th century, masturbation was seen as a dangerous activity that could lead to mental illness (Gagnon 1985). At the same time that many young people are
discovering the physical pleasures of masturbation, they are absorbing the cultural shame associated with the act: derisive humour, stereotypes, and humiliation teaches young people that masturbation is taboo (Kaestle and Allen 2011).

It was not until the late 1930s that a shift in thinking concerning masturbation began to occur. Some of the psychoanalytical thinking regarding children and this subject started to move away from the taboo. Wittels (1933; cited in Hawkes and Egan 2008, 452) saw masturbation in children as acceptable although ‘the child may become too reliant on masturbation, thumb sucking or other source of sensual pleasure,’ in which case the parent should be assisted in ‘the delicate balance between increasing anxiety about and fixation on the erotic activity and redirecting the libidinous energy to a difference source of release.’ This process is summed up by the phrase ‘liberal sensual education’ (Middlemore 1936; cited in Hawkes and Egan 2008, 452) in which the parent encourages sensual stimulation from a wide variety of sources. ‘Mental health and mature adjustment are to be reached by a pathway midway between allowing and forbidding’ (Clothier 1938; cited in Hawkes and Egan 2008, 453).

The 1950s and 1960s saw researchers and clinicians begin to contend that masturbation was beneficial to self-exploration, definition of body image, and setting of ego boundaries (Lo Presto, Sherman and Sherman 1985, 142). Many researchers believed ‘that myths about masturbation may result in an ill-conceived, myth-laden perception of the adolescent’s overall sexuality and, in turn, self-esteem’ (Coleman, 1950; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gerbhard, 1953; cited in Lo Presto, Sherman and Sherman 1985, 143). Toward the end of the 1970s, more widespread academic acceptance was achieved when ‘college-level sexuality texts’ stated that ‘masturbation was absolutely not a danger to mental or physical health; in fact it might be a positive activity at certain moments in the life course’ (Gagnon 1985, 453).

Research conducted within the last 10 years shows the continuing evolution in the normalisation of this solo sexual act. However, this research also demonstrates the gendered nature of masturbation. Studies conducted by Hogarth and Ingham (2009)
and Kaestle and Allen (2011) both found that young men masturbate more than young women, and that it is more socially acceptable for young men to do so. Kaestle and Allen (2011) found that there were varying levels of stigma surrounding this act for young men and women, with more stigma seemingly attached to young women. Gagnon (1985, 455) asked parents of pre-teens whether they ‘wanted their child to have a positive attitude toward masturbation when the child became a teenager. Less than half of parents responded positively, with only one third of mothers and fathers wanting this attitude held by their daughters.’ This negative outlook is funnelled down to young women. Masturbation is perceived as more of a normal practice for young men — even among young women — who view it as dirty, or ‘not right’ for themselves (Hogarth and Ingham 2009, 559) while young women interviewed by Kaestle and Allen (2011, 6) ‘reported a profound ignorance about masturbation when they were young’. While young men discuss this topic among themselves, even if in a joking manner, the ‘vast majority’ of young women interviewed by Hogarth and Ingham (2009, 562) revealed that they had ‘never spoken to anyone, including friends’ about masturbating. Kaestle and Allen (2011, 9) suggest that their study illustrates that masturbation is a site of ideological conflict. The cultural scenarios and social contexts that inform these scripts and ideologies appeared to pivot on the silence of families and draw heavily on peers and the media.

Normalising and appreciating masturbation are developmental tasks that, ‘in the absence of overt learning about any positive aspects,’ some young adults in Kaestle and Allen’s (2011, 10) study ‘eventually redefined sexual health for themselves in a way that included a strong positive view of masturbation.’ These participants ‘not only rejected stigma but developed a discourse embracing masturbation as a critical part of sexual development and self-discovery that was necessary for safe and satisfying sexual lives.’ The positive, explorative aspects of masturbation allow young people to gain a better understanding of their bodies. The vast majority of — if not all — boys, have experienced an orgasm prior to their first sexual intercourse. ‘They
have explored their own bodies; they have learned to understand what gives them pleasure and how to reach orgasm’ (Hogarth and Ingham 2009, 560). In contrast, most girls’ earliest experiences of arousal are much more likely to occur in a heterosexual dating situation. In other words, boys learn about their sexuality themselves as one young man reported: ‘I believe I started experimenting with myself early on in age...it was all trial and error’ (Kaestle and Allen 2011, 6).

In contrast, girls often learn about masturbating through their contact with boys. Consequently, Hogarth and Ingham (2009, 559) suggest that girls are less likely than young men to have learned how to arouse themselves and have not experienced the sensation of an orgasm.

Both studies (Hogarth and Ingham 2009; Kaestle and Allen 2011) found a positive correlation between masturbation and sexual self-esteem. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2005, 36) reported that:

females with a history of self-masturbation and noncoital orgasmic responsiveness have higher levels of healthy sexual self-development according to a number of markers. ... Females who reported noncoital orgasmic responsiveness feel more entitled to sexual pleasure through self-masturbation, feel more efficacious in achieving pleasure, and reflect more on the sexual aspects of their life than those who have never experienced a noncoital orgasm. Furthermore, females with noncoital orgasm experience are also less self-silencing in their intimate relationships and more resistant to sexual double standards.

A young man interviewed by Kaestle and Allen (2011, 9) expressed this: ‘it is very important not only for yourself, but for future sexual partners...How can you tell someone else what you like and don’t if you don’t know yourself?’

**Non-coital sex**

Another area of sexuality that has traditionally been excluded from classroom learning is non-coital sex: ‘it has only been in the last decade or so that researchers have begun studying the prevalence and correlates of non-coital activities such as
oral sex’ (Malacad and Hess 2010, 178). While this research into non-coital activities, particularly oral sex, corresponds on many points, there is some disagreement on timing. Halpern-Felsher (2008, 207) and Lindberg, Jones and Santelli (2008, 237) believe that adolescents are more likely to have had oral sex before they engaged in vaginal sex, while Malacad and Hess (2010) suggest that oral sex is as prevalent as coitus. Regardless, a large number of adolescents are now engaging in non-coital sexual activities.

Non-coital behaviours are common expressions of human sexuality. These include ‘mutual masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex, [and] are commonly practiced by both opposite-sex and same-sex couples’. Still they ‘continue to carry an aura of taboo’ in wider society (Lindberg, Jones and Santelli 2008, 231). Despite the taboos, young people see oral sex as ‘less intimate’ than vaginal sex, and therefore more acceptable (Malacad and Hess 2010; Lindberg, Jones and Santelli 2008). In fact, many young people ‘do not consider oral and anal sex to be “sex”’ (Lindberg, Jones and Santelli 2008, 231).

The results of the Malacad and Hess (2010, 184) study reveal that most young women today:

- associate both coitus and oral sex with positive emotions including excitement and stimulation. Less than 20% of the sample reported negative emotions at their most recent sexual experiences.

This finding suggests that these young women are engaging in these sexual activities because they enjoy them (Malacad and Hess 2010, 184). Although ‘not as rampant and casual’ as recent media reports suggest, oral sex has become a common practice within sexual relationships. ‘Fellatio is as prevalent as vaginal intercourse among young people, and is actually slightly more common among younger adolescents’ (Malacad and Hess 2010, 184).

The prevalence of oral sex and the growing acceptance of anal sex for young people (Halpern-Felsher 2008; Malacad and Hess 2010; Lindberg, Jones and Santelli 2008), calls for sexuality education that addresses these topics. These researchers concur
that although oral sex may bear ‘less physical, social, and emotional risk than vaginal sex, oral sex does not reduce sexual risk to zero’ (Halpern-Felsher 2008). Young people should be made aware of risk factors from STIs such as herpes ‘along with those posed by vaginal sex’ that young people should be made aware of.

*Parents and sexuality education*

Acquiring information about sex and sexuality is a complex process that often begins in the home and commences from as young as infancy. Sexual socialisation theory suggests that the messages — whether explicit or implicit — that children receive from their parents and other sources, inform their beliefs, values, and understanding of ideas about sex and sexuality (Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch 2007, 116). By the time a young person reaches adolescence, the sources of their sexual socialisation will have expanded beyond that of their parents and family to include schooling, their peers, and the media. However, parents continue to be one of the most important agents of sexual socialisation for their children well into young adulthood by helping them to interpret the messages they receive from all other sources (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 40).

This literature review will discuss the role of parents in sexuality education. Firstly, it will look at the dominant discourses and ideologies surrounding parental sexuality education. Secondly, it will examine the perceived barriers to sexuality education and communication faced by parents, before moving on to parental approaches and views of teaching their children about sex and sexuality. Issues of gender in sexuality education — both from the perspective of maternal and paternal differences in delivery of parent-child communication, and the differing information received by young males and females — will also be considered. Finally, it will look at the outcomes experienced by parents who do discuss sex and sexuality with their children.
Discourses and ideologies in familial sexuality education

Parents are caught in the middle of the numerous public discourses surrounding their children’s sexuality education. They are made constantly aware through news and media reports of the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, teen pregnancies, the rise in casual sex in adolescents today (Elliott 2010, 245), and they are left in a state of panic and fear about their children’s sexuality and what they should be teaching them. There are two prevalent discourses about adolescent sexuality and sexuality education — McKay (1997) calls these ‘permissive’ and ‘restrictive’ and Luker (cited in Elliott 2010, 241) refers to them as ‘sexual liberals’ and ‘sexual conservatives’. Sexual liberals, or those with a permissive ideology believe that providing a comprehensive sexuality education arms young people with the knowledge they need to have healthy and safe sex lives (Elliott 2010; McKay 1997). Comparatively, sexual conservatives, with restrictive ideologies, promote teaching abstinence with the view that ‘too much sexual information can be confusing, at best, and dangerous, at worst, to young people’ (Elliott 2010, 241).

Elliott (2010, 241) argues that this polarisation of ideas surrounding children’s sexuality education ‘does not accurately reflect the complexities of parents’ understandings and management of their children’s sexuality.’ Instead their feelings can be characterised by ambivalence and ambiguity. Due to this ambivalence — which Elliott uses in the sociological sense as ‘emphasiz[ing] that contradictory feelings or attitudes are often rooted in structured social relations’ (Smelser 1998; Willson et al. 2006 cited in Elliott 2010, 241) — parents lack ‘a cultural repertoire to talk about sex outside of marriage in a positive, affirming way.’ This means that parents often promote abstinence to their children (Epstein and Ward 2008, 122; Dyson and Smith 2012), despite the fact that many of them see this as unrealistic (Elliott 2010, 245).

Researchers have also debated the nature of parental communication about sex. Dyson and Smith (2012) speak to the fact that in public discourses about sexuality education, parents are seen as the primary source of this part of their children’s
educations; this also positions them as gatekeepers of their child’s sexuality — or the ‘guardians of their children’s sexual lives’ (Levine 2002, 105 cited in Elliott 2010, 241). Two of the dominant public discourses around adolescent sexuality — one of risk and consequences, and the other of young people with out-of-control hormones — further this positioning of parents and feeds the ambivalence and ambiguity that they feel about their child’s sexuality education (Elliott 2010). Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch (2007) suggest that placing parents as primary sexuality educators is not necessarily feasible, and they instead draw a distinction between sexuality education, and sexual socialisation — intimating that parents are responsible for the latter, while the former should be a collaboration between parents and schools that provides adolescents with the tools they need to become sexually healthy adults. (Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch 2007, 116) A similar point is made by Sprecher, Harris and Meyers (2008) who differentiate sex education from sex communication. These researchers point to the fact that in literature on sex education in relation to parents and their children, the term is often used interchangeably with sex communication (Fisher, 2004 cited in Sprecher, Harris and Meyers 2008, 18), but by their nature, these can be very different things. While sex or sexuality education is usually ‘characterized by the unilateral transfer of information from the one who knows more to the one who knows less’ (Sprecher, Harris and Meyers 2008, 18), sex communication can happen informally and can be instigated by the parent or the child. This description aligns with the sexual socialisation process described by Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch (2007, 116) which is more about the communication of ‘values and behavioral expectations’ than a direct education about sex and sexuality.

**Barriers to parental sexuality education**

While many parents would like to be a source of information for their children when it comes to sex and sexuality (Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011; Wilson et al. 2010, 58; Dyson and Smith 2012; Weaver et al. 2002; McKay, Pietrusiak and Holowaty 1998; Jordan, Price and Fitzgerald 2000; Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis 2008;
Wyckoff et al. 2008), and some young people would like their parents to discuss sex with them (Somers and Surmann 2004; Campero et al. 2011; Byers et al. 2003a, 2003b; Smith et al. 2009; Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus 2002), parental discussions about these topics often do not take place. A number of perceived barriers have been identified in the literature for parents when it comes to talking to their children about sex.

In understanding this lack of communication, in research conducted with parents and young people, four key interrelated themes emerged. These themes are fear, developmental level, knowledge, and comfort. The fear in this area is specifically a fear that talking about sex and sexuality would encourage their children to engage in sexual activity (Dyson and Smith 2012; Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon 2000, 205; Wilson et al. 2010, 59, 61). This is a common discourse in sexuality education which frames sex as something that young people need to be protected from (Allen 2007, 577) as Dyson and Smith (2012, 222) found with their research with parents, with some participants who were ‘concerned to protect their children from too much information about sex.’ This fear of discussing sex and sexuality, and active avoidance of discussing it continues what Dyson and Smith (2012, 223) call a ‘tradition of secrecy and silence’ and means that parents often ‘provide euphemistic answers to their children’s questions, or … respond in defensive or reactive ways’ (Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 27).

Often, avoidance of discussion about sex and sexuality is due to the second theme that emerged as a barrier to parental communication — thinking that their child is not developmentally ready to have ‘the talk’, or waiting for the ‘right time’ (Dyson and Smith 2012, 222; Jerman and Constantine 2010, 1172; Miller et al. 2009, 372; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 27; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008, 288; Wilson et al. 2010, 60; Davies and Robinson 2010). According to Martino et al. (2008, 616) popular culture has something to answer for in giving parents the idea that the best approach to providing sexuality education to their children is ‘the “big talk” on sex’ or ‘a 1-time discussion’. Parents often use onset of puberty in their children as a
marker that they are ready for this discussion (Miller et al. 2009, 372; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008, 288; Wilson et al. 2010, 60) or instead wait for their child to ask questions (Wilson et al. 2010, 60; Davies and Robinson 2010). Waiting for the right time can be a delaying tactic based on parent’s thinking that their child is not ready to hear about sex, but Wilson et al. (2010, 61) contend that this delay relates back to the previously discussed theme by being ‘rooted in a narrow conception that equates any acknowledgment of sexuality with a readiness to engage in sexual activity.’

Waiting for their child to ask questions is also often due to a third factor — a lack of knowledge on the parent’s behalf. This knowledge theme has two sub-themes, with the first being a general lack of knowledge about sex and sexuality and the issues facing their children in this arena. Parents often avoid discussing sex with their children because they are afraid that their child will ask something that they do not know (Dyson and Smith 2012, 226; Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon 2000, 204; Wilson et al. 2010, 60; Jerman and Constantine 2010, 1172), and because they feel that they are lacking in accurate knowledge and terminology about sex education as Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik (2011, 244) found when talking to one father of teens:

I think sometimes it is embarrassing; we are just unsure of the terminology you use, because it was different for us and you lot are a lot more open and knowledgeable about things than we were. (see also Raffaelli et al., 1998 cited in Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005, 380; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 26; Wilson et al. 2010, 60).

The second knowledge sub-theme that emerges is a lack of knowledge about how to approach sex and sexuality education based on their own experiences of sexuality education when they were children. Prior research points to many parents not having the tools to talk to their children about sex and sexuality because, as Dyson and Smith (2012, 222) found, they themselves ‘had very limited or no sex education as children.’ This experience was mirrored in a number of studies involving parents
(El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 110, 111; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 26; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011, 242; Wilson et al. 2010, 60) and was attributed to both a ‘cross-generational taboo against discussing sexuality within the family’ (El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 105) and a larger societal taboo surrounding sex (Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011, 242; Wilson et al. 2010, 60) that parents see as particularly true for their generation, as this metro participant in Dyson and Smith’s (2012, 222) study outlines:

With our generation, our parents, you know, it was just a taboo subject. Whereas this generation now, we’re more open about it. But because we weren’t taught properly — you see, back when I went to school you had to have permission to have sex education, and a lot of parents wouldn’t sign. So you’ve got the people who had it and people that didn’t. It makes it easier if you had something.

This societal and generational taboo around sexuality also informs what is perhaps the most prevalent barrier to sexuality education faced by parents: a general discomfort or embarrassment about talking about sex with their children (Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005, 380; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011, 562; Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon 2000, 189, 204; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 41; Miller et al. 2009, 372; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 26; Wilson et al. 2010, 60; Jerman and Constantine 2010, 1172). This general ‘communication discomfort’ (Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005, 385) has been raised by both parents and young people as an issue — ‘if he [father] was more comfortable I think I would have been more comfortable’ (Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011, 562) — and extends to the two particular topics that researchers have found parents feel the most uncomfortable discussing with their children: masturbation and nocturnal emissions (Croft & Asmussen, 1992; Geasler et al., 1995; Miller et al., 1998; Thomas, Flaherty, & Binns, 2004 cited in El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 112). According to Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006, 47) this discomfort and avoidance conveys a great deal to young people about parent’s feelings about sex and sexuality:
By appearing extremely uncomfortable or unable to discuss sex-related topics, parents send a message to their [children] that sex is difficult to discuss, secretive, or dirty.

**Parental approaches and attitudes to sexuality education**

While there are numerous barriers to discussing sex and sexuality with their children, when asked, the majority of parents acknowledged that sexuality is an important part of their children’s education (Dyson and Smith 2012, 226; Eisenberg et al. 2008, 354; Wilson et al. 2010, 58). Despite coming from diverse backgrounds with different values regarding sex and sexuality, the parents who Dyson and Smith (2012, 226) spoke to wanted to ‘raise their children to be sexually healthy people capable of engaging in respectful relationships.’ As discussed, many parents find it difficult to discuss sex with their children, and so are heavily in favour of school-based sexuality education (Eisenberg et al. 2008, 354). For parents who do attempt to teach their children about sexuality, a number of approaches are consistently used. The dominant approaches used by parents tend to be reactionist, and are based on concerns or fears that often come from external sources such as the media, which again feed into the protection discourse that surrounds much of parental sexuality education (Allen 2007, 577).

The first of the concerns that parents have about sex and sexuality in regards to their children, which can lead them to having some version of a ‘sex talk’, has to do with exposure to sexuality in the media, with many parents feeling that ‘sex is in your face all the time’ now in media such as billboards, television, songs, and music videos.’ (Dyson and Smith 2012, 223; see also Wilson et al. 2010, 58) The second concern is also a reaction to the media, specifically the ‘extensive and often sensationalized coverage of sexual abuse of young children’ (El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 112) which leads many parents to focus on avoiding this perceived threat (Martin and Luke 2010, 289; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 19; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 111) ‘instead of facilitating their children’s healthy sexual development’ (El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 112) because ‘the [cultural] construction

Parents often deliver two messages to their children about sex and sexuality in place of a real discussion. As mentioned previously, many parents feel ‘accountable to promote abstinence in their lessons to their children about sexuality’ (Elliott 2010, 242; see also Dyson and Smith 2012, 224; Epstein and Ward 2008; Sneed 2008, 78). Parents encourage their children to abstain for a number of reasons, including; a cultural construction of adolescents as having out-of-control hormones and an immaturity that does not allow them to responsibly navigate sex (Elliott 2010, 242); equating sex with love by using messages such as ‘sex is a special thing to be shared with someone you love’ (Epstein and Ward 2008, 120); wanting their children to wait until marriage (Epstein and Ward 2008, 122); and a worry about the risks and consequences associated with having sex (Elliott 2010, 242). Often telling their children to abstain until marriage is something parents would like to do because of their own experiences of adolescence and sexuality, but they are conflicted about this due to the fact that they did not abstain themselves and feel hypocritical in advocating abstinence (Elliott 2010, 247).

Focusing on risk and consequence motivates the other dominant message parents convey — if you have to have sex, use protection: ‘they just said to be careful if you decide to have sex. “Be careful, use protection.”’ (Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010, 143). However, for some parents, this fear about STIs and unwanted pregnancy manifest as a discussion about those topics, without an associated encouragement to use protection, which Jerman and Constantine (2010, 1171) suggest is a ‘focus more on the negative consequences of sex than the positive consequences of using protection if one is sexually active.’ Often, as observed in Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen’s research (2010, 143), these messages are presented in a nonchalant or joking manner: ‘when I went out sometimes, they were like, “well, you know, safe sex,” but it was more of a joking thing.’ However, young people often recognise that while these messages are said in a joking or offhand
way, there is intent behind this delivery: ‘but at the same time I kind of understood they really meant it too’ (Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010, 143).

Joking is one of the more common methods that parents employ to convey their values and beliefs about sex and sexuality without having to converse about something that is potentially embarrassing for both parties. In research looking at parental communication about sexuality, Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006, 47) speak about how these joking messages can still be very powerful, a common example is when fathers joke that they will lock their daughters in their room until they are older so that they are unable to date. While this is not ‘explicitly a conversation about sex, such jokes provide daughters with information about their father’s views about romance and dating’ (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 48).

Traditionally, there is an image of a parent-child discussion about sex — commonly referred to as ‘the talk’, but in reality ‘it is likely that many of these conversations happen in the context of daily lives’ (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 49). Another way that parents engage with their children is by taking advantage of ‘teachable moments’, which Martin and Luke (2010, 289) explain as ‘the need to respond to questions’ but can also involve using opportunities as they arise. These opportunities can include ‘learning that a daughter’s best friend has a date’ (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 49) and using that as a way to learn about what is happening in their child’s own sexual life and development. Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006, 49) found that one mother-daughter pair they observed as part of their research requested to move their chairs so that they were sitting alongside each other in order to ‘mimic their most common context for having serious conversations—in the car.’ This time spent driving children to school or activities allows parents to have these conversations without the embarrassment that can accompany eye contact. Other teachable moments included parents who are naked in front of their children — which can prompt their child to ask about the differences between their bodies ‘thus providing an opportunity for or even requiring’ parents to answer their child’s question (Martin and Luke 2010, 289).
Teachable moments for parents also often arise when co-viewing television programmes and movies, or reading books together with their children. The information that parents are able to disseminate to their children from co-viewing and reading together can be two-fold — they can teach their children how to be media literate and understand the purpose behind media portrayals, as many parents feel that ‘their children are exposed to a great deal more sex than they had been when they were young’ (Dyson and Smith 2012, 223). While many parents are troubled by the sexual nature of some media, such as this parent in Dyson and Smith’s (2012, 223) research:

R1: And look at [the television show] *Home and Away*, when girls get out of bed with their boyfriends and they put on their school uniforms and go to school.

R2: Yes! [The character] Matilda did that all the time. And it’s shocking.

For some parents, this was the second benefit to co-viewing and co-reading: it can be a ‘a vehicle for communication’ (Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 21) and create ‘opportunities for discussion’ (Dyson and Smith 2012, 224) as this parent found:

But they’re great because you get the questions coming back. And [watching the show with my kids] I thought, oh this is a great opportunity to get onto this subject and follow on like that. (Rural participant) (Dyson and Smith 2012, 224)

The same was true for reading books with children as this parent found:

Because when we read books and we discuss them, the person in the book can do stuff and you can really talk about that...It’s removed and it gives you some freedom. (Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 21)

For many parents, one of the most common approaches to teaching their children about sex and sexuality was to use resources such as educational videos or books (Epstein and Ward 2008, 121) like the parent who borrowed ‘a video from the library
that is on where babies come from’ after her son asked about the subject (Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 21). Parents have two predominant approaches to using resources to teach their children about sex. Some parents used resources to teach themselves about the topic so that they can pass that knowledge on, which Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaijik (2011, 244) found correlated with an open discussion, ‘which contributed to a close and trusting relationship developing between parents and their children.’ For other parents who were more embarrassed at discussing this topic, the second approach to using resources was to give their child the book or video to read or watch themselves (Wilson et al. 2010, 61) or to go through with them. Parents mentioned to Wilson et al. (2010, 61) that one useful resource was the ‘materials from their children’s sex education classes in school’.

An issue that many parents struggle with in discussing sex and sexuality with their children is when to do it. The ideal is to engage in sexuality education throughout the life of the child (Walsh 2012a), but as Dilorio, Pluhar and Belcher (2003) found in a review of literature looking at parent-child communication since the 1980s, there is very little research conducted in this area with younger children — much of the research instead focuses on adolescents or university-age students. The focus of researchers on sexuality later in a child’s life is mirrored in the timing for many parents, who wait until they think their child will be engaging in sexual activities to disseminate this information (Dyson and Smith 2012, 222; Jerman and Constantine 2010, 1172; Miller et al. 2009, 372; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 27; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008, 288; Wilson et al. 2010, 60) or think that ‘children are already exposed to a lot of sexual information and likely know more than parents think’ (Wilson et al. 2010, 60). Davies and Robinson (2010) conducted research with parents and their young children to examine the issues of risk and regulation in relation to communication about sex and sexuality, and found that parents were aware that this information needed to be communicated at an early age, but as explored previously, these parents didn’t know when or how to address these topics, or what knowledge they needed to be communicating with their children at these
young ages. Many parents recognise that ‘children need to know about sex before they confront any sexual feelings or situations, so that they are prepared to handle them when they arise’ (Wilson et al. 2010, 60). Additionally, starting these conversations early have the added benefit of making it ‘easier to talk about sex when their children got older and the topics became more sensitive’ (Wilson et al. 2010, 61). As one father stated in this study (2010, 61):

If you’re waiting until they’re nine or 10 to start having conversations with them about anything, let alone sex, you missed the boat! You’ve got to talk to your kids when they’re young. Spend time with them...[Then] these things will come naturally.

**Gender and parental sexuality education**

When parents do discuss sex and sexuality with their children, there are often clear differences in both the delivery of that information, dependent on the gender of the parent, and the nature of the information, dependent on the gender of the child. Research overwhelmingly shows that the job of communicating about sexuality with children often falls to the mother in traditional parental units (Wyckoff et al. 2008, 659; King and Lorusso, 1997 cited in Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005; Byers et al. 2003a, 14; Dyson and Smith 2012, 227; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 110; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011; Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon 2000, 188; Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus 2002, 81; Jerman and Constantine 2010; Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman 2002; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Pluhar, Dilorio and McCarty 2008; Sprecher, Harris and Meyers 2008; Sneed 2008).

Researchers present a number of reasons for this imbalanced division; it is assumed in many of these parental units that the father will be responsible for talking to their male children about sex, while the mother will speak to the female children (Wyckoff et al. 2008; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011). In practice, however, this does not always occur and this has been attributed by Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman (2002, 72) to ‘the greater time spent by mothers with their children, women’s greater
communication skills, and their designation as the owners of intimacy’ and by Pick and Palos (1995, cited in Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005) to mothers having a higher level of comfort in communicating about these topics. Of note here is that many young men, such as those in Sprecher, Harris and Meyers’ (2008, 23) study, report that they are discussing sex with their fathers more than their mothers, but that they are receiving more information from their mothers. These researchers suggest that the content of the discussions between fathers and sons was ‘less educational or informative’ (2008, 23) than those with mothers, and therefore that the father-son conversations tend to be more about sexual socialisation. This appears to be a common theme within sexuality discussions with fathers — as noted previously, fathers often use a joking approach in their discussions (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006): a form of sexual socialisation that is more aligned with value-transmission and sexual attitudes, while mothers provide more of the educational information that aligns with sexual knowledge. Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman (2001, cited in Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman 2002, 72) postulate that this can also be ascribed to the ‘conflict experienced by fathers who are positioned in two contradictory discourses: traditional masculinity and involved fatherhood’.

Due to two predominant factors, young men receive the least amount of sexuality education from home in comparison with their female counterparts. Epstein and Ward (2008, 114) point to a number of studies that show that:

the majority of parents never had a meaningful discussion about sex with their sons, including never discussing topics such as physical development, sex before marriage, safe sex, or sexual pressure.

The first factor is that, as noted above, it is assumed that fathers will provide the information to their sons but largely do not, and while mothers do discuss some sexuality topics with their sons, they are more likely to discuss sex and sexuality with their daughters (Byers et al. 2003a, 14; Wyckoff et al. 2008; Dyson and Smith 2012, 220). The second factor, as highlighted by Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus (2002, 81) is that ‘boys find it less important (and think their parents find it less important as well)
...to talk to their parents about sexuality than girls’. By extension, parents tend to privilege their daughters as having a higher level of need of sexuality information, and particularly of information about risk factors. (Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus 2002, 81).

This privileging of the needs of young women over young men for sexuality information can be attributed in part to the positioning of young women in a gatekeeping role, and therefore only requiring information that is ‘restrictive, stressing protective issues and the negative consequences of sexual activity’ (Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010, 140). These gatekeeping messages cast young men as ‘physically and sexually dangerous but also as hazardous to one’s dreams for the future’ (2010, 145). ‘Girls are held to stricter “moral” standards than boys’ (Martin and Luke 2010, 289) which ‘reflect[s] the fact that female sexuality is subject to more sources of formal and informal regulation compared with male sexuality’ (Sprecher, Harris and Meyers 2008, 23). Messages to young men (when they are given) reflect this double standard — instead of being restrictive, they are often instead about ‘sexual exploration and pleasure’ (Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010, 140), and these researchers found that while young women in their study were told ‘emphatic[ally]’ to ‘postpone sex until marriage’, no young men reported being told the same (2010, 144).

The adversarial nature of messages provided by parents to their children, in which mindsets of ‘vulnerability and victimization, often based on a battle of the sexes paradigm whereby girls trap boys and boys use girls, permeate discussions about teen sexuality’ (Elliott 2010, 246). These messages are highly problematic for both sexes — for young women they ‘encourage a climate whereby girls and women risk being debased and disparaged for expressing sexual agency’ (2010, 247) (as opposed to the young men in one study reported that the messages they received ‘encourage[d] a sense of agency’ (Epstein and Ward 2008, 122)) and portray young men as only wanting them for sex (Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010, 145). The adversarial messages young men received about young women placed an emphasis
on stereotypical gender norms such as ‘women like strong men’ and encouraged them not to ‘trust slutty girls’ (Epstein and Ward 2008, 121).

**Outcomes of effective parental sexuality education**

The research shows that when parents do have discussions with their children about matters relating to sex and sexuality, the outcomes are always positive (Wyckoff et al. 2008; Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005; Dyson and Smith 2012; Jerman and Constantine 2010; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Martino et al. 2008; Miller et al. 2009; Morgan, Thorne and Zurbriggen 2010; Parkes et al. 2011; Secor-Turner et al. 2011; Sprecher, Harris and Meyers 2008; Turnbull, Van Schaik and Van Wersch 2010; Hadley et al. 2009). Within this research, these reported outcomes vary dependent upon the nature of the conversation, and primarily have a basis in health promotion discourses — with two predominant ‘desired outcomes’ that include reducing risky sexual behaviours (Wyckoff et al. 2008; Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005; Byers et al. 2003a; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Miller et al. 2009; Secor-Turner et al. 2011) and delaying onset of sexual activity (Burgess, Dziegielewski and Green 2005; Dyson and Smith 2012; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006; Miller et al. 2009; Parkes et al. 2011).

Risky sexual behaviours chiefly encompass condom use and number of partners, and these discussions have been found to be most effective when delivered prior to onset of sexual activity (Wyckoff et al. 2008, 650). Beyond just having discussions about safe sex, research shows that when parents demonstrate high responsiveness within these discussions, there was an additional positive association with ‘adolescents’ communication with their sex partners and with condom use’ and there was a buffering effect of ‘sexually active peers on adolescents’ intentions to delay intercourse’ (Miller et al. 2009, 372). While delaying onset of sexual activity has been shown to have a corollary relationship with ‘conversations about sex-related topics before they become sexually active’ (Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006, 51), Parkes et al. (2011, 38) suggest that ‘fram[ing] the parental role solely in terms of
advocating delayed sex’ is not helpful in the larger sexuality education of their children. Instead, these researchers advocate that ‘both sex-focused and generic parenting may indirectly promote more positive, as well as safer, early sexual experiences’ and that ‘parenting may be important in helping teenagers, even those who have sex at an early age, to develop values and skills for managing relationships’ (2011, 38).

Other outcomes that are not focussed on health promotion discourses can include critical thinking skills, as highlighted by Dyson and Smith (2012):

Participants who fostered discussion with their children about sex that was connected with real-life events or media exposure are more likely to encourage skills in critical thinking...then when young people are faced with making decisions about sex, they may be more able to make responsible decisions.

And importantly, Martino et al. (2008, 617) found that when parents communicated often with their children about sex and sexuality, it was an ‘important predictor of teens’ perceptions of the closeness of their relationship with their parents and their ability to communicate with their parents about sexual topics and in general.’

**Media as sexuality educator**

The first part of this literature review examined how schooling is teaching young people about sex and sexuality. Clearly, schools are limited in what they can teach, and important information about healthy sexual development is not being covered in classes. Indeed, given the findings, it is difficult to imagine how schools could ever cover information about pleasure, desire, masturbation and non-coital sex. As seen in the second part of this literature review, parents face similar difficulties in talking to their children about sex and sexuality. In such a context, young people must look to other sources for their information, and in particular the media.
Children and adolescents today spend a substantial amount of their time watching, listening, and interacting with the media. They are ‘voracious consumers of mass media’ (Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 562) and have unprecedented access to it, with free-to-air and pay television, DVDs, smartphones, ‘as well as the opportunity to be connected with friends (and family) virtually any time of the day or night’ (Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 95). Research indicates that young people are spending between six to eight hours a day with their televisions, computers, video game consoles, and various devices (Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010, 757; Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 562; Collins et al. 2011, 585; Pinkleton et al. 2008, 462).

When using a variety of media concurrently — for example, using the computer while watching television — six to eight hours can become as much as 10 hours and 45 minutes a day (Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 95), which is more time than is spent at school, with their parents, or sleeping. Clark (Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 95) ‘has called this the “constant contact” generation’. This level of contact and consumption has raised concerns among researchers and academics about the effect that the media is having on the population, and specifically on children and adolescents.

Research on the effects of the media has increasingly been applied to the possible impact of televised sexual content on young people’s sexual behaviour and beliefs. A number of studies conducted speak of a marked increase in the sexual content seen in television and the media today (Eyal and Kunkel 2008; Brown and Bobkowski 2011; Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999). These researchers and others have conducted content analyses examining the amount of behaviour and talk that can be deemed to be sexual. This can include flirting, touching, implied sexual activity, talk about sex, and kissing. This content was found to appear in 70% of all television shows (Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 562). One study found that approximately one in eight programmes on television contained strongly implied sexual activity, and one in four programmes contained representations of sexual behaviours (Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999, 234-236).
There are concerns surrounding the possible effects this sexual content is having on young people, with particular anxiety around the growing numbers of teenage pregnancies and the increasing prevalence of STIs in young people (Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 570). Theorists are pointing to the media as a possible cause of these problems due to the messages it sends about sexual norms and behaviours (Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999, 230; Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 562-563, 570; Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 162; Collins et al. 2011, 585; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304; Pinkleton et al. 2008, 462; Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 56; Ward 2005, 67; Hennessy et al. 2009).

Media effects theories

The number of theories and models that researchers have developed to explain the perceived effects of media indicate the ongoing uncertainty within the area. They vary from relatively simple, direct cause-effect models, such as the ‘hypodermic needle’ or ‘magic bullet’ approaches of early media researchers, through to more complex accounts, which seek to capture the complexity and contingent nature of media effects. Differing approaches are premised on different models, for example, a model of the media consumer — as active or passive in their consumption; a view of the mechanisms of causations as direct or indirect; a concern with the focus of effects — on either individuals or groups, behaviour, beliefs, attitudes or values. (Berelson and Janowitz 1950) Bandura (Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 164) was one of the first to work in the media effects field with research into the effects of violence on television. Bandura established that when televised violence was seen to result in ‘positive outcomes or rewards’, it led to ‘an increased viewer tendency to imitate the acts’. Bandura (Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 164) further theorised that this effect could also be applied to ‘all observed behaviors’.

One of the most influential of the media effects models is the Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura (Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010, 758; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304; Collins et al. 2004, 281). This hypothesises that when a
behaviour is viewed by children or adolescents, they learn to imitate that behaviour, particularly if it appears to have positive outcomes. This may be seen as especially significant in relation to sexual content as young people viewing casual sex occurring on television without any consequences such as pregnancy or STIs hypothetically learn that there is little risk involved in engaging in casual sex themselves. This theory predicts that if there are no negative consequences, sexual talk or behaviour alone can ‘influence teens to have sex’ (Collins et al. 2004, 281).

Cultivation Theory differs from Social Learning Theory in that, instead of learning or imitating behaviours seen, with enough time spent viewing television, young people will look at the fiction presented there and come to accept it as factual. This would potentially affect young people’s beliefs about sex and encourage the idea that it happens far more often and without risk than is actually the case (Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 57; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304; Collins et al. 2004, 287).

Social Comparison Theory is used within media effects to describe the idea that people compare themselves to others, and use that comparison to change themselves in some way. This can mean that if young people see a character their age having sex, they may believe that all other young people their age are having sex, too, and that they should initiate sexual activity (Peter and Valkenburg 2009, 173). Similar to Social Comparison Theory is Superpeer Theory, which views the media as akin to an influential best friend (and is premised on the importance of peers as an information source) who offers examples for young people to compare themselves to, and use as a template of sorts for their own behaviours. This theory posits that young viewers, due to the trust placed in the ‘superpeer’, can view risky sexual behaviours as normative (Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010, 758; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 305).

Another widely used theory is that of Sexual Socialisation (Brown and L'Engle 2009, 130, 132; Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, 161; Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 100-101; Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999, 230; Ward 2005, 67; Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 56;
Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 177). This theory bears some similarity to both Cultivation Theory and Social Comparison Theory as it is also tied to the amount of viewing and how young people see themselves in comparison to television characters. Sexual Socialisation is a process by which the themes surrounding sex and sexuality seen in the media provide a framework for young people’s own developing sexuality. The media is seen as a socialising agent with a set of scripts and ideas for how sex and sexuality should develop for the young person.

Differing from these models is the Media Practice Model put forward by Steele (1999). Instead of viewing young people as a passive sponge-like audience — soaking up information presented by the media — this approach sees young people as active consumers. The Media Practice Model suggests that young people seek out information that is pertinent to them. They select and interact with this media content in line with their own stage of development and then apply it to themselves by creating their own romantic and sexual scripts (Steele 1999, 332, 334; Brown and L'Engle 2009, 132; Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 62; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304).

*Media effects studies and issues*

Researchers have conducted a number of studies using these models to examine the relationship between media content and the sexual lives of young people. Some assert, for example, a positive correlation between early or increased sexual activity and media use. One of the largest of these studies was a longitudinal research project conducted by Collins et al. (2004) which found associations between the amount of sexual content viewed on television and initiation of sexual behaviour in young people. This was achieved by coding the 23 most-watched programmes of the time for sexual content and establishing how often the test subjects, aged 12–17, watched these programmes. The study’s participants self-reported their level of sexual experience at baseline and reported again at a follow-up questionnaire one year later.
The results presented by Collins et al. (2004, 284) showed that predictors of earlier sexual activity were also associated with variables that indicated lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This may be read against the context that, traditionally, low classes are already greater consumers of media and many of these young people had previously exhibited sensation-seeking behaviours and had minimal supervision. These are factors that have previously been associated with sexual risk. (Collins et al. 2011)

Other media effects studies (Steinberg and Monahan 2011) show an emerging picture of more relaxed attitudes towards sexual behaviours and earlier sexual initiation that appear to be linked to the increase in consuming mediated sexual content. Similar results are seen in two studies: one conducted by Chandra et al. (2008) in relation to sexual content and teen pregnancy, and another longitudinal study by Hennessy et al. (2009) that, in addition to television, examined music, video games, and magazines. These studies infer a causal relationship between this consumption and the sexual behaviours, however they also acknowledge, if only in passing, the correlational nature of their results (Chandra et al. 2008, 1052; Collins et al. 2011, 589; Hennessy et al. 2009, 595). Steele’s (1999) Media Practice Model explains this correlation. There is no way for these researchers to positively know what level of sexual curiosity or development these young people already had at baseline. According to Steele’s (1999) model, if a young person is already sexually curious, they would actively seek out media with more sexual content. In short, the relationship between media consumption and sexual behaviour is heavily contingent on other contextual factors.

Most media effects studies underplay the individual differences of the young people they are discussing, such as socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic variations. Bleakley et al. (2011, 538) examined the association between sexual content exposure and sexual initiation in African-American adolescents, who consume more media content than White youth (Bleakley et al. 2011), they showed no hastening of sexual activity
in relation to viewing habits, supporting the idea that context is important in understanding media effects.

Another difficulty of many studies is the approach to categorising sexual content in the media. A study conducted by Manganello et al. (2010) used the coding of sexual content previously conducted by Kunkel et al. (2005, cited in Manganello et al. 2010) and had adolescents code the same television programmes. They found differences between the ideas of what was sexual in the eyes of these young people and the experienced coders. Manganello et al. (2010, 371) found that the intended viewers — in this case adolescents — can and do interpret messages differently according to their ‘age, sex, race or other characteristics.’ This has implications for all media effects studies as they rely on a standardised coding system devised by researchers without consultation from the target audience.

The positive effects of the media

An alternative approach to that of the effects research tradition summarised above is to consider the positive effects of sexual content in the mainstream media (comprising television, movies, magazines etc.). As noted previously, young people are not being provided with all of the information they need about sexuality from their formal schooling or parents. In this context, the media may be a rare site of education about sexual pleasure and desire. With the majority of studies focused on the perceived harmful effects of the media, the positive messages and information the media provides are often overlooked. However, within the research examining these perceived harms, there are concessions to the view that the media can play a significant part in providing information about sexuality and relationships to young people. While warning of the earlier onset of sexual activity attributed to the mainstream media, and the ‘more permissive sexual norms’, Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein (2010, 760) also speak to the ‘important role [the media plays] in providing sexual information to adolescents’. In a previous examination of research, while Brown and Strasburger (2007) again speak to the perceived harms of viewing
‘unhealthy sexual behaviour’ such as casual sex, and refer to studies that show corollary links between earlier onset of sexual activity and viewing sex in the media, they also acknowledge that young people have cited media portrayals as providing ideas for how to discuss sex with their partners, in addition to noting prior examples of effective use of the media in educating young people about sexual and reproductive health. Epstein and Ward’s (2008, 121) research into the communication young men receive from parents, peers, and the media found that while young men do you receive some messages from the media that perpetuate gendered norms and stereotypes, the media was also perceived as encouraging safe sex, and provided information about relationships. The media can also help in identity formation; when young people look at characters on television that they feel resemble themselves. These characters provide a range of models that may validate what they are feeling because of the perceived similarities and shared problems (Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 62, 64; Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 96).

Adolescents are naturally curious about sex and sexuality, and the media often provides information that can be judgement free or even positive, and can be accessed in private (Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 100; Brown and L'Engle 2009, 129). The potential to work with the media to provide this information in an entertaining manner, while still delivering positive messages and encouraging safety, would be a benefit to young people (Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 61; Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010, 763).

While much of the media effects research conducted continues to paint the media in a negative light, moving forward and providing young people with the information that they need about sex and sexuality may be difficult. However, projects such as this one can have a positive effect on young people’s knowledge levels about sex and work toward making them safer sex practitioners.

*Peers and sexuality education*
As discussed previously, sexual socialisation theory describes the process of learning about sexuality over the course of young person’s early life via verbal and nonverbal messages from those around them, and initially, the majority of this sexual socialisation comes from parents (Ward 2003, 348; Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch 2007; Lefkowitz and Stoppa 2006). The second most commonly cited source of sexuality information and sexual socialisation is peers. In research conducted since 1974 in the US (particularly given the differing levels of sexuality education in schools), peers have most consistently been named as the primary source of sexual information by adolescents over parents, schools, and the media (Sutton et al. 2011, 27-29) In Australia, friends – and more commonly female friends – are consistently cited as a trusted source of information in this domain (Smith et al. 2003, 82; Smith et al. 2009, 57-59; Mitchell et al. 2014, 67-68; Parks 2010), while these information sources do vary according to sex – young men seek information from friends far less than young women do – on the whole, peers are an important source of information about sex and sexuality for the majority of young people (Parks 2010).

Research about young people’s sexual learning from peers takes two prevalent approaches – examinations of what young people learn from their peers, which are often largely quantitative studies – and examinations of perceived impacts of sexual learning from peers – a risk-based approach that often have their grounding in effects theory. These quantitative focuses on what young people learn from their peers, and the perceived impacts of that learning, means that there is very little information on the ways that young people are learning from each other. Indeed this would be extremely difficult to establish, as it would require long periods of ethnographic fieldwork and observation in order to truly establish the nature of young people’s communication with each other about sex and sexuality.

**Peers as sources of sexuality information**

There have been a number of studies that quantitatively examine the sources of information for young people in the domain of sex and sexuality (Smith et al. 2003,
Smith et al. 2009, 57-59; Mitchell et al. 2014, 67-68; Parks 2010). However, as McKee (2012, 499-500) points out, the differing levels of terminology used in survey questions can make it difficult to establish what is being asked of young people, and may not cover the extent or the complexity of what young people discuss in relation to sex. These surveys often ask where young people get their information from, but do not go into detail about the nature of that information – as Allen (2005b, 44-45) discusses, young people see sexual health as two separate areas, which she calls the ‘official’ and the ‘erotic’. The erotic information about sexual health includes the information that young people want to know the most about – how to have pleasurable sex and what makes sex pleasurable. This is the information that young people seek most from friends, but in a Family Planning NSW survey, this kind of information was encompassed in one category of sources of information: ‘sexual activities’ (Parks 2010) making it difficult to establish the nuanced conversations that young people have about this aspect of sexuality.

There is great difficulty in finding existing research into how young people educate and learn from each other about sex and sexuality because this is rarely or never the focus of research into peers and sexuality information. There is however, a large body of work that examines what young people learn from peers, but this research largely positions peers as influential and examines the impact that young people have on each other. This body of work is largely focused on timing of first sexual activity and the influence of peers in this process (Miranda-Diaz and Corcoran 2012; Sieving and Eisenberg 2006) or peer influences on romantic or sexual behaviour (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner and Collins 2004; Wisnieski, Sieving and Garwick 2013; Ali and Dwyer 2011). It is clear that this is an area that requires further research and needs to look at what are the specific areas of knowledge and information that young people are gleaning from one another, what do they want to know, and are they receiving that information from their peers?
What do young people want to learn about sexuality, and what are they being taught?

There are certain things children want to know about sex ‘whether or not they ask [about] them’ (Halstead and Reiss 2003b, 174). However, ‘some children may not ask questions and therefore may not gain the information they require’ (Mason 2010, 162). What young people want to know often differs greatly from what the school or the teachers think that they ‘need’ to know.

Research shows that what young people want to know about sex and sexuality are the pleasurable and the emotional aspects of relationships (Allen 2004, 2007). Young people have demonstrated a desire to ‘learn about what love means to sex’ and ‘what love feels like’ so that they could make decisions and choices within their relationships (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 70). In an evaluation of New Zealand school-based sexuality education, the topic most senior-school students wanted to know more about was ‘how to make sexual activity enjoyable for both partners.’ (Allen, 2005b; cited in Allen 2007, 584) Interest in pleasure is also evident in research where young people show a greater interest in pleasure and erotics than information about STIs (Allen, 2005b; cited in Allen 2007, 584). These discussions stand in stark contrast to ‘adult discourses of young people’s sexuality’ (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 70).

The predominant model of sexuality education being conveyed to young people across the western world is one that frames sex as something that has few, if any, positive outcomes (Allen 2004, 2007; Brick 1991; Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010; Dailey 1997; Fine 1988; Ingham 2005; Phillips and Martinez 2010; Pick, Givaudan and Kline 2005; Levine 2002). There is an underlying belief that the approved sexual behaviour for any child’s age group is no sexual behaviour at all (Levine 2002, 19), yet being fixated on risk and danger does not equip young people to deal with the emotional and sensual aspects of sexual attractions and relationships (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 71). Allen (2007, 578) suggests that teaching about sexual risk is viewed as a more legitimate and easier task than teaching content that deals
with desire and sensuality, which can be construed as inciting sexual danger. As a result, educators have sidelined any positive explorations of desire and pleasure as a legitimate part of sexuality. (Allen 2005a, 154)

The abstinence message disseminated in sexuality education is not always explicitly based upon religious or political conservatism, but grounded in biomedical notions of risk (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 66). As a teacher stated in an interview, ‘my role is to emphasize consequences of sexual activity, until teens understand consequences they should abstain’ (Phillips and Martinez 2010, 376).

Adolescents are receiving the message that sex is a dangerous and problematic thing that requires constant vigilance; this is taught in relation to both sex as an act and to their own developing bodies and burgeoning sexualities. The current dominant discourse about adolescents is that ‘their sexuality is something dangerous and that they need protection from’ (Allen 2007, 577). Protection and control are words that appear to be recurring throughout the sexuality messages received by young people. Control features heavily: control over young people’s bodies, (Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 65) control over their fertility (Ingham 2005, 381), and, most importantly, control over their sexuality (Fay 2002, 12-13).

One view held by researchers in this area is that the current discourses in sexuality education, which push for a disease and preventative model, are a form of governmental control. Fay (2002, 12) perceives a political climate that sees young people’s sexuality ‘as a problem to control and exploit, and that views sexual pleasure with trepidation.’ Sexuality education ‘represents a state mechanism for reducing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections’ (Allen 2007, 579). But the state has an economic and social interest in doing providing sexuality education. These governmental strategies aimed at reducing STIs and unwanted pregnancies may be fundamentally about ‘containing and disciplining the body as a threat to social order’ (Giroux 1998, cited in Coleman, Kearns and Collins 2010, 62). However, it’s not sexual thoughts and feelings that are harmful, it is sexual behaviour that should be worried about: ‘Under what circumstances is self control
more likely to be present – when sexual desire is acknowledged or when it is repressed?’ (Fay 2002, 13).

Sexual activity can undoubtedly be a source of physical and mental suffering for adolescents (when, for example, it is coerced, leads to unwanted pregnancy, or results in social ostracism); however, it can also be a source of pleasure, satisfaction, and growth (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2011, 11).

Schools need to ‘overcome their reticence when delivering certain aspects of the content, such as sexual intercourse, the concept of sexuality and the pleasure of sex...’ (Mason 2010, 168). Including a discourse of erotics in sex education programmes should not be at the expense of official messages about, for example, safer sex. Rather, these messages might be reformulated within a discourse of erotics to capture the interest and attention of more young people, and integrate this important information into a reality that more readily matches their sexual practice (Allen 2001, 120). However, as will be seen in the data analysis section of the next chapter, while educators within schools may be eager to teach information that is more relevant to young people and their sexual lives, they often exist within a system that makes this very difficult, if not impossible.
Chapter 3 — Methodology

This chapter will outline all stages of data collection and analysis for this research: recruiting participants and the issues faced, data collection, and analysis of the data. The methodologies used for this research and the underpinning methodological approaches will be examined here.

**Ethical clearance**

Conducting any research involving human participants requires approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC). This project is considered low risk, as the research does not involve anything medical or invasive. UHREC granted ethical clearance (approval number: 1000001288) (see Appendix 1) for this research to be undertaken until 21 December 2013. As part of the requirements for ethical clearance; in order to take part in the focus groups, each participant needed to provide their own and a parent or guardian’s consent.

**Data collection**

**Breakdown**

The research data for this project was gathered through 20 focus groups with 89 high school students aged 14–16 from five Queensland schools. Of the five schools, three were religion-based co-educational independent schools, one was an independent single-sex girls’ school, and one was a state school. The fee-based independent schools enrol students from higher socioeconomic background, while the state school was in a lower socioeconomic area. The focus groups comprised 15 female focus groups of 71 young women, and five male focus groups of 18 young men. The over-representation of young women was due to the difficulties associated with recruitment (discussed further in Recruitment of Participants). Facilitators of the same sex as the participants led the focus groups to encourage more open communication. Professor Alan McKee (an experienced qualitative researcher) led
the male focus groups, and after training under Professor McKee, and researching focus group facilitation, I led the female focus groups. It was decided that given some of the topics and the associated embarrassment and the stigma attached to the discussion of these topics – such as masturbation, and puberty (for young women in particular – as will be seen in the analysis chapters) that it would enable a more open discussion if the facilitator was of the same sex as the participants.

Participants were given a $20 iTunes voucher to thank them for their time and involvement. Within this thesis, these young people have been de-identified with a code such as 1.F.2, where ‘1’ is the group number (and refers to the order in which the focus groups were conducted), ‘F’ is the participant’s sex, and ‘2’ is where the young person was sitting in the group (going left to right).

There was some concern that the data would be limited by being restricted to predominantly private — or economically advantaged — schools, and only one state school. However, research has shown that young people from economically advantaged backgrounds typically have higher levels of knowledge surrounding sex and sexuality (Collins et al. 2004). Therefore, given the knowledge levels of the economically advantaged young people from the independent schools — who demonstrated a lack of knowledge surrounding the discussion topics — it was possible to extrapolate that the knowledge levels of the young people from the smaller pool of state school students would be even lower.

No participants in this research identified as LGBTIQ. When designing this research project we decided, for two reasons, not to attempt to ask the participants in the focus groups about their sexuality or sexual identity. Firstly, as these were focus groups, we felt it would be ethically problematic to ask young people to self-identify when there was likelihood that they may not have identified their sexuality to their friends or peers. Secondly, we wanted to find out how mainstream school students talk about sex and sexuality in their own cultures. As will be seen in Chapters 4–7, schools are highly heteronormative institutions that operate within discourses
formed around assumptions of heteronormativity. To discuss sexuality and sexual identity in this context would have imposed an agenda onto the focus group discussion that could have changed the way that the young people responded. Buckingham and Bragg (2004, 23) speak to how the young people in their focus groups had ‘learnt to become “researchable subjects” and to “perform” being a citizen by “expressing” what they saw as appropriate opinions.’ If sexual identity had been discussed in our focus groups, it was likely that the participants would have ‘performed’ the ‘appropriate opinions’ instead of providing the honest — and at times heteronormative and homophobic — responses that they did give.

**Methodology**

Qualitative research, and focus groups in particular, were chosen because qualitative research emphasises meaning as opposed to the measurement emphasised by quantitative research (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 14). This aligns with the culture-centred approach to health promotion that informs the way that the research was conducted for this thesis. Quantitative research does not typically allow us to understand how participants make sense of a health topic — what they think are the important issues, what language they use to describe them, and how they make sense of them in relation to their everyday lives. Qualitative approaches make it possible to gather such data. Focus groups sit in the middle of the more traditional individual interviews and participant observation (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 2), not only occupying ‘an intermediate position between these other qualitative methods’ but also possessing a ‘distinctive identity’. Focus groups ‘provide access to forms of data’ that are difficult to obtain with the other two methods (Morgan 1997, 2). The typical focus group is made up of participants with shared characteristics ‘pertinent to the study’ and usually comprises ‘between six and 10 participants who are strangers to each other’ (Powell and Single 1996, 500).

For this research, due to the somewhat stigmatised and potentially embarrassing subject matter of sex and sexuality, and the fact that recruitment of young people occurred through their school the focus groups were held in school time, it was
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decided to recruit the participants within their peer groups. Previous research has shown that young people regularly talk about sex and sexuality with their peers (Steele 1999, 339) and therefore have a level of comfort discussing these subjects in front of each other that would facilitate a more open discussion. While it was anticipated that each focus group would be between six and 10 participants in order to enable a broader conversation, the decision to have single-gendered groups and to allow students to self-nominate to groups with people they felt comfortable with led to three of the groups having only two or three participants. However, as they were peers, the facilitators were still able to maintain a good discussion although it was sometimes slightly more difficult to maintain momentum with a smaller group.

The data from focus groups comes from the discussions between the participants as well as their interactions with the moderator. It is this interactivity that makes a focus group different from an individual interview (Wilkinson 1999, 222-223; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 11; Bloor et al. 2001, 7) by providing a way to observe ‘how and why individuals accept or reject others’ ideas’ (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 11). Focus groups can provide the stimulus for the participants to ‘articulate those normally unarticulated normative assumptions’ (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 11).

The language used within qualitative research can be a complex matter: whether to speak in slang terms or use proper language when speaking with participants. The researcher needs to consider whether all participants will understand the proper terms, or, more importantly, whether they understand it to mean the same thing. This is especially true for young people, for whom slang forms a large part of their discourse (Cohn and Richters 2012). Focus groups offer the advantage over interviews or surveys in that group members can express their feelings using their own terminology, not the language of the researcher. This can allow the researcher a privileged access to conversations that can contain ‘indigenous terms and categories in the situations of their use’ (Bloor et al. 2001, 9). For this reason, at the beginning of each focus group, the facilitators asked the participants to speak as they normally
would with each other, and to feel free to use any language including slang and ‘swear words’. Allowing participants to use their own language and terminology made them feel more comfortable within the discussion. The relief was evident in one focus group when the participants were told to say whatever they wanted and not worry about swearing: ‘(laughing) Woo! Scared what’s gonna come out...’ (1.F.5). When the facilitator does not understand a slang term or an acronym, asking the young person what they mean puts them into a position of authority on the subject, making them the owner of knowledge. Taft (2007, 208) speaks to the difficulty as a researcher of admitting a lack of knowledge about what young research subjects are talking about, in an effort to appear ‘hip’ or ‘cool’. These concerns about conducting research with teens or young people — particularly in the area of sexuality — are echoed by Buckingham and Bragg (2004, 39) who were concerned about how to present themselves for fear of ‘seem[ing] too old or out of touch’. However, Taft (2007, 208) concedes that a willingness to appear ignorant to research subjects, paired with a genuine curiosity and interest in their lives, can pay off with participants seeing the researcher as someone who values what they have to say and is willing to listen to them.

The other key advantages of focus groups are that they enable the researcher to concentrate on the most ‘pertinent variables’ of the study, and give the opportunity to ‘observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time’ (Morgan 1997, 2; Powell and Single 1996, 500). This makes it possible to gather large amounts of data using a relatively small amount of people and resources — if interviews had been used instead of focus groups, it would have taken more than 89 hours for data collection alone as opposed to the roughly 20 hours that were spent. This meant less disruption for the participating school, and, more importantly, it means that there will be less irrelevant data, and as discussed above, speaking with a group of participants allows for the pertinent information to be examined in depth. Another important benefit to focus groups that was revealed was that participants could jog the memory of other participants. Finding out where a participant knows
something from can be difficult if it was from a television show or movie that they saw six months ago. However, during a discussion, a participant can give basic details of the movie, and another participant may know the name as they are from within the same demographic and will likely have seen the same movie:

13.F.2: Yeah, but, no, what's that movie? What movie is it? Is it *John Tucker Must Die*? I think it's *John Tucker Must Die* and then there's a PE teacher and he's standing in front of a blackboard and he goes, "If you have sex you will - - -" 


As the researcher is there chiefly as a facilitator, the group of participants should ideally be addressing each other — so that while the researcher is directing discussion topics, and moving the conversation along if it gets off point, the discussion can move along under the power of the interactions of its participants. This means focus groups are far less controlled than individual interviewing, which can be a limitation of this research method. A focus group requires a skilled facilitator who will be able to bring the discussion back on point (Bloor et al. 2001, 9, 13; Morgan 1997, 11; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 14) — someone who is empathetic, open, and an active listener. (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007, 14) At the start of each focus group, the facilitator laid out the ground rules and etiquette for the discussion. This positioned the facilitator as the leader of the discussion, established the boundaries while letting the young people know that the focus group was about them, and reiterated the confidentiality that needs to be inherent in these discussions in order to get a true indication of participants’ thoughts and feelings. The ground rules and expectations for the focus groups were outlined in a discussion schedule (see Appendix 2), but were not read out word for word. A key element of speaking to young people about sensitive matters is not to come across as too formal, but rather to project a human face. Research has shown that young people are reluctant to discuss sexual matters with authority figures like
teachers, but are comfortable to do so if researchers seem to be approachable (Halstead and Reiss 2003a, 35).

Once the ground rules had been agreed, the facilitator placed a series of eight cards in front of the students, one at a time. Each card had one topic relating to sexual development written on it, which previous research has identified as important for young people. The cards were designed to cover the range of domains of healthy sexual development developed by McKee et al. (2010) which include:

1. Freedom from Unwanted Activity
2. An Understanding of Consent and Ethical Conduct More Generally
3. Education About Biological Aspects of Sexual Practice
4. An Understanding of Safety
5. Relationship Skills
6. Agency
7. Lifelong Learning
8. Resilience
9. Open Communication
10. Sexual Development Should Not Be ‘Aggressive, Coercive, or Joyless’
11. Self-Acceptance
12. Awareness and Acceptance That Sex Is Pleasurable
13. Understanding of Parental and Societal Values
14. Awareness of Public/Private Boundaries
15. Competence in Mediated Sexuality

For each card, the young people were asked what they knew about that topic and where they got the most information from — parents, friends, school, the media (including the Internet and pornography), or another source. The cards were
designed to function as discussion starters. Facilitators were not, at any time, to introduce new information into the conversation, or answer questions seeking new information.

The discussion schedule included the following topics:

1. *Asking people out and how to break up with them*
2. *Asking for what you want in a relationship*

These topics covered the domains: *Relationship Skills, Agency, and Resilience.*

3. *Giving yourself sexual pleasure*

This topic covered the domains: *Education About Biological Aspects of Sexual Practice, Agency, Lifelong Learning, Self-Acceptance, Awareness and Acceptance That Sex Is Pleasurable, and Awareness of Public/Private Boundaries.*

4. *Having good sex*


5. *Having safer sex* [Avoiding pregnancy, information about STIs, etc.]

This topic covered the domains: *An Understanding of Consent and Ethical Conduct More Generally, Education About Biological Aspects of Sexual Practice, An Understanding of Safety, Relationship Skills, and Agency.*

6. *Understanding the changes in your body* [Puberty, etc.]

This topic covered the domains: *Education About Biological Aspects of Sexual Practice, and Open Communication.*
7. *Saying no to sexual advances you don’t want*


8. *Feeling good about yourself whatever people say [Self-esteem and peer pressure]*

This topic covered the domains: *Agency, Resilience, Open Communication, Self-Acceptance, and Competence in Mediated Sexuality.*

The research was undertaken within a culture-centred or ‘systems approach’ (Dolcini et al. 2012). This approach is mirrored in a number of studies looking at health and sexuality, but has been referred to by different titles that all have a basis in ecology. Dolcini et al. (2012, 55) use a ‘bioecological framework’ that ‘holds that youth are affected by forces in their immediate environment, by the interaction of the various forces with each other, and by factors in the broader context.’ while Eisenberg et al. (2011) refer to this as a ‘social-ecological framework’ which ‘emphasises multiple levels of influence on individual behaviours, encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisational/institutional and community/policy factors.’ What these ecological models speak to is the importance of taking into account all sources of information that influence the way that young people learn about sex and sexuality, without privileging one source of knowledge as more ‘worthy’ than another.

*Data analysis*

The data gathered from the focus groups was recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using ‘thematic analysis’ (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). This is a five-step
analytical process. The first step is becoming familiar with the data by reading the transcripts in detail more than once. During this process the researcher starts to see the key themes in the data. While a transcriber was engaged, transcribers often misunderstood the language used by the participants, and so listening to the tapes repeatedly to ensure that the transcription was correct started this process. Once I had listened to the tapes repeatedly while also reading the transcription, I moved on to the next step. The second step is codifying the thematic framework — codifying the transcripts and putting the key themes into words. In this research project, the key themes were identified and highlighted by close reading within the documents. Sections of text were then separated into individual documents according to the theme. The third stage, indexing, involves searching the data for quotes that illustrate the key themes. Stage four, charting, requires the researcher to collect relevant quotes in the appropriate part of the analytical framework. The final stage is ‘mapping and interpretation’, where the analyst works to ‘map and interpret the data set as a whole’ (Ritchie and Spencer 1994, 186). When undertaking the analysis of this data, I decided to discuss the data by source as opposed to by topic because it became apparent from this thematic analysis, and will be seen in the analysis chapters, that the sources worked in very different ways. One limitation of this research analysis was that I carried out the majority of the analysis by myself — allowing for the possibility that my analysis of the data could have included a certain measure of subjectivity. To combat the possibility of these subjective interpretations, I checked in with my supervisory team on my interpretation of the data to ensure that I was on the right track.

**Recruitment of participants**

In order for the results of this research project to be indicative of the knowledge levels and sources of a larger range of young people, it was decided to approach Education Queensland for approval to conduct research within state schools. With the wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and diversity of cultural backgrounds
found among state school students, it was hoped that all research would be conducted within the state school system.

When a researcher wants to access one state school in Queensland, they can approach the school’s principal directly to gain permission. However, when a researcher is seeking to access more than one state school across Queensland — as was the case for this project — it is necessary to apply online via a form that is assessed by Education Queensland’s Strategic Policy and Research Branch. This online application was submitted (see Appendix 3) on 8 February 2011, and on 29 March 2011, a Senior Research Officer from Strategic Policy and Research called to discuss some issues that they had with the research application. These issues were responded to over the phone, while asking the officer to send an email (see Appendix 4) so that these issues could be addressed with more considered responses that were substantiated with references to prior research in this area. There was one issue in particular that the officer raised, that questioned the scope of the research, and, in particular, the relevance of two of the proposed discussion topics: ‘Giving yourself sexual pleasure’ and ‘Having good sex’ to the ‘stated study topic and to [the] school sexuality education context’ (see email correspondence).

The email response to this issue was:

The purpose of this project is to find out how young people are finding out about sexuality, where they are looking for information and what they are learning.

Recent research in the *International Journal of Sexual Health* has identified fifteen key domains of sexual health (McKee et al. 2010). ‘Education about biological aspects of sexual practice’ and ‘An understanding of safety’ are two of these domains. However there are many other domains that must also be addressed in healthy sexual development. These include ‘Awareness and understanding that sex is pleasurable’ and ‘Open communication’ about sex (McKee et al. 2010, 17). Research into sexuality education has made it clear that the various aspects of healthy sexual development are best understood holistically (Allen 2008b; Fine and McClelland 2006)
and including all elements of healthy sexual development in discussion can lead to improved educational outcomes (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 57; Hirst 2008, 402). Sexuality education is often highly gendered, with research showing that young men and women receive varying levels of knowledge outside of school (Allen 2008a, 440). Kaestle and Allen (2011, 983) suggest that young people receive mixed messages about masturbation, and that the stigma and silence attached to this topic “may have a profound impact on the sexual health and development of young people.” (2011, 984) Examining the levels and sources of knowledge on this topic is important in discovering what kinds of messages young people are receiving on a topic that contributes to healthy sexual development.

After calling and emailing a number of times to see if a decision had been reached, on 11 May 2011, Professor McKee and I were invited to discuss any issues that the Director of Strategic Policy and Research still had. This meeting took place on 20 May 2011 with seven representatives from that organisational area, Professor McKee and me. The same issues were raised and again answered in detail with reference to supporting research. The Strategic Policy and Research representatives suggested that removing the two discussion points regarding pleasure would increase the chances of the application being successful, but, as these topics form an important part of this research, we told them that this would not be possible. A letter denying the application was received shortly thereafter (see Appendix 5) citing ‘the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter’ as the reason. This denial was particularly telling about the way that schools and government departments think about and address sex and sexuality in relation to young people, and this is explored further in the Discussion in Chapter 8.

After a subsequent denial from Brisbane Catholic Education to conduct this research in Queensland catholic schools (see Appendices 6–9), the only remaining formal schooling option was to approach independent schools. Fortunately, a number of these schools were both amenable and happy to have this research conducted with their students. Additionally, we gained permission to access to one state school — as
it was the only state school we approached — by approaching the principal directly. This brought the total number of schools where the focus groups were conducted to five.

The following four data analysis chapters were a result of these focus groups. They demonstrate that there are passionate educators working in schools who recognise the importance of providing sexuality education, and are striving to improve this aspect of their students’ education.
Chapter 4. Data Analysis — Sexuality Information — Schools

This chapter will look at the information that young people receive from their most official source: school. The key message that young people are getting from schools is that both sex and their bodies are risky, dangerous, and should not be discussed or spoken about until it’s absolutely necessary — which is often too late.

**Schools provide the most information about puberty**

In the context of puberty, sexuality information is often disseminated after puberty has started, which can lead to confusion and fear for young people. There is a lack of discussion about basic information concerning puberty and what physical changes a young person can expect. The bulk of this information is left in the hands of schools, and this was one area of sexuality education where schools were mentioned as providing the majority of this knowledge to young people: ‘it’s more school isn’t it’ (1.F.5), ‘well I think that we get taught about it a lot in school’ (8.F.1), ‘school and the media’ (15.F.4), ‘they did it over like a couple of weeks, like four weeks, and they would take us through all the different things that would happen like your voice breaking and getting hair and that kind of stuff’ (3.M.1), ‘we had a person come in and like… give us a class and that’s it’ (3.M.2), ‘it’s really basically from school’ (18.M.4), ‘primary school’ (15.F.1). While most of the young people stated that schools were providing this information, they all spoke to the inconsistency of delivery in regards to timeliness, with some learning in ‘Grade 5’ (5.F.5).

In primary school in Grade 5 we all, all the Grade 5s got together with the two teachers and they’d tell us about, just start telling us about this one thing, about puberty and stuff. Just to a minor sort of level. That was all together with boys and girls. In Grade 6 we split up. This was just one day each year. And in Grade 6 we split up and we started talking about that sort of thing and then in Grade 7 we did it again, except we started talking about it on a more - on a higher level.’ (9.F.2)
Others started a year earlier: ‘for me like at the school here from Grade 4 we had this thing where we called it Sex Ed and it basically just went through everything so like puberty, relationships, just everything growing up kind of’ (7.F.3). The information covered here was very basic:

In Grade 4 it’s mainly about like, it’s kind of just understanding like that you can get older, like what will happen and kind of like you have like bodies and you like line them up from baby to older kind of thing and yeah, that type of thing. (7.F.3)

‘Primary school all the people that came were, “Now, you might start to develop breasts”’ (15.F.6). For many of the young people, this information didn’t come until the last years of primary school:

Well, we — at my primary school we did it in Year 6 and 7. I learnt most of my stuff in Year 6 and 7. The stuff we learned in Grade 8 I already knew because we did this. We had a kind of a day off. We got to wear to casual clothing and the teachers would teach us all about the boy’s stuff and the girl’s stuff. (13.F.6)

Yes and then like it … was separate genders, so in Grade 7 they had us together, girls and boys and that was more about sex and stuff. The others were kind of just more about growing up and they had like puberty tapes. Just like telling what happens and like the menstrual cycle kind of thing. (7.F.3)

For one young man, the information had been optional:

I got it in Year 7, but that wasn’t the school forced us to. They gave us an option to go to some night with our parents. And mum said, “Oh, yeah, I think that’s a good idea.” So we went and that was just pretty much when it started — I started changing, so at the start. (6.M.1)

For some of these young people, the information was not delivered until later: ‘Year 8’ (13.F.4).
I didn't get any sex ed thing until Year 8’ (6.M.2), ‘We had a little bit of it in science as well. We did. Was it just science? We did like the menstrual cycle and stuff like that just this year [Year 10] because I didn’t go to [this school’s] primary, I haven’t done any of the like sex ed stuff so it was kind of like just that science class. (7.F.2)

‘And then there was that video in Grade 8 that we watched. … It was just a video about like everything like that’ (7.F.1). This was an area where socioeconomic status appeared to make some difference as the two students in this group who had not received the information had attended state schools:

Facilitator:    Did you learn that stuff in primary school, too, or...?
7.F.2           No.
Facilitator:    Did you go to, like, a state school or...?
7.F.2           Yeah.

One young woman spoke to the confusion she experienced when this information was initially provided to her with the assumption that she would know what was being discussed:

16.F.4:        I found out in Grade 5. I thought they were talking about pyramids.
16.F.2:        And your pyramid comes out.
16.F.4:        And I was the only one in the class who didn’t know what a period was.
Facilitator:    So how did you find out?
16.F.4:        I was really confused. So they [the teacher] took me into another classroom and told me about it.

Many of these young people strongly advocated delivering this information earlier:

I think that they should do it more early in primary school because in primary school — like we did it in Grade 6, 5 and 6, but I think it’s
getting earlier now, they stopped doing it for Grades 5 and 6, for us it was like a trial thing, and now they’re doing it in Grade 7 and 8 kind of thing. (8.F.1)

As evidenced by the young woman who thought they were discussing ‘pyramids’, preventing embarrassment was one of the reasons named for teaching this topic earlier: ‘so it was good to have it at an early age because you don’t know that and it's embarrassing that you don’t’ (13.F.6), ‘by the time you get to Year 8, it's a bit...’ (13.F.4). They spoke to the fact that the information was redundant by the time they were taught about it in high school ‘cause some people get theirs really early, like...I know someone and she got hers in Grade 4’ (1.F.1), ‘by the time I got to Year 8, I basically knew all the things they were trying to tell us’ (13.F.2), ‘I knew all the things’ (13.F.4).

Aside from preventing embarrassment at lack of knowledge, the main reason many of these young women in particular advocated providing this knowledge earlier was to avoid the shock or horror that accompanied menstruating for the first time without knowing that it was impending: ‘when I had my first period I actually thought I was dying. I thought I had some major disease. I didn’t even know periods existed’ (9.F.3).

Like, when I first got my period I was like what the hell is going on? ... I had no idea. The first time I got it I thought I was like pooping my pants. I was like chucking out my underwear to make sure my mum wouldn’t see them. And the next, like I got them like a month later I’m like oh, oh right. And I had to work up the guts to tell my mum and it was like... (5.F.3)

I think they should do it earlier because isn’t it changing so people like go into puberty early, so it’s like you don’t want to be in Grade 4 and you don’t know what is coming out of your vagina, it’s like bleeding and you don’t know what it is. (8.F.1)

‘We didn't know anything about it before we got our periods. I heard about it once or twice.’ (9.F.1)
One group of young women discussed the gendered secrecy associated with the discussion of puberty, with young men and women separated and told only about the changes they themselves would experience. These young women felt that young men should be educated about the changes women and girls experience, and vice versa. This was due to the lack of understanding the young men apparently exhibited about menstruation and the jokes that arose from this lack of understanding:

7.F.2 Like sometimes the guys here, the ones that they’re like T.C., like Too Cool and stuff, they’re all like oh yeah you must have your period or something like every time someone gets mad.

7.F.3 Yeah, every time you make a comment they’re like “oh PMS-ing”, you’re like “shut up”.

7.F.1 And when that happens you just want to punch them in the face.

7.F.2 But I reckon they should educate the guys a bit more about what happens to girls and maybe girls what happens to guys, like just so that you don’t get jokes about that. Like about “oh you’ve got PMS or your period” or whatever, just stuff like that because it can get really annoying.

Facilitator: Do you not think that guys get told about it?

7.F.3 They know like the basics but I’ve had a few guy friends ask me like about like periods and stuff and it’s kind of like what do you want to know.

7.F.2 They don’t know, they just know that you get your period once a month.

7.F.3 And that’s all they know.

7.F.2 And you’re cranky. That’s pretty much it. That’s all they’ve got.
7.F.2 They split it up, was it Year 8, Year 9 they sort of did kind of like they split the girls and boys up in Year 9 and the boys did something together for two days and the girls were doing different stuff together. And I reckon that if they did something like that they should teach the girls about the boys and the boys about the girls just so that they know what’s going on.

For one young woman, the discomfort for men that arose from this lack of information around puberty or menstruation in women was evident later in life when talking about the lack of information about this topic in primary school: ‘no. I think we were meant to [learn about puberty in primary school] but we had a male teacher and he was pretty awkward around the subject so he just didn’t teach it’ (13.F.4).

**Schools and self-esteem**

According to the focus group participants, self-esteem and body image is an area that schools appear to devote some time covering within the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum. As discussed previously, there is competitiveness — particularly for young women — surrounding appearance, and so self-esteem and body image are often tied closely to bullying in schools. With the current concerns over bullying and cyber-bullying in particular (McQuade, Colt and Meyer 2009), the young people in these focus groups spoke about schools being one of the primary sources of information about this topic.

This was an area that appeared to be covered particularly in the first two years of high school according to many of the participants: ‘the course we did it was in Grade 8 in PE about self-esteem and body image’ (7.F.1), ‘Grade 8 PE is body image, there’s a bit of it’ (11.F.3), ‘and also that is in health studies, they do a lot of the self-esteem stuff’ (13.F.3), ‘in Grade 8 especially’ (13.F.6). An area within these lessons that schools are doing well according to some of the focus group participants is in teaching young people to be media literate in regards to image and self-esteem: ‘the
media image and how the media gives you this idea of a perfect body that very few people can actually achieve it but everyone tries anyway’ (7.F.1). One group of young men had spent some time at school looking at body image and the media within their class for an assignment, but they attributed the bulk of these messages around body image to young women:

18.M.4: About like sort of low self-esteem because of unreachable body images promoted in the media, you know, this can lead to things like if girls from a wealthier financial — or particularly girls, that’s the message that I always got from my research, that girls that come from a wealthier background that can afford nice clothes and things, might tend to bully girls that can’t afford nice clothes particularly in free dress schools like [name] State High across the road.

18.M.2: And also the girls are kind of unrealistic, kind of like they Photoshop people in the media, or if the girl is skinny or the guy has big muscles, so that’s not really real, even if you try to go to that standard it’s not — well, it’s very hard.

For some of these young people, the message provided in this class focused particularly on how to feel good about yourself: ‘our school in Grade 8 they gave you a whole booklet on friends and how to feel good about yourself. And it was the most important thing’ (15.F.1), ‘it said friends’ tips or something’ (15.F.2), ‘it was just this cute little — it was, “What makes you happy? What do you like doing on the holidays?” and stuff’ (15.F.3). For many of these young people, there were good messages within these classes: ‘we learnt about like anorexia and bulimia and peer pressure and stuff’ (7.F.1), ‘you know the main theme, you know, you are perfect the way you are is always true’ (7.F.2), ‘they just basically say that you, that you shouldn’t change, basically’ (2.F.4), ‘they sort of say what [name] says, like it’s important to accept yourself for who you are and not what other people want you to be’ (2.F.1).
The young people saw the messages delivered in these classes as well meaning, with an emphasis on external pressures such as bullying. This included talking about how you feel about yourself in relation to others:

Yeah that’s right except yeah I guess they really will cover about how you should feel in response to how other people say like feel and talk about you and so really it is all about, it’s less about your self image and how you feel about yourself but responding well to how people react to you and the things they say to you kind of thing. (11.F.4)

However, there was a feeling that this was not covered enough: ‘I reckon they could probably cover it more, like I feel like I understand but you know...’ (11.F.2)

They only talk about — like we talk about bullying and stuff, but they talk about what to do if you’re being bullied, like go and tell somebody, and then they’ll talk about, this is bullying, like they’ll define it and make sure nobody is doing it. (8.F.1)

This group felt that they were provided with very little information about how to deal with the consequences of this bullying:

But they won’t really talk about what to do if you’re feeling bad because you’re being bullied, or because somebody said something. So it’s like we don’t really talk about what to do if you’re feeling upset about something.’ (8.F.1)

In these cases, the school encourages the students to visit the counsellor: ‘like there’s the counsellor and stuff’ (8.F.1), but for these young people, that is not always the best option if they’d prefer to not have their parents brought in and escalate the situation:

But you can’t really talk to the counsellor because if something’s happening they have to tell people...You don’t really want to — because you trust them like, like they can’t tell everyone, but if something bad is happening to you then they have to tell people, you don’t always want that to happen. (8.F.1)
‘And then they tell your parents, like there’s a leak, like I don’t want them finding out, they’re like the last person I’d want to know.’ (8.F.3)

For many of the young women in these focus groups, the messages delivered in these classes — such as ‘No bullying. Feel good about yourself. Be happy with your personality and your life’ (13.F.4) and ‘don’t care what other people think about you, just be yourself’ — were ‘kind of bad. They’re not really very personalised’ (16.F.4), or felt like empty messages because:

> Even if you tried to be happy with yourself, deep down there’s something in you going, “you’re not worth it,” or whatever. It depends how confident you are in yourself. (13.F.6)

They felt that ‘it’s really clichéd most of it’ (13.F.6) and found the messages to be unrealistic because ‘I think that everyone cares what other people think about them’ (13.F.4), ‘deep down they do. They try to think that they don’t but deep down everyone does’ (13.F.6).

Young men in the focus groups took a slightly different message away from these lessons. While for young women the message was often about self-esteem in relation to appearance and feeling good about themselves, for young men, the message often equated to being themselves. These ranged from general messages received in conjunction from ‘probably school…a lot in school…and parents a bit, yeah’ (6.M.2) such as:

> Well, I think it’s good to have self-esteem because then you feel confident and you probably do more stuff, you get involved more. You feel better about yourself and you might do better if you didn’t have as a high self-esteem. (6.M.1)

> Yeah, confident. Yeah, pretty much what you’re saying. It’s just good to have the confidence. When you feel good about yourself it doesn’t really matter what anyone else thinks. You trust yourself that you can do it and it doesn’t matter what anyone else — you
might stuff it up or whatever but it doesn’t matter because you think that — you still feel good about yourself. (6.M.2)

to more direct messages: ‘don’t give in to peer pressure’ (4.M.2), ‘you are who you are’ (4.M.3), ‘individuality and stuff like that’ (4.M.2), ‘I guess school tries to tell you the sort of stereotypical message, you know, don’t listen to what other people say, be yourself. That sort of thing’ (18.M.4). For some of these young men, the messages were often seen as ‘boring. Very, very boring’ (4.M.2), ‘same, it’s pretty boring’ (4.M.1). And like the young women, the young men perceived the messages to be well meaning, but ultimately ineffectual:

Ah, I don’t think it’s boring. I think the lessons they try to teach us are true. I think ... just the way they’re teaching us is ineffective. But, um, yeah peer pressure is definitely a thing that can lead you away from your true self and your true beliefs and values. (4.M.5)

‘Because generally you will give in to peer pressure’ (4.M.2), ‘everyone tells you to be yourself, but everyone knows that really, with so many influences from friends, media, family, you, you know, you can’t just be yourself’ (18.M.4).

**Schools rarely or never communicate about relationships**

It emerged from these focus groups that information about dating and navigating romantic relationships was an area that was rarely or never covered within the school curriculum. In many of the focus groups, school was never mentioned as a source of information in this area, and when directly asked, the majority of young people said that they received no information from school (5.F.3; 7.F.1; 7.F.2; 7.F.3; 9.F.1; 9.F.2; 9.F.3; 9.F.4; 9.F.5; 11.F.1; 11.F.2; 11.F.3; 11.F.4; 12.F.1; 13.F.2; 13.F.3; 13.F.4; 13.F.6; 14.F.1; 14.F.2; 14.F.3; 15.F.1; 15.F.2; 15.F.3; 15.F.4; 15.F.6; 16.F.1; 16.F.2; 16.F.3; 16.F.4; 18.M.1; 18.M.2; 18.M.3; 18.M.4; 18.M.5; 19.M.3; 20.F.4).

A large number of young people spoke of school focusing on their bodies and their physical health with no concessions made to their mental well-being in the context of a relationship:
9.F.5: No, they don't talk about relationships, just sex and genitals and health.

9.F.3: Yeah, they just talk about what parts of the genitals, which isn't really sex. And about sex, like, safe sex. And then they'll talk about — yeah; they don't actually talk about relationships.

9.F.2: It's, like, here's the relationship and here's the sex and that's all they talk about.

One group of young women referred to this information as ‘logistics’ (15.F.5) because ‘they just — I guess they talk to you about safe sex but they don’t always do that. But they wouldn’t talk to you about relationships; they’d talk to you about making sure that you don’t get pregnant’ (15.F.6). The feeling from many of these young people was that their schools actively discouraged them from having relationships: ‘they encourage you to avoid having a boyfriend anytime’ (9.F.3). This was seen by one young woman as a tactic to keep their focus on school work: ‘and I don’t think they’d want us to get too involved in relationships because of like school work and everything and I don’t think they like promoting it’ (14.F.3).

For many young people, schools’ and teachers’ active discouragement of relationships extended to policing physical contact between each other. This regulation of contact was given a number of names in different schools: ‘there’s like a one-metre rule’ (7.F.1), which was accompanied in this case by a maxim that ‘touching makes babies’ (7.F.3); although, enforcement of this rule was dependent on the individual teacher: ‘there are some teachers who will jokingly say stuff and then there are some teachers who are like “no. Do not stand within a metre of each other; I mean it or I’ll get a ruler out or something”’ (7.F.2). Another school used a different name: ‘I mean there’s things like at school we have the daylight rule’ (18.M.4), which meant that ‘you have to maintain some distance of daylight between two people’ (18.M.4). While often these rules were unwritten, this daylight rule was: ‘it’s written in the school rules’ (18.M.1); although, one of these young
men noted that the rule was clearly intended to police romantic relationships instead of just preventing students from touching each other: ‘I mean I’m allowed to do that [get close] to [same-sex friend] without getting a detention. I mean it’s a bit of a weird rule’ (18.M.4). This also speaks to the assumption of heterosexuality and inherent heteronormativity that occurs within schools.

Bullying was mentioned a number of times as one of the only aspects of managing relationships that was addressed in school: ‘they more talk about sex and cyber bullying’ (16.F.2), but this was more in relation to friendship relationships than romantic relationships: ‘not like sexual relationships, more like friends’ (14.F.3), ‘yeah, bullying’ (14.F.1). Some of the young people mentioned a small amount of teaching time spent on relationships: ‘no, you sort of get told a little bit about relationships but it's only one or two lessons and not much at all really’ (6.M.2).

Often, the focus was on all relationships and these lessons were few:

When we had like ethics in Grade 8 and we have that book about relationships... It was like activities, like sometimes it would ask what you’d do in a situation I think. I can’t really remember. It was like two years ago. (12.F.4)

Occasionally, teachers would make offhand or joking comments about their students being in relationships: ‘I don’t know, but you know how they sometimes drop hints, like “going down to the city on Friday to meet your boyfriend?” ... It’s like, no, actually’ (8.F.1), but this could be accompanied by a warning: ‘they’re open though, they’re all like “and if I see you snogging your boyfriend around some tree...”’ (8.F.4).

One group spoke about learning about relationships within the HPE curriculum, but this was accompanied by rhetoric about love and emotion being required:

4.M.3 We had like a PSD unit like about
4.M.2 I think it was like [teacher] saying ...
4.M.3 Gotta be in love.
4.M.2 Yeah, you gotta be in love if you want to be in a relationship.

4.M.3 And deep and meaningful.

4.M.2 Yeah, deep and meaningful...and, ah, emotions and happiness.

4.M.3 Oh my God.

4.M.2 Yeah.

These young men recognised that this rhetoric was not always applicable:

Because, like, it’d vary from person to person. Like they can teach about the whole like loving relationship...“oh make sure that you’re with a partner that loves you and you love them” and stuff like that. But, like...if it’s not like the whole love, let’s get married relationship and you can’t really teach that (4.M.2).

*Information from schools about consent is limited or conflated with other issues*

Schools gave messages about consent that were almost identical to those given by parents. For a lot of young people, consent was something that had been discussed at school at some point, but, as with parental messages, the predominant message was to ‘say no’ (3.M.1; 3.M.2; 4.M.1; 4.M.2; 4.M.3; 4.M.4; 6.M.2; 8.F.5; 10.F.2; 14.F.1; 14.F.3; 16.F.3; 16.F.5; 20.F.4). As for parental communication, these ‘just say no’ discussions could be problematic because they often positioned the young woman as gatekeeper: ‘because they’re [girls are] the ones that have the say’ (19.M.4) because ‘they’ve got all the worries like pregnancy’ (19.M.2). However, in co-educational schools, there was sometimes less of a gendered message as this information was often delivered in HPE to mixed classes:

In PE we've been told, “make sure you say no if you don't want to do it.” It's in the Year 10 course that you're [6.M.1] doing currently.
And, yeah, they say — they repeat that a lot, “if you don't want it just say no. Just tell them to stop,” and stuff like that.’ (6.M.2)

One group of young men spoke about one teacher who made sure to communicate to them that they could say no: ‘he said you have the right to say no’ (4.M.1), ‘yeah. He [the teacher] even like made sure that all the guys knew that you could’ (4.M.2). However, most young men felt that this message was aimed predominantly at young women: ‘the schools kind of promote, you know, say no if you don’t want to do it. Except they don’t really promote it for guys, they more promote it for girls’ (3.M.1). They felt it was aimed at young women because ‘well, I’ve seen a poster up on the wall which is like a picture of a girl in like all different situations and you know it’s like “would you say no?” at the very bottom’ (3.M.1). Some young men felt that schools do not target this message at them because ‘I guess they don’t expect that’ (18.M.4), ‘that we would be in a situation where we would be faced with this’ (18.M.1).

The young people tended to speak about consent only within a context of rape or sexual assault that is perpetrated by a stranger: ‘it's more like personal safety as in if a strange man comes, kick him off’ (13.F.2). One teacher had apparently used a personal experience to warn about this, which had been discussed among the students:

It went around the school that, well actually it [rape] actually happened. But, she was out partying; she chose to share this with her class because she was leading like a health, Sex Ed class and it was about it. And, um, I remember her saying that she was out one night and, um, someone drugged her and followed her back to her apartment and raped her and then left. (1.F.5)

Many of the young women spoke about receiving information about how to say no — but only in the context of being at parties where alcohol is involved, and, again, when the person is a stranger:
They talk about like say at parties and boys I don’t know force themselves onto you or something like they would come and teach you how to say no and like how to take the situation. (14.F.3)

They do [talk about sexual assault] but it’s usually just when drunk or over-intoxicaced. And then you back off calmly and that’s about all, but not when they’re okay and you know them and stuff. (15.F.1)

Speaking only about strangers or intoxicated young men presented as highly problematic for a number of young women: ‘they don’t really tell you about us saying no to like a boyfriend or something but it’s more like they teach us a lot of stuff about like drinking and parties and stuff and like don’t let go’ (14.F.2). This was a problem because:

I think there’s like a big difference though to saying no to like your boyfriend who you really like and like you disappointing him or whatever and like saying no to like some like seedy guy at a party. (14.F.2)

Many young people felt that schools tended to conflate drug and alcohol use, bullying, and consent into one issue with more of a focus on bullying or alcohol: ‘I think the main thing is actual — the main thing they teach us is cyber bullying and alcohol really though. They don’t focus on sex’ (17.F.1) with the ‘just say no’ message being a catchall for all of these issues. ‘They had like say no, but it wasn’t to like sexual advances it was to like smoking and stuff’ (2.F.5), ‘like every time there’s a bullying seminar they always fit in that you need to be able to say no, it’s just every — all the time’ (10.F.2). And these messages can be presented as black and white: ‘in PE there’s scenarios and they’re, like, “If your friend is drunk and she goes into a room with a boy what should you do?”…they do stuff like that to you. And they’re, like, “what's the right choice and the wrong choice?”’ (16.F.3) when often for these young people, these situations are far more complicated and can be dependant on a number of factors:
Also it depends if the girl likes the guy or not. It depends on what she's willing to do with him when she wasn't drunk.

I think it's also — it depends on the guy as well. If he's a creep then...

Yeah.

It depends on the girl as well.

But if it's a really nice guy or they're not going hurt anyone.

Do anything.

Yeah.

Or if they both like each other.

Yeah, and if she's just a tiny bit tipsy it's not that bad.

And also it depends on the girl.

Often this information is delivered in the later years of high school, which was also seen as problematic for some young women because 'they leave it until like Grade 11 I think, like they leave it way too late, like girls are starting to do stuff that they regret in like Grade 9 or even 8' (11.F.3).

Safe sex is taught in schools with a focus on risk, science, and danger, and is often delivered too late

In line with what we already know about sexuality education in schools (Carmody 2009), these focus groups highlighted that sex and safe sex were often not discussed at length, and when safe sex was discussed in schools, the information was delivered with an emphasis on the scientific, often accompanied by a directive to use contraception or abstain. This was consistent with research findings from a number
of studies and researchers (Sorenson and Brown 2007; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Halstead and Reiss 2003a).

The scientific approach to teaching sex and sexuality for many of these young people had constituted learning about the different sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or STIs. Every focus group was aware of this information, and was able to recount at least one STI: ‘in health last year they taught us about all of them [STIs] and what they do and stuff’ (1.F.5). However, while these young people had ostensibly learned about all of these infections and diseases, as noted by Allen (2005a, 61) young people’s knowledge was clearly disconnected from engagement with the information in this area: ‘they never really go in details. I guess the only one they go in details with is herpes’ (1.F.5). This ability to recount STIs was common across all groups as was the lack of engagement: ‘it’s like you know the names but you don’t know the details’ (5.F.4). For many of these young people, the focus on diseases and infections was seen as ‘scientific’ (11.F.4; 13.F.4; 13.F.6), which in this case amounted to something that was not related or relatable to them:

13.F.6: It's not — it's all scientific though ...
13.F.2: It's not in relation to your life ...
13.F.6: Education about the disease.
Facilitator: Okay.
13.F.6: Yeah, and how it works. And how it works in your body. And I’m, like, “Yeah, stuff that.” You wouldn't really talk about in everyday life.
13.F.2: Yeah.
13.F.6: But, “this works like this because of the two x-proteins” and all that stuff like that.
13.F.6: You wouldn’t say that in an everyday conversation.

13.F.4: No.

13.F.2: Did you know that the protein coating of AIDS changes — that’s why they can’t cure it?

What these, and a number of other young people in the focus groups were speaking to was a lack of acknowledging sex as anything other than a scientific occurrence — with no mention of the pleasurable or emotional aspects that they knew to be present. Young people used ‘scientific’ interchangeably with a number of terms and words that spoke to being disengaged from this information. ‘Mechanical’ was also used in this way:

15.F.3: In 8 and 9 they mostly sort of tell us about it. They're sort of...

15.F.2: The mechanical things.

15.F.3: Yeah, they kind of like how it is but not — how the baby's made but not really about sex as such. Do you know what I mean?

A number of young people attribute this use of scientific information as a way to scare them into abstinence:

I noticed that schools don't teach us kind of — [they] discourage it [having sex] by emphasising on it by scaring us about what would happen. Like, you can get AIDS from it and die and things. And you have one in a million chance where that happens. In Australia it's not widespread. And not that it isn't but... (15.F.1)

‘They tell us like the bad things that could happen’ (10.F.4). This was particularly evident when graphic images of STIs were used: ‘they showed us pictures ... [they] showed a penis, and it was blue’ (1.F.6), ‘just like lots of gross pictures’ (1.F.1). A video of a woman giving birth was used in this same way: ‘it’s like a science one of what the body does’ (8.F.5).
8.F.2: The Miracle of Love.

8.F.1: To watch babies being born, which is not something...

8.F.3: That’s no miracle.

8.F.4: It’s like actually coming out.

8.F.1: A baby’s head coming out of a vagina.

For some young people, there was no allusion to abstinence being a better choice — it was delivered as the only choice: ‘Sex Ed class here, yeah it was just like you can’t have sex and that’s it. Nothing else’ (19.M.4).

Another predominant message that schools delivered was to do with ‘all the different types of contraception’ (2.F.2). ‘We learnt all about this at school actually, all the different types of barriers or whatever they’re called’ (6.M.2). ‘Contraception’ (6.M.1). But this was still often offered as ‘scientific’ information: ‘we went through methods of — in science we went through methods of contraception and all that stuff. And then they had a percentage of reliability’ (9.F.1). This information was seen to be sending a direct message to a number of these young people — just don’t get pregnant: ‘the school just kind of suggests different ways of avoiding pregnancy’ (9.F.3), ‘like biology, this term was just full on about how to not get pregnant’ (10.F.2) because pregnancy was shown as a life-ruining occurrence:

10.F.2: Because well you hear about more scary stories about teen pregnancies than about STDs.

10.F.3: Yeah because we all want to go to uni, and if you have babies it’ll be really hard.

10.F.2: And so the idea that right now if you got pregnant your life would be ruined, that’s really scary for all of us, and so you just don’t want to take that chance.

10.F.2: The school would just expel you, you’d be forced to go to somewhere like...
Young people often receive information about sex and sexuality after they have commenced sexual activity or have figured out the information that they need on their own: ‘some people they’ve already had intercourse. A lot of people have already had their own experiences and it's kind of too late to do anything about it’ (13.F.6). For many of these young people, their school does not deliver the bulk of their sexuality education until their senior years: ‘Sex Ed mainly starts in Grade 11… so, next year our whole health studies course is about sexual education’ (9.F.4). Prior to that, ‘we get one lecture and that's it. We don't get any in class’ (9.F.4). Learning about sex and sexuality intermittently in this way caused problems: ‘that’s the thing, they tell you about all these things but you forget them anyway’ (20.F.3) because ‘they aren’t taught here at this school — here and the other school was like a year and a half ago so I’ve forgotten’ (20.F.3). Young people felt that the delay in teaching sexuality education was due to the fact that they were not legally supposed to have sex until the age of sixteen: ‘in Grade 11, we get it because we’re like 16’ (10.F.1).

We haven't really talked about the topic yet because they don't think that we're ready to be dealing with that stuff yet. They're probably going to do it next year when everyone's turning 16, which is the legal age. (17.F.1)

This sent a clear message to some young people: ‘I think by teaching it in Year 11 is definitely sending a message saying that that shouldn't be...happening until Year 11’ (15.F.5). This delay was extremely problematic for a number of young people: ‘I think it would be good if they taught us about that a little earlier because Term 3 of Year 11 is kind of late for a lot of people’ (13.F.4). Anecdotally, some young women knew this to be the case: ‘I've heard stories about Grade 8ers...and Grade 9ers having sex. You just hear them all the time...I know they're true’ (15.F.4).

Young women at a co-educational school spoke about the difficulties associated with learning in this area with some young men being immature about anything to do with sex:
It’s kind of hard ‘cause in the class we’re in, there was guys as well so they were like mucking about and laughing and everything so...

Yeah

All the guys are pretty immature about it and...

Yeah they like laugh about it and they were...

Do you think the girls are more mature about it?

Yeah

Like if someone mentions the word sex all the guys will think it’s really funny. It’s not really that funny.

A number of young people were aware that developmental levels varied among their peers:

I think the school does leave it a bit late to get into it [sexuality education] because it’s a touchy thing — because some girls are like too young to know about it but then other girls ... like it’s the right time for some girls but other times it’s way too late. Like that’s the problem with a lot of girls, like they don’t know the risks before they do it. (11.F.3)

However, they also knew that a delay in providing this information would not stop young people from having sex:

They [school] put it off so long ... but it’s like no if you put it off people just aren’t going to be aware of how to do things properly and make good decisions ...’ (11.F.4)

They also knew that providing the information would not make young people go out and have sex, but instead provide them with the knowledge they need:

Knowing it earlier isn’t going to encourage you to have sex, it’s just going to help you.
11.F.3: Be safe.

11.F.1: Exactly, like we learn about drinking but it doesn’t influence really people’s drinking decisions, it just makes them aware of like how to handle situations.

The possibility that sex can be good is not discussed within the school curriculum

As can be seen from the previous section, sex is often discussed in school in a negative light with a focus on science or safety. So, when asked if good sex was ever discussed at school, the answer from all participants was overwhelmingly no: ‘well, no, they don’t really teach us that at school’ (3.M.2), ‘no. No one really talks about how to have good sex’ (6.M.1). For some young people, the confusion over what constituted good sex was clearly influenced by school and parents:

Facilitator: Okay. Having good sex, what do you know?

6.M.2: It’s safer when you wear a condom.

Facilitator: That’s not what I’m asking about. Having good sex.

Again, sex was only described in a mechanical or scientific way — ‘just technicalities’ (9.F.5), ‘like, I know how it works. I’ve drawn the diagrams... (laughing). I’ve labelled the diagrams; I know what goes where’ (5.F.3) — with an emphasis on risk management: ‘I think school would more talk about the risks rather than the actual process as well’ (18.M.4).

5.F.4 But, you know, they don’t really talk about it in health and things like that. They don’t talk about having good sex or how to make it good or how it feels...

5.F.5 It’s just this goes in here...

5.F.4 Yeah, and then it’s like...

5.F.3 Don’t forget to use protection...
And, again, young people had the feeling that teachers thought talking about sex — particularly about it being good — would encourage them to go out and do it: ‘they’d rather prevent us from doing it than like encouraging us, so they wouldn’t talk about like having good sex or anything’ (12.F.5), ‘they never talk about having good sex because they don’t want us to have sex’ (16.F.2). A teacher at one school was the exception to the rule with a joking comment about her own sex life that was recounted in more than one focus group:

Well, our...teacher, she's a biology teacher and she tells each of her classes in their biology unit, it's not related to what we're studying, and she tells everyone that she prefers the man on top.’ (17.F.3)

’It’s kind of like to remember how to do a punnet square, put the man on top, “I remember that because I love the man on top”, and then no one laughed and she’s like “oh it just went over your heads”. (10.F.1)

This chapter has shown that while formal schooling is providing some key information to young people that they receive very little of elsewhere, such as information about puberty, young people are overwhelmingly not being supported in schools in their sexual development. This is despite young people viewing schools as an important source of information. As will be seen in the following chapter, this is a problem also associated with parents and their delivery of sex and sexuality information.
Chapter 5. Data Analysis — Sexuality Information — Parents

This chapter will look at the information that young people receive from one of their two most official sources: parents. Similar to the levels and types of information received from schools as discussed in the previous chapter, the predominant message that young people are getting from parents is that sex and sexuality should not be discussed.

Parental information about puberty is inconsistent

When speaking to young people, it emerged that many parents were apparently reluctant to discuss puberty and preferred to rely on school or their child’s peers to deliver the needed information. For parents who did address this topic with their child, they often relied upon media — books were named in particular as a source of this information. For many young people, the information from parents was often provided too late due to this aspect of development being taught at school, or often parents were waiting for the child to approach them when puberty commenced instead of speaking about it proactively.

In a number of both male and female focus groups, young people mentioned books as a common tool that parents used to inform their children about puberty. Some of the young men recounted the developmental books they had received from parents:

‘my parents bought me a book called *Puberty Boy*’ (4.M.5) that contained ‘like how testosterone, more testosterone comes and your balls get bigger (*laughing*), and stuff like that’ (4.M.5), ‘my parents got me a book of the human body, shows how all the, ah, sex organs work. That’s about it’ (4.M.4). For roughly half of this focus group, parents didn’t provide a book or information: ‘I never got a book. I feel left out’ (4.M.3), ‘I never got any book or the talk’ (4.M.2). This was also seen in other focus groups: ‘[my] parents never spoke to me about anything’ (3.M.2), and one young man had to rely on ‘just seeing what happened to my [older] brothers’ (18.M.4) as his parents never raised the topic with him.
Two young men in another group spoke about receiving books about puberty from their parents: ‘my parents gave me a book probably in Year 7’ (6.M.2), ‘I had a book in Grade 4 and that was way before it happened’ (6.M.1), ‘they hadn't specifically bought it for me though, but they just had it because it was a bit old. But I read it and at that time it was a bit of a giggle’ (6.M.1). Finding these books amusing was common for both of these young men: ‘the first time I read them I was just giggling all the time’ (6.M.2), ‘just laughed’ (6.M.1), ‘laughing at the pictures and stuff. I couldn't take it seriously at all’ (6.M.2), but it emerged that they retained that information when puberty did arrive: ‘then it started happening and you're, “Oh”’ (6.M.1), ‘then you sort of realise’ (6.M.2).

For some of these young men, the books were given without any accompanying explanation from their parents:

That was parents. But they just sort of gave me the book. They didn't really explain it. They just sort of gave me the book and said: “read this at some time.” They weren't watching over me but they just said read it. So I just — I think it was later that night I sort of had a look and just laughed at all the pictures and stuff. (6.M.2)

This lack of discussion of pubertal information was often attributed to perceived awkwardness and embarrassment around the topic matter: ‘I think my dad did sit me down once and talked to me about it for a little bit, but he sort of found it a bit awkward and I did’ (6.M.1), ‘I'm guessing that's why mum and dad didn't sit me down because it would have been too awkward. They just gave me the books ...’ (6.M.2). Alternatively, the books were accompanied by an option to discuss anything that wasn’t understood: ‘if I didn’t know something I’d just ask them’ (4.M.5), and again, this lack of discussion was attributed to perceived embarrassment: ‘they didn’t really tell me much. I, yeah, I might have asked them a couple of questions. Yeah, they feel a bit awkward talking about it with me I think’ (4.M.4). For some young men, this awkwardness on the part of their parents came across as making
off-the-cuff remarks or joking about the changes that were happening to them instead of talking about it:

Facilitator: Have your parents spoken to you about this at all?

18.M.5: No.
18.M.4: Not really.
18.M.3: Maybe like a mention on breaking voice or something.
18.M.4: Yeah, like “Oh, your voice is breaking” or something.
18.M.3: Yeah, or jokes about it.

But this embarrassment was sometimes on the side of the young person as when this young man’s parents attempted to discuss puberty with him: ‘they did for my brother and sister, but me I just, whenever they’d try I just walk away’ (4.M.2), and this was reflected for some of the young women also: ‘my parents tried to but I was always really squeamish about the idea, like I was like I don’t want to know about what’s going to happen, I don’t want to just know sort of thing’ (7.F.2).

For young women, as will be seen in the following chapter, parents often provided them with the book, Girl Stuff, which contains a chapter on puberty: ‘on my 12th birthday, I got Girl Stuff’ (5.F.4). A number of other books were mentioned by young women; for some of these participants, the books were embarrassing and unwelcome or too many in number:

Oh (laughing) my mum has given me about nine books to do with like puberty and like periods and all that, and they’re all like at the very back of my cupboard, never touching them. (5.F.5)

Like I got one like every year for a few years about the changes in your body (laughing), the Christmas one...’ (5.F.2). But for another group, these books were welcome and enjoyed:

15.F.4: Then they [parents] get the books.
15.F.3: Yeah, lots of books.

15.F.6: The books are great.

15.F.2: I loved, What’s Happening to Me? and Where Do I Come From?

15.F.4: Yeah.


Facilitator: It’s called The Puberty Book?

15.F.6: It’s called The Puberty Book. That’s what it’s called.

For some of the young women in particular, their parents never provided information about puberty. When asked if their parents had told them what to expect: ‘no’ (16.F.4; 16.F.2), ‘they didn’t tell me what was coming’ (16.F.2), ‘I guess you get some from your parents. I’ve never got told by my parents...’ (1.F.5), ‘I’ve never gotten told by my parents...’ (1.F.6). This was an issue for a number of young women who were unaware about menstruation in particular, and were terrified or very surprised when menses commenced:

I’d never — I didn’t even know what a period was. I thought I was dying. I was, “Mum. I’m bleeding.” She’s, like, “Where are you bleeding?” I was, like, “Oh, my God. Don’t want to talk about it, mum.” She’s just said, “Oh, did you get your period?” I’m like, “What is that? What is that?” (9.F.3)

When things start happening to you, this is what happened with me, when these changes starting occurring like I would like freak out and then I would tell my mum about them and she’s just like “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you”, I was like “Well why didn’t you warn me about this earlier?” she’s just like “I wanted you to find out”, I was like “It’s a bit too late now like now you can’t rescue me” but yeah I’d like to tell my sister, my younger sister about it so that I give her prior notice so she doesn’t freak out like I did. (12.F.6)
Some of the young women thought that their parents expected they would learn about this from school or friends, and therefore didn’t need to discuss it with their child:

Yeah but for me, this is going to sound like my parents are like the worst parents in the world but they never taught me about that stuff, like I got it mostly from my friends and from school, like my mum would help me when I got my first period but like they never like told me in advance kind of thing. I think they just expected school and friends to have an influence and to kind of yeah. (14.F.3)

‘My parents are way too laid back for that. They wouldn’t tell me anything until it happened or if I asked.’ (16.F.4)

Some young women spoke about their parents attempting to give them this information: ‘my mum spoke to me about like “you’re in high school now; things are going to change and things are going to happen” and you know things like that’ (7.F.1) but arriving at the party a little late, as school and personal experience had already provided the knowledge: ‘I kind of already kind of understood it so I was like yeah, mum, whatever, okay, been there, done that, can I say that, yeah.’ (7.F.1) However, some young women felt able to talk to their parents about this:

I ask my parents stuff and they like give me big talks and stuff if like I want to talk to them about something I’ll just ask them, they just talk to me. (1.F.3)

However, ‘I only do it in from of my mum, I can’t do it while my dad’s there’ (1.F.3). And for one young woman, who had received the information in school, there was a feeling that she could approach her mother or older sister if needed: ‘but I think you can go talk to your mum about it; otherwise, my older sister...’ although she had not talked to her sister, and would be more likely to speak to her mother ‘because she’d probably be like how do you not know this and I’d be like well...’ (8.F.1).
When speaking about the information they had received about the expected changes to their bodies, some of the young people alluded to their parents speaking about their bodies as weird or dangerous. Two young women spoke about the timing of menstruation and puberty and how they felt that their parents acted as though there was something wrong with them because they either started menstruating later or earlier than expected:

16.F.5: It shocked my parents that I was — I was young.
16.F.2: It shocked my parents that I hadn't — they thought it would happen earlier on than it did.
16.F.3: Yeah.
16.F.2: Like, what's wrong with you?
16.F.3: Yeah, same.

And some of the young male participants spoke in terms of their bodies as sites of risk or danger, in that puberty would make them dangerous or aggressive:

6.M.2: You grow hair. Voice changes. You get more sexual urges to, you know...
6.M.1: Yeah, your personality can change because of the hormones and stuff, you can be more aggressive.
6.M.2: Yeah. You want to be more on a — not your body. I was going to say you want to be more risk taking, but that's...

**Parents and self-esteem**

For most young people, the majority of the time in their formative years is spent with their parents, and much of what they know about themselves and their sense of self or self-esteem comes from this source (Polce-Lynch et al. 2001). In the focus group discussions, it became clear that for most of these young people, self-esteem equated to two different aspects of the self — appearance or body image, and
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confidence or inner strength. Of interest in these discussions were the distinct gender differences around these two aspects of self — for the young women, appearance and looks were at the forefront of any discussion about self-esteem, and for young men confidence was at the forefront. A question that arises here is, are young women still being taught that their looks and appearance matter above all else, while young men are taught that being self-confident is of higher importance for them?

From our focus groups, it appeared that young men rarely have discussions with their parents about these issues, with only one group speaking about receiving this information from their parents. For these young men, self-esteem was either an extension of having confidence or the two were interconnected:

Well, I think it's good to have self-esteem because then you feel confident and you probably do more stuff, you get involved more. You feel better about yourself and you might do better if you didn't have as a high self-esteem. (6.M.1)

Yeah, confident. Yeah, pretty much what you're saying. It's just good to have the confidence. When you feel good about yourself it doesn't really matter what anyone else thinks. You trust yourself that you can do it and it doesn't matter what anyone else — you might stuff it up or whatever but it doesn't matter because you think that — you still feel good about yourself. (6.M.2)

When asked where they had received this information, school was named as the primary source (as seen in the previous chapter), and then parents came in as a secondary source: ‘and parents a bit, yeah’ (6.M.2), ‘my parents told me to be confident and then you actually put it into practice at school because that’s where you interact probably most’ (6.M.1). For both of these young men, school was the playing field where they performed confidence, while home was the place to practice:
Yeah, you can't sort of do it at home because you know everyone. You've got to be with — to feel good about yourself — to try and feel good about yourself at home you sort of you know the people anyway. (6.M.2)

When it came to parents: ‘you've known them since you were born’ (6.M.1), ‘it's not really out of your comfort zone or whatever’ (6.M.2).

As discussed in the following chapter, young women felt that the media played a large part in setting up expectations of the perfect look, or an ideal of beauty that many of them felt unable to live up to. Upon discussion in the focus groups, it emerged that, for many young women, parents often contributed to these feelings or expectations in a negative way. One young woman spoke about the importance of messages received from parents and other family members and the impact this can have:

If your parents are very proud of who they are then you’re not going to be as self conscious, like if they’re not like “oh look how much weight I’ve put on this week” or something like that or your sister is like “oh I look so ugly” or something then you’re not going to think if they’re always talking about how good they look or something then you’re going to kind of start picking that up whereas if they’re always like “oh I look so horrible today” then you’re going to start thinking well maybe I do too because like they’re my parents so I must look like them a bit. (14.F.4)

For the majority of young women in the focus groups, appearance, and particularly body weight, were things that they constantly worried about, and the messages they received from parents ‘can be positive but they can be negative’ (7.F.3). The three members of this focus group had all experienced negative comments from their parents about their weight or appearance:

I do a lot of dancing and I just had like photos like last weekend and there are some costumes that are really tight and like my mum will just make a comment oh maybe you should be doing a few more sits up or work on those tummy muscles. (7.F.1)
It’s coming into summer now and so we’re all out like swimming because we have a pool or I’ll wear a tight shirt for exercising or something yeah and mum will say pretty much the same thing as that and I’ll be like oh... (7.F.2)

When asked if their parents said anything to them about being fat: ‘yes’ (7.F.3) but, ‘I don’t think it’s meant with the intention to like offend you and put you down. It’s just a voiced observation’ (7.F.1), ‘they don’t say you’re fat just like that; they’re not like oh you’re fat’ (7.F.2); instead, it was ‘the comments that they make kind of insinuate it and like I guess because we’re already thinking about it from school and everything’ (7.F.3).

Parents telling their daughters that they are fat, or pointing out imperfections was a common theme throughout these focus groups. These ‘voiced observation[s]’ (7.F.1) were often framed as a joke — particularly from their fathers — which could be taken seriously by these young women. One young woman’s father would often jokingly comment on her weight: “hey fatty, what’s up, go play basketball.” He’s like “you’re growing horizontally, I want you to grow vertically” (8.F.5). When asked how this made her feel:

Well, I can — like deep down I know that — because if he says that I just laugh at him, that’s like our family system, we deeply know he’s joking but sometimes he’s just like “go swim” because sometimes he comes home and he sees me eating cheesecake or something; he’s like “really, [name], really, can you just do some sport?” (8.F.5)

This joking criticism from parents was echoed by another member of this focus group: ‘like, I was sitting there getting ready and mum was just like “you know, you could probably be a face model”, and I was just like, “thanks mum”’ (8.F.4). When asked by the facilitator what she thought that meant:

I don’t know, but it was mean, like they joke about it but they don’t — they obviously don’t think we take it seriously. My dad — God I hate when he does this, he’ll sit there at the dinner table, and then he’s just like “what’s that, a little spot, a little spot right there”, and
you’re just like no you don’t say that. He points out your flaws, I loathe it.’ (8.F.4)

Criticism regarding weight from mothers to their daughters was often framed less as a joke, and more as a health concern. A common discussion thread here was a maternal observation of eating habits, which was a level of parental control that could be quite hurtful to these young women:

It does get frustrating when like your mum says, oh, I don’t know, like “oh really, eating a lot today” or something like, I don’t know, like “do you want to start going back to the gym” or something like that; like it does like put yourself down because it’s your mother speaking but she knows best: mummy knows best. (14.F.3)

When asked by the facilitator if she took offence to this:

I do, yeah. I remember one time my mum told me I was, well hinted to me that I was gaining more weight and I was pissed off, like, you know kind of expected for your mum to be like “oh, yeah, you’re so beautiful”, but yeah it’s a bit of a slap in the face because she’s so like truthful. (14.F.3)

For one of these young women, the messages were mixed, which left her not knowing what to do:

But with my mum, ... say at dinner time ... she’s like “stop eating; you’re really fat” but if I don’t eat then she’s like “eat more; you’re getting too thin” and it’s like... (12.F.5)

One young woman had recently had an overseas trip for school, which meant a period of not having her eating observed by her mother:

I went overseas in the middle of the year and it was like a month of just like eating whenever I wanted, like getting fat, like not even caring. But ... I get back and Mum’s like “you need to lose weight” because she’s all about being healthy and stuff. (11.F.3)
For many young women, the criticism and constraints from parents were based upon clothing or make-up, but these were often mixed messages: ‘well, your parents sort of, like, tell you that it’s okay; like, be whoever you want to be and that sort of thing. Well mine do, so...’ (2.F.2),

Then there’s always like that, oh you sort of you can’t do things and stuff. Like, you’re not allowed to go out to that party or (laughing)...things like that. But it’s sort of like, control you in that way. (2.F.3)

Often parental concerns about showing too much flesh could be misread as an insult about how they looked:

And they judge you like if you were going out like with friends to a party or something they’ll always comment on your outfit and make you feel like you look really bad in it and you’re like oh okay. (7.F.3)

When asked what kinds of things had been said: “‘oh, isn’t that skirt a bit short showing your thighs” or something, like stuff like that’ (7.F.3), and when it came to making physical changes, parents reasons for saying no were not transparent:

Oh, my mum, because when I ask things like can I get my hair dyed and stuff, she says it’s not important. And then I kind of say that’s contradicting yourself (laughing)...because if she’s saying it’s not important then why is it, why can’t I do it. Yeah, why is it such a big deal? (5.F.5)

For many young women, when it came to looking good or feeling good about themselves, they felt that they couldn’t rely on compliments from their parents because of the idea that parents all see their children as beautiful: ‘every mother thinks their child is the best. That’s what my mum thinks’ (12.F.6)

‘It’s always like the classic like “oh I’m so ugly”, “no you’re not; you’re beautiful”, “you have to say that; you’re my mum”, but like they do have to say it...’ (14.F.1)
This creates conflict for many young women in particular because appearance — and competitiveness about their appearance — features so heavily in their lives. They want to be told that they are beautiful or pretty, but also want there to be truth in these compliments:

I don't believe my dad because he just says stuff all the time. But my mum's really honest. So she will tell me if I look bad in something. She'll say, “No, change.” She'll tell, which is good. So then I have someone at home telling me I look bad so then in the outside world if someone tells me I look bad I can handle it, which is good.’ (13.F.6)

For some of these young women, the competitiveness makes compliments from parents about their appearance and feeling good about themselves feel like empty sentiments:

I hate it when people sit there and go, “you've got to feel good about yourself” and you’re sitting there, you go, “well great, but” — and then you just walk around the city or something and you see all these really tall, really skinny, really curvy girls, and you just sit there and you’re just like “fuck off, how dare you”. It’s so much — like when they sit there, they'll tell you you’ve got to feel good about yourself, you’re beautiful; you’re beautiful just the way you are and you’re just like “yeah well I could be better, so…”’ (8.F.4)

Although many young women feel that their parents ‘... are meant to tell you, “You're beautiful.”’ (13.F.2), they felt that ‘... getting it in the context’ (13.F.6) was important:

Facilitator: Do you think it's true when they tell it to you?

13.F.6: It depends when it comes up. If they’re talking about...

13.F.4: Yeah, it depends when they say it.


13.F.4: When you're lying there in your pyjamas I don't think so.
Or if you’re really upset and they tell at that time you’re obviously — they’re just telling you to make you feel better. But if it’s just randomly, spontaneously, and they say it, then it’s more believable.

There were, however, a few young women who reported receiving positive messages from parents about their looks and self-image that didn’t read to them as hollow sentiments. One young woman’s mother spoke to the competitiveness and the habit of comparing themselves to others:

My mum always says, “don’t compare yourself at all. Don’t because then you will just — all through your life. Even if you compare yourself — not even just by looks but by personality and everything, you’re going to have that hinder your whole life just comparing yourself to other people and thinking that you’re not as good as them.” (15.F.5)

This young woman’s mother spoke about accepting who you are:

If you say, like, “oh, I hate this about my body”, well, personally I always say, like, “oh, I hate my hips or something”, my mum would be like, “you have to, like, embrace it because you’ve got to work with what you’ve got” kind of thing and she’d always, like, well my mum would always cheer me up about it and say you know something good about it when like you say the negative she can say the positive. (14.F.3).

Health emerged as a message that one young woman received from her mother that was not contextualised as a concern about appearance and being thin as discussed previously:

My mum’s about being healthy but it’s like, mum has really good values and it’s like she doesn’t really care how people look; it’s not about your appearance but it’s to take pride in how you present yourself. And it’s like it’s not about being super skinny but it’s about being healthy, but it’s not about being health crazy. It’s about like she sees healthy as someone who’s happy and like my mum enjoys her food so much and like she’s not fat but she’s not like super
skinny. She’s like a good weight and like one of the most important things is enjoying your food and she’s like that’s like some people totally miss out, like food is for enjoyment, like you’ve got to eat. (11.F.2)

One father provided a message to his daughter about the importance of feeling good about herself and the impact it would have on her demeanour:

My dad said one of the most sexiest things a woman can have is confidence, like so feeling good about yourself, you’ve got to do that first before you can listen to other people I think, yeah. (10.F.4)

**Parental communication about navigating relationships**

When it came to parental discussions about dating and how to navigate relationships — particularly when it came to beginning and ending relationships — it emerged that parents communicated information and messages in a wide range of ways. Parental attitudes about dating and relationships ranged from the ability to conduct open and frank discussions with their children, to a restrictive and prescriptive approach, to an offhanded and joking manner, to a complete lack of discussion. Focus groups discussed two topics that spoke to navigating relationships, the first of which was: **Asking people out and how to break up with them**.

For a large number of young people, the topic of dating had not arisen within a discussion with their parents. The lack of discussion appeared to be true for many of the young men when asked if their parents had ever spoken to them about it, or if they would talk to them: ‘oh, no’ (4.M.3; 4.M.2), ‘no’ (4.M.4; 18.M.3; 19.M.1), ‘not this one’ (19.M.2), ‘I haven’t — mum hasn’t sort of told me about this at all really. We haven’t talked about it at all. I don’t know really how I found out, probably just...’ (6.M.2), ‘friends’ (6.M.1), ‘friends, yeah’ (6.M.2). But this was not limited to young men; again, when young women were asked if their parents had talked to them about asking people out, or breaking up, or dating: ‘no’ (2.F.1; 2.F.4; 8.F.2; 11.F.4; 15.F.2; 15.F.1; 16.F.5; 16.F.2; 16.F.3; 20.F.4), ‘not really’ (8.F.2; 15.F.3), ‘my
parents don’t say anything’ (16.F.2), ‘I haven’t had any [talk] yet’ (5.F.1). One young woman attributed this lack of discussion to an ordering of importance, with a prioritisation on a discussion of sex:

You don’t really talk about that sort of thing with your parents. Like your parents will sit you down and have the sex talk, but they don’t really have a talk about like, going out with people. (2.F.2)

For some of these young people, the information had never been offered, and, due to this, they were uncomfortable in broaching the topic themselves: ‘my parents don’t say anything either. If I asked them they would, but I don’t really ask them’ (16.F.4), ‘yeah, the same’ (16.F.5), ‘yeah, I think the same’ (16.F.3). For many of these young people, there was a feeling that this was not an area that they would be comfortable discussing with their parents: ‘I don’t know how to do it. That’s just not advice I’d go to my parents for’ (15.F.4) and when asked if their parents did try to raise this topic with them, half of one group reflected this discomfort:

15.F.4: I’d feel awkward.
15.F.2: Yeah, I'd feel really awkward. I'd just kind of blank out.
15.F.4: It's kind of like, “What the hell?”
15.F.5: I don't think I'd even tell my mum if I had a boyfriend.
15.F.4: Yeah, me either.
15.F.5: Me and my mum talk, but just not about that kind of thing.
15.F.4: Yeah.

Either due to this lack of discussion or a general sense of discomfort, one young man felt that this was ‘not parent territory’ (4.M.2). This parental discomfort in discussing dating and relationships was also reflected in the female focus groups:
No it’s just they’re not the kind — I don’t personally feel that they’re the kind of people that actually would sit down with their child, and sit there and tell them the ropes or something (8.F.4)

‘Same’ (8.F.2), ‘same with mine’ (8.F.3). One of the young women in this group had seen this discomfort modelled by her parents when an older sister started dating:

Yeah, when my sister got a boyfriend like eight months ago they sat there and they were just so awkward, like they didn’t know what to say to her and it was just the funniest thing because I was like watching while they were just like trying to talk to her about all this stuff, and like they just didn’t know what to do, and so that was kind of funny. (8.F.4)

She felt that her parents would ‘kind of expect that I just ask my friends who have already had boyfriends, so they don’t really get in with that kind of stuff’ (8.F.4).

Many focus group participants spoke about their parents making offhand or joking comments about dating, without offering any information: ‘our parents just say stuff like, “don’t go breaking people’s hearts,” and great little sayings like that, but they don’t actually talk to you about it’ (16.F.3). For one young man, the ‘passing comments’ (18.M.4) were limited to his parents stating that they would ‘lose him’: ‘you know, mum and dad might say, you’ll have a girlfriend — I don’t know — you’ll have a girlfriend soon, then we’ll lose you, sort of thing’ (18.M.4). Or many parents’ discussion is limited to jokingly asking if they are seeing someone: ‘my parents kind of joke about it. They’re just like “oh do you have a boyfriend”’ (2.F.4), ‘oh, yeah, my parents will be, if they see me like, talking to a boy, and they’re like oh is he your boyfriend? It’s so weird’ (2.F.5), ‘my parents have joked like you know ... Not up to going down that path yet’ (5.F.2). Joking seemed to be a way that fathers in particular were able to talk about dating with their daughters:

I’ve kind of had like joking talks with my dad. It’s just like “if I can hear the car speakers from down the road, you can’t go out with him.” Or, like, “if he has pierced ears you can’t go out with him.” (5.F.4)
My first boyfriend, my dad found out that I had a boyfriend after I’d broken up with him. Because I only went out with him for like a week and I was like, you know, I didn’t want to be going out with him at the time. ... And then the day that I broke up with him I get home and somehow dad’s found out. I haven’t told any, like haven’t told mum or anything. But sometimes, like dad just knew because we were like talking about it and he jokes about it all the time now. And it’s like, great. (5.F.3)

When it came to young women and their fathers, it appeared that the paradigm of father as protector and gatekeeper held strong for many focus group participants. Some fathers expressed this as a distrust of their daughters:

My dad's really suspicious of me because he's — he's not often home with me because of work. And so he thinks I'm out all the time partying. Or if I go to a birthday party he thinks there's going to be alcohol and drugs or random stuff. I'm, like, “no. I'm not that type of person. I wouldn't do that”...he's just like, “so, have you been with any boys?” I'm, like, “no.” Well, if they're boys I'm just friends with them or anything, nothing serious or anything. (13.F.6)

For another young woman, this lack of trust was perceived as the reason for not engaging in a conversation about dating: ‘they don't trust us to talk about it. It's, like, “don't want to have this conversation with you”’ (17.F.2). For some young women, this meant keeping their father out of the loop in regards to their dating lives for fear of retribution: ‘I don’t think my dad knows that I have a boyfriend yet because I’m way too scared to tell him’ (5.F.4), or due to a general lack of communication: ‘I reckon I’d probably tell my mum but I would not tell my dad though. Because I don’t really talk to him a lot anyway’ (15.F.3). One young woman had learnt from a previous experience with her father that he did not view her dating favourably, and therefore she was hiding her current relationship from them:

I think my mum can handle it but my dad will probably be like “no”, really — he caught me web cam-ing with a guy in Grade 8 or something and he got really pissed off, and he took my internet cable, and my webcam, and... (8.F.5)
Hidden relationships were common among young women:

I didn’t like going out. Like I don’t like having a boyfriend because technically I’m not allowed to date from my parents. So I don’t like having to lie to them. So, it was sort of...it was uncomfortable going out with him because we couldn’t like let my parents know or anything so. (1.F.2)

Like these participants, for many of these young women, parental discussion of dating was limited to a directive that they not date: ‘my mum says no boyfriend’, (8.F.3) or wait until an arbitrary age: ‘dad said 23; my mum said probably after school finishes’ (8.F.5), ‘[I’m] not allowed to date till I’m 18’ (20.F.4). This young woman knew that ‘my dad is pretty serious when he says that’ (20.F.4) after witnessing the consequence of his ire at discovering her sister was in an unsanctioned relationship: ‘he broke up with one of my sister’s boyfriends for her’ (20.F.4). There were fathers who clearly did not look favourably upon girls who date in high school:

My parents, well, my dad in particular is not a fan for teenage relationships. He gets very angry and says lots of things. He told me, with my previous boyfriend, he’s, like, “well, that’s fine now you can go be a prostitute on the streets or something”...so that made me a little bit upset. He’s not the one you want to go talk to about a relationship. He’ll just tell you that it’s stupid and that people are going look down on you. He was telling me how everyone’s going to see me as a slut. (17.F.1)

Her [17.F.1] dad is like...he was just getting angry and telling me that...girls who are in relationships at high school are frowned upon by everyone. And how no one likes them. And how they're destined for bad lives. You're not going to have a nice life. (17.F.3)

This group felt this was a double standard considering: ‘isn’t your mum, like, his high school girlfriend?’ (17.F.2) and ‘well, my mum, I think, judging by what she’s told me she’s had lots of boyfriends in high school’ (17.F.1). Parental double standards in
relation to dating had also been encountered by other focus group participants after some investigation:

My family's really secret about all that stuff. I did some working notes. Went and interviewed my grandma when she was in a good mood, finding out about how my dad travelled to Adelaide and stuff when he was 16 to spend a week with his girlfriend when she moved there. And I was using it in my argument because he wouldn't let me go with my boyfriend in his beach house with his family and stuff. “Dad you went by yourself to Adelaide and back. I can go to Noosa on the bus for a day.” … Didn’t work.’ (17.F.3)

For some young women in particular, some of the messages they had received from parents in relation to dating perpetuated traditional gender norms and stereotypes. The information given to them by parents suggested that they should wait to be asked out instead of pursuing the young man themselves: ‘my mum is like, “never be the one to chase the guy”, like, “make the guy chase you”’ (12.F.5). This young woman recognised that this advice was slightly outdated: ‘I guess it’s like old fashioned for especially my mum, like because she’s pretty old she thinks that it’s right for the guy to be the one who takes the initiative and asks the girl out’ (12.F.5) but she still appeared to believe the message because ‘girls wouldn’t be prepared to ask the guys out I guess and the guys would be’ (12.F.5). This was confirmed by a peer in this group:

Because it’s like they’re the manly figure, they’re the superhero sending the girl…and I just personally would like not to ask someone out, just like the guy ask you out. I don’t know. (12.F.6)

These stereotypically gendered messages from parents were mentioned in another focus group while being recognised as stereotypical:

Well, personally, I know it’s a bit stereotypical but it’s kind of nice if the boy always asks the girl out because otherwise the girl is chasing after them and stuff. And I know my dad always says that girls can
never play too hard to get. Never run after a boy or something. (17.F.3)

One young woman spoke about her mother using her own relationship problems to model appropriate behaviour: ‘she said bad stuff that’s happened in her relationship and how she fixed it and everything’ (20.F.3) which she had ‘learn[ed] heaps from that’ (20.F.3). This modelled message was also true for another young woman:

My mum tells me about her failed dates and stuff...like times when everything went wrong and stuff. Like when she was in a boat and she like, threw up and stuff. (2.F.5)

Unlike the previous young woman, this participant felt that ‘that isn’t particularly useful’ (2.F.5). Siblings were also particularly useful for modelling behaviours and learning from:

11.F.3: I get a lot from my sister actually.
11.F.1: Me too.
11.F.2: I get most from my siblings because I have an older brother and an older sister.
11.F.3: My sisters and I talk about everything.
11.F.2: I can’t even recall, it’s probably just like come up in like over the years like just I know that they know a lot about it.

Facilitator: Do you all have older siblings?
11.F.1: Yes well I have an older sister and an older brother as well.

Facilitator: So they give you information?
11.F.3: My sister is really close to my age so we’re really close.
11.F.1: My sister is nine and a half years older than me.
11.F.2: My sister and I have some good chats.

11.F.4: My sister is five years older than me and I guess she doesn’t really give me tips or anything. My sister didn’t have a boyfriend through high school either. She has boy troubles all the time. It’s really annoying.

11.F.2: So many problems.

11.F.4: I guess I’ve learnt from her problems lately.

Other parents provided information, but it was limited to generalised information about how they should treat a partner:

She [mother] just said — she's basically, “just be respectful for the other person.” She’s said that since grade 6 or something.’ (6.M.1) ‘My parents are like, “just like be nice”’. (10.F.3)

‘We [she and her mother] talk about the rights and wrongs and that sort of thing’ (15.F.5) but for this young woman, the generalised discussion did not promote an open dialogue: ‘I just wouldn’t tell her if I had a boyfriend. I don’t know why’ (15.F.5).

There were some parents mentioned in these focus groups who were very open in their discussions about relationships with their children, and in turn, their children were comfortable in approaching them for advice, but this was the exception to the rule: ‘I always go home and talk to my mum about everything’ (17.F.2), ‘me and mum talk about everything’ (20.F.3); this included ‘helping me out with it [navigating relationships]’ by ‘kinda telling me what to say.’ (20.F.3)

Some of these young women felt more comfortable getting advice from a friend’s parents than their own:

I wasn’t comfortable speaking to my parents about anything and so all my advice came from my friends and they went home and asked their parents. Your [17.F.2] mum gave very good advice. (17.F.3)
For some young people, discussion with parents was due to having limited access to trusted friends:

I tell my mum most things. I didn’t used to tell mum anything. They didn’t even know I was in a relationship until three months and they finally realised, like, “Oh, congratulations.” Then ... I ended up just telling my mum myself because it was the middle of exams and I was really stressed about stuff. (17.F.3)

Yeah, I think my mum knows everything. My dad knows some things. I found it harder to break up with him [boyfriend] because it was on the holidays so I didn’t see many of my friends. And so it was more relying on my parents. (17.F.1)

For this young woman, informing her parents about a prospective relationship was rewarded: ‘I got champagne...my parents gave me champagne with lemonade’ (17.F.1), ‘yeah. When she got asked out’ (17.F.3).

The second topic that spoke to navigating relationships was Asking for what you want from a relationship. As will be examined in Chapter 7, young people’s attitudes about asking for what they wanted, or assertiveness within a relationship, varied widely between feeling confident and comfortable enough to have an open discussion with a partner about their wants and needs, to relying on indirect communication such as hinting at what they wanted or just waiting for their partner to bring it up. The participants appeared to point to a correlation between open parental communication, and their assertiveness and comfort in being able to ask for what they wanted within their relationships. Young people who reported not discussing relationships with their parents all conveyed that they felt ill at ease in talking to their partner about what they wanted — sexually or otherwise.

As noted previously, the participants in Group 2 rarely or never discussed relationships with their parents (2.F.1; 2.F.2; 2.F.4; 2.F.5), and when asked if they would be comfortable asking for what they wanted in a relationship, it emerged that they would feel ill at ease having this discussion early in a relationship: ‘I guess it
depends on how far you are into like the relationship and stuff’ (2.F.2), ‘if it’s like the first few weeks I guess you wouldn’t want to’ (2.F.4). Instead, they would rely on guesswork: ‘I think I’d just try to guess myself where we were, if like...and just hope that he felt that as well’ (2.F.4). And in the case of one young woman who had been in a relationship and did want to move the relationship forward sexually, without these communication and assertiveness skills, she had to wait for him to raise it: ‘he needed to ask if I was ready for stuff. I was too shy to ask him if he wanted to do stuff’ (2.F.5) even though ‘I wanted to, I was just too shy to ask’ (2.F.5). This was a common theme for young women — waiting for their partner to raise the topic or ask to take things further because ‘you don’t want to be rejected’ (13.F.1). This lack of communication turned relationships into a guessing game: ‘it depends how close you are with them and how they feel about it. If you kind of know that they want to’ (13.F.6), ‘it also comes down to how you think they’ll react’ (13.F.2) which would be infinitely harder if their partner also had problems communicating what he wanted: ‘but if they weren't bringing it up at all I probably would be a little uncomfortable. I wouldn't really know’ (13.F.4).

Some young women — who again had no or little discussion of relationships from parents (5.F.2; 5.F.3; 5.F.5; 13.F.6) — had a fear that asking for what they wanted in the context of behaviour and treatment would be construed as controlling:

And I guess like asking them what you want. Like you want them to be the person that you see in your head but you don’t want them to change who they are either. (5.F.3)

Alternatively, they simply felt uncomfortable communicating with a partner:

Yeah, I think like I wasn’t communicating with him as much, because...I don’t know, he seemed like more comfortable than I was. I don’t...and then like actually I broke up with him because I felt really bad, because like, I wasn’t doing anything like that. It was so awkward so I’m just like...(5.F.4)
When specifically asked why they would not feel comfortable asking for what they wanted, members of one focus group pointed to their parents disregard for the seriousness of teen relationships: ‘well, my parents have always been, “ugh, it’s just teenagers. It's never going to last”’ (13.F.5), ‘like, “don’t be serious...don’t get in a serious relationship until you’re really old”’ (13.F.4).

For many young women, discussing feelings or desires was fine: ‘well, if it's feelings-wise I think you should but...’(16.F.5) as long as those desires were not sexual: ‘but if it's sexually related then maybe not’ (16.F.2). ‘No. No. No. You can talk about feelings. But then about sexual things it wouldn't be, “oh, I want you to do this to me,” for some guys’ (16.F.5) for fear of coming on too strong.

It also depends what kind of guy that it is. If the guy's really, really innocent you don’t want to be, “Oh, blah, blah,” because they’ll be, “Oh, I'm intimidated.” (16.F.5)

This is where indirect communication such as hinting came in:

16.F.5: You can hint at it but you’d have to do it slowly.

16.F.1: Sometimes it's [laughter]...

16.F.5: Yeah, because some guys they'd be really innocent. You wouldn't want to do...

16.F.3: Well, if they're that maybe you should just hint at it instead of get...

16.F.5: Yeah, just hint at it but you wouldn't...

16.F.2: But you wouldn't be, “let's do this.”

16.F.1: Just openly.

16.F.5: Yeah. That's what I'm saying. It wouldn't be really open. It would be kind of like hinted at.
While for these young women the emphasis was on not being seen as pushy or corrupting, when this conversation was echoed in another focus group and hinting came up as a way to communicate indirectly what you want — ‘hinted’ (15.F.4), ‘yeah. You hint at it...I guess you could ask but you hint’ (15.F.6) — this group of participants thought that things were meant to happen organically without any communication: ‘no. That just happens. You don’t ask’ (15.F.6). Again, when asked if their parents had ever touched on this subject, participants said ‘no’ (15.F.2; 15.F.4; 15.F.5; 16.F.2; 16.F.4; 16.F.5).

Another approach to communication within a relationship that emerged was waiting for something to become an issue before discussing it. One young woman’s mother tended to make judgements about proper conduct:

> My mum just says, “kissing and sex, there's nothing in between. He’s either kissing you or he's having sex with you.”...Mum’s...seen me hug a guy but she thought that was slutty, so, whatever...yeah, mum said, “it’s really slutty that” because I hugged three guys. I was, like, “Yeah, I know.” (9.F.3)

Her mother would talk at her about relationships without engaging in a discussion: ‘My parents tell me about their relationships but I don't talk to them. They don't give me advice really’ (9.F.3). When asked about her comfort in talking to a partner, she initially reported some comfort in communicating what she wanted: ‘I tend to do that [ask for what she wants] before the relationship stuff’ (9.F.3), but then it emerged that she would instead wait for something to become an issue:

> Yeah, you say at the beginning or more towards — actually I tend to do that when it starts to become an issue. If it’s just going fine then I wouldn't talk about it...If a person’s going too quickly or too slowly then I talk to them about it. (9.F.3)

This discomfort in communicating wants and needs in a relationship was not limited to gender, and again, these young men had never discussed with their parents how to communicate within a relationship: ‘no, not at all’ (3.M.2), ‘nuh’ (3.M.1), ‘no, not
really’ (6.M.2), ‘well, not this sort of thing’ (6.M.1). And like some of the young women, these young men felt that forward movement in a relationship was something that happened spontaneously without discussion: ‘hmm, never, I don’t really think I’ve heard anyone like asking what they want in a relationship’ (3.M.1), ‘yeah, it just kind of happens on the spot I guess’ (3.M.2). Another group spoke about the difficulties in communicating this information:

I think it's important for the other person to know your preferences and what you sort of want in a relationship. And I think it is difficult to tell them that sort of stuff.’ (6.M.1)

In particular, they feared that saying anything unwanted would come with reprisals:

Yeah. And that's probably the main thing. That's probably why people would do it [not say anything] is just because they don't want to get dumped or whatever. So, yeah. (6.M.2)

When the facilitator asked if they knew the best way to communicate what they did or didn’t want: ‘not really’ (6.M.1), ‘no. I wouldn’t know’ (6.M.2).

To support this correlation between parental discussion about communication in relationships, and comfort and assertiveness skills within romantic relationships, it was evident that there were parents who had these discussions with their children by:

Telling us what we should expect sort of ... Well my dad and my mum, they sort of explained to be equal, like not to have to do all the time just for one person without even getting something back for yourself, and not — being healthy, not constantly obsessing over the person, it’s kind of like you’ve got to let them breathe as well. (10.F.4)

In this case, the father was the driver in these discussions: ‘my dad, yeah, my mum is sort of — yeah, mum sort of goes with it, but my dad — yeah, my dad’s kind of...[the one who gives the relationship advice]’ (10.F.4), and, in turn, these young people
had high levels of confidence in asking for what they wanted and egalitarian ideas about relationships:

Like when you ask for something you want you shouldn’t be perceived as like selfish or something, it should be mutual, like they should be able to ask for what they want as well, so — yeah. (10.F.4).

There were some young women who, while they were uncomfortable talking to their own parents about these things: ‘my mum sort of tries to but I just don’t want to talk ... to my mum about stuff like that’ (14.F.2) although her mother did try to subtly raise the subject:

She’ll sort of be like, “oh, so, like...so how’s like so and so; like, are you guys just friends?” I’ll be like, “yeah”, so, you sort of like brush it off. (14.F.2)

This was true for another young woman in the group:

Yeah, and in something like relationships my mum’s not really into me having one because it’s a distraction to school work and what not and she’s just not the kind of person to talk to about boys, like she’s so innocent and cute but she’d tell me like what to look for in a boy and like make sure he’s nice ... She kind of hints like, “oh you’re not looking for that kind of thing, like you don’t like boys do you”, it’s like “oh, not really”, she’s just like “oh, you can save that for later?” kind of thing. (14.F.3)

Although these young women didn’t talk to their own parents, they were completely comfortable broaching the subject with friend’s mothers: ‘I talk to her [14.F.1] mum more than I talk to my mum’ (14.F.2), ‘I always talk to other people’s mums instead of my mum; I don’t know why’ (14.F.3). The young woman whose mother was approachable by these young women — ‘she’s just so chill, you can talk to her about anything’ (14.F.2) — had open discussions with her own daughter also:

I’m very open with my mum because like I know like that’s how we’ve been brought up; like, there’s no secrets in my family
whatsoever. And like when it comes to boys, like I know, like she’s like always like telling me like you have to like a boy for what he gives to you and how he’s nice to you and stuff. Like you don’t like him just because he’s hot and you’re going to get poon out of it and all that sort of stuff.’ (14.F.1)

With ‘poon’ being ‘sexual favours’ (14.F.3). When this group of girls was asked if they would feel comfortable asking for what they wanted: ‘yes’ (14.F.1), ‘yeah’ (14.F.2)

Well, if you were in a relationship you’d trust them and you’re expected to tell them everything and you should be comfortable with asking them or telling them what you’d like out of the relationship rather than him like expecting to know or if you’re uncomfortable you should be comfortable talking to him about it. (14.F.3)

‘Yes and like [if] you didn’t know that they weren’t ready then you could ask them’ (14.F.2), ‘and you would have to like talk about it at some stage if you wanted that [sex] as well’ (14.F.3). When asked again about feeling comfortable asking for something sexual:

Yeah, at least I think I would be. You should be, like if you don’t trust them that much then you shouldn’t be like in that situation with them anyway I guess, so...’ (14.F.2)

*Parental information about navigating consent is often limited*

Navigating consent was an area that many parents ostensibly discuss quite often — particularly with their daughters. However, the nature of these discussions can be problematic. Consent appears to be discussed within a paradigm that speaks of all men as potential rapists and teaches young women that they should just say no, which can discount that they might want to say yes. In this context, young women are rarely taught negotiation and communication skills beyond saying no. As will be seen in Chapter 6, some young women are unable to effectively communicate with their partners and can end up having unwanted sexual encounters that they feel extremely uncomfortable about, but don’t identify as sexual assault.
For a number of young women, this subject had never been discussed with parents.
When asked if their parents had communicated with them about saying no, or how
don’t think they’d talk to me about that’ (12.F.5), ‘my parents never bring it up’
(12.F.2), ‘I don’t think they think that I would do that’ (12.F.4). Some young women
surmised what they believed their parents would say: ‘my parents probably would
want me to say, “no,” to all sexual advances’ (13.F.2)

Well I don’t know because it’s never really come up about like that
exact thing but I think that because she doesn’t really worry about
me with that kind of stuff she hasn’t really told me like when to say
no because she kind of assumes that I kind of know when to say no
which I think I do so.’ (14.F.4)

Or again, joking was used instead of discussion:

See my parents tend to joke about it; like, they won’t actually sit
there like straight on and say … so it’s kind of like they’re joking
around but they’re trying not to be serious about it, so it’s like...
(8.F.4)

But we might be at the dinner table, we might be joking about how
[name] and [name] are going out, and then they’re like, “you’re not
doing that are you [name]? say ‘no’”, and you’re just like “okay.”
(8.F.5)

The overwhelming message communicated to young women by parents is to ‘just
say no’ (1.F.1; 2.F.4; 10.F.2; 10.F.4; 13.F.6; 15.F.3; 15.F.4; 15.F.6), but this is largely
delivered as a standalone message with no further discussion:

They did once. They just like [said], “… if someone … like asks you
for it and you’re not ready … then just say no”. And I’m just like,
“oh, ok.” (1.F.1)

She [mum] doesn’t really say much, but she’s like just make sure ...
I’m safe, and if I don’t want to do something then she’s just making
sure I know I can say no or anything like that, other than that yeah not much. (8.F.2)

15.F.4 I was leaving to [name]’s party last year. There were a few of us and my mum yelled down the stairs, “Just say no.” I’m saying, “Thanks mum.” “Just say no.”

Facilitator: What was she saying to say no to?

15.F.4: Everything.

This directive to say no can be delivered by positioning the young man as only wanting them for one thing: ‘and so they just talk about how they think, they explain the guy’s often just using you and just saying no’ (11.F.3), ‘mum’s always like “don’t give your body up because they could just like be gone in an instant” and stuff ... it’s like that’s all they want’ (20.F.1). One young woman was frustrated with this insufficient communication from parents when it was based around rhetoric of not trusting boys:

No, see that’s what annoys me. My mum doesn’t trust me that I’m going to be able to say no, she’s like I trust you, I don’t trust the boys, like well you obviously don’t trust me if you think that I’m not going to be able to [say no]. (14.F.2)

This message about saying no is often delivered in the context that the young person should be able to say no, or know when to say no, again without any explanation of how to do that: ‘you should just be able to — you shouldn’t let someone do anything that you don’t want’ (10.F.2)

My mum’s talked to me about it a little bit, but not like in a whole lot of depth. It’s just like don’t do anything you don’t want to do because it’s like your body and your life, yeah.’ (2.F.2)

Yeah like my mum would tell me, oh she’d be like “oh, you don’t have a boyfriend do you?” and she’s kind of like “well if you were, you would know when to say when kind of thing.” (14.F.3)

This young woman spoke in the abstract about parental intentions:
I think parents would want to have some sort of impact in telling you and teaching you how to say no because they would want you to be saying that, they would want you to be comfortable and everything like that ... they would want to teach you how to say no and if worse comes to worse to like back off kind of thing. (14.F.3)

When asked if her parents had actually communicated how to say no, initially she said ‘yeah’ (14.F.3), but when another group member stated that: ‘I don’t know if they really tell you like how to say no but they certainly tell you to say no’ (14.F.2), she agreed: ‘yeah, I take that back’ (14.F.3). One young woman spoke to the fact that it can be difficult knowing how to say no in the context of a relationship:

That [saying no] sounds easy now but you don’t want to hurt the other person’s feelings, like if you know they’re not trying to be — like not actually intentionally trying to hurt you then I think it’s hard to say no. (10.F.4)

For two of the young women in one group, their parents had communicated to them how they would feel if they didn’t say no, which could lead to negative judgements of girls who did say yes, or didn’t have a chance to say no:

We haven’t really had a conversation but sometimes it comes up and she’ll be like “it’s hard like how girls do that.” And I’d be like “yeah mum,” it’s just that I’ll say something like “they were idiots” or “they should have said no” or something like that; she’s like “good you think that way.” She’s like “that’s right.” Even like we’re driving in the car and there’s something on the radio and she’s like “oh, that’s so sad” and I’m like “yeah but they shouldn’t have gotten themselves into that situation, or they just should have like backed out or something like that” and mum’s like “yeah that’s right, good job.” (11.F.2)

It’s not really spoken and the thing is my mum understands all the stuff that goes on because she’s kind of cool. So it’s fine for me to talk about that, like when I come back from a party kind of talking about everything that’s going on. It’s fine because my mum’s not really going to judge all my friends because she understands some
girls are a bit stupid and foolish and don’t really know any better. So it’s just what they’re going to do because it’s what everyone else is doing but she knows that I’m not really into that and she knows that I’ll make a better decision and also from the way I talk about it sometimes. She knows that I’m kind of a bit like pitying of them, like I feel a bit above them because I’m like I know better than that kind of thing. (11.F.4)

Consent is taught as a heavily gendered topic — young women are placed in the role of gatekeeper, and often told that they can and should say no — but this information is rarely disseminated to young men. When asked if parents had raised this topic: ‘no’ (18.M.1; 18.M.3; 18.M.5), ‘we don’t talk about that kind of stuff’ (4.M.1). They are left to glean this information for themselves and make assumptions:

I think my parents would, you know, think I could either say yes or no, you know, they didn’t mind what I would do. More in the sense ... they’d care but...I think they’d know, well they know that I would probably say no, if I didn’t want to. (3.M.1)

or hope that it is taught at school: ‘no, my parents wouldn’t [talk about it]; they just expect the school to do it, I think’ (3.M.2). Young men are portrayed as the drivers in sexual relationships, so if they are given messages from parents, it often comes down to being told not to engage in sexual behaviours instead of being told that they can say no or communicate with their partner about this:

Um...yeah, my dad just said, “don’t touch” ... if I have the opportunity he says I shouldn’t do it. I should, you know, save it...save my virginity...That’s just my parents’ philosophy. (4.M.5)

‘Well, I know mum said, “If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it.”’ I think she said that ages ago’ (6.M.1). Some young men notice this gender divide if they have a sister: ‘well...well this is just me, but my dad, ah, my dad and my mum talked to my sister about saying no, but they never did to me or my brother’ (4.M.2).

Some of these young women, however, had some good discussions with their parents about consent. A young woman inadvertently instigated one of these
discussions when she asked her mother about a sexual practice, which sparked an interesting conversation for this focus group:

1.F.6 I asked my mum if she knew what S and M meant and like I already knew what it was but I was just testing her. And she knew what it was. And then I was like well is it sort of normal. And she was like well...

Together What is it?

1.F.6 ...it’s like macochist [sic] where you like to, someone likes to give you, hurt you during sex and then you like to receive, like being hurt. You like being hurt.

... Yeah, and then my mum sort of said well if anyone sort of hurts you during sex and you don’t want that, then that’s classified as rape.

1.F.5 Yep. Isn’t it like...even...in a way...kissing is rape if you don’t want it...

1.F.6 Yep.

1.F.5 ...it’s like isn’t anything sexual counted as rape if you don’t want it. That’s what I always got told.

1.F.6 Yeah, or if you’re underage as well.

One young woman’s mother liked to assess how her daughter would react in a fun way through a game in which she gave her possible scenarios:

My mum (laughing), sexual person she is, puts me like in mad situations. It’s where like we play this game where before she gives me another step ... so I asked to go to my boyfriend’s house to have lunch with him. She said: “okay, but what would you do if he put your hand on his erection?” I’m like: “take it away.” (5.F.5)
And there were some parents who spoke about being able to say yes, as long as they felt comfortable and ready:

I’m trying to think of the many conversations. Well, most times my parents just say, “do what you feel comfortable with and he should have respect for what you say you’ll feel comfortable doing.” (17.F.1)

‘Yeah, my parents are always the same’ (17.F.2).

My mum says do it. My mum’s sort of like, “There’s no point in planning it,” because I don’t really listen to plans. And then she’s, like, “Don’t plan your future just do what you feel comfortable with at the time. And don’t let him try and pressure you into doing anything.” (17.F.1)

Although in this instance, it appeared that this discussion was slightly problematic in that it advocated spontaneity, which could possibly lead to having unsafe sex.

**Parental communication about safe sex**

Safe sex was an area that parents again communicated about with their children to varying degrees. This ranged from no discussion, to little discussion beyond a directive to have safe sex and not get pregnant or get a girl pregnant, to parents who were open and approachable with their children about sex, with a variety in between.

Over a quarter of the young people in the focus groups indicated that they had not had a discussion from their parents about sex or safe sex (1.F.4; 2.F.3; 2.F.5; 4.M.1; 4.M.2; 4.M.4; 5.F.1; 5.F.5; 8.F.1; 8.F.2; 8.F.4; 8.F.5; 11.F.2; 12.F.1; 13.F.6; 14.F.3; 16.F.2; 16.F.5; 17.F.3; 18.M.1; 18.M.2; 18.M.4; 18.M.5; 19.M.4; 20.F.2; 20.F.4).

For many of these young people, they assumed that they had not been given this information because their parents did not think they were ready to start having sex and therefore did not need this information yet: ‘well I don’t think my parents really
think that I’m going to have sex anytime soon, so...’ (8.F.1), ‘I think my parents will when I get older but not right now’ (8.F.2), ‘because they don’t expect us to do anything now’ (8.F.5). Alternatively, they assumed that their parents thought that they would not be having sex outside of a relationship:

Yeah, like if I have a boyfriend for like six months or like ages and they have a feeling that I would, then I’d like expect them to say something. (14.F.3)

For young people who had older siblings, it was apparently common for parents to assume there was a value-added system — if they had had a conversation with the older sibling, parents assumed that they would pass that information down:

So my parents kind of talked to her [older sister] a little bit and were like make sure you’re being safe and all that, and make sure you’re ready and all that stuff. So they kind of did but I don’t know. (8.F.1)

Or parents expected siblings to be approachable so that they didn’t have to be:

See I have an older sister and so she’s already had the talk so I don’t think my mum and dad — because I’m very different to my sister so I don’t think my mum and dad would just approach me, I think they’d tell me just go ask [her sister]. (8.F.4)

If parents had not spoken about sex or safe sex to the older sibling, then they could rely on their sibling’s experience:

Oh yeah, my mum and dad NEVER talked to me about sex at all. I think they just knew that like my brother he’s a lot older than me, and he probably just like, he was the only one really in my family that talked to me about it. That was it ... But yeah my parents never talked to me about it at all.’ (19.M.4)

Young people also perceived the lack of discussion to be about parents’ own values or beliefs:
No, but I know my mum was a virgin when she married my dad because she's only had, before my dad, two boyfriends. So it was, like, yeah. So I think she expects me to [not have sex]. (16.F.5)

or even perceived cultural mores: ‘my parents don't talk to me about sex...they're too English to tell me what me to do about sex.’ (16.F.2)

However, some parents were simply uncomfortable on this topic:

My mum’s really awkward about that. We don’t really talk about things like that because I think she sees sex as like a really private thing and so yeah we wouldn’t really talk about that. (11.F.2)

Some participants perceived that their parents felt that their own level of knowledge was lacking in comparison with what they thought was being taught at school or elsewhere:

They know we’ve had a lot of like Sex Ed at school and compared to them especially we’ve been so like well equipped with sexual education and so they would be, I don’t think they’d feel the need to really have the talk. (11.F.2)

One young woman recognised the importance of having parents discuss safe sex, even though hers had not:

Well they don’t talk to me but like I know that when they would be expecting me to have like sex they would be teaching me and telling me to have safe sex, like I think, I reckon parents and school would be the main like factors on like ensuring that you do have safe sex...’ (14.F.3)

Parents leaving this talk for too long had demonstrable consequences — one female participant had witnessed her older sister who was ‘22 [or] 23’ (20.F.4) recently have a contraception talk:

My parents have talked to my sister about safe sex — like cause she’s just had a baby. And I don’t know how they got to the topic
but [stepmother] started telling [sister] ... what she can do so she can keep having it but not have another kid.’ (20.F.4)

Pregnancy — or prevention of pregnancy — was the predominant reason for parents talking to their children about safe sex. However, this rhetoric around consequences was often issued as a directive to not get pregnant:

I guess the extent of it is we don’t really talk about it but my mum’s like “oh, when you do it just make sure you use a condom because I don’t want you getting knocked up” and that’s basically as far as it goes…” (11.F.4)

Particularly when in high school: ‘they don’t want us to get pregnant in high school’ (8.F.1) because of the consequences of being ‘stuck with a baby when you’re a teenager. Like just how it ruins your whole life like you can’t...you have to look after that baby’ (2.F.2). This focus on consequences, and pregnancy in particular, was sometimes issued as a threat:

My dad’s just like, oh yeah, you’ll know what it’s like to live in the garage then. Because they said if I ever got pregnant, um, then they probably wouldn’t let me stay at home. So my parents are really strict… (1.F.1).

And if pregnancy did occur, the messages received were about parental control and lack of choice, either to abort: ‘if I was under 16, mum would probably make me abort it’ (1.F.1) or to keep the foetus:

Once I asked her [mother] if I got pregnant, she said that she would be like fine with it and that if I wanted she’d take the baby for me and that and she said the only reason she’d never talk to me again if I like had an abortion. (14.F.4)

For many parents, the focus on risk and consequences rarely extended to a discussion of STIs, when one group of young women was asked if parents had talked about this topic at all: ‘no’ (1.F.1; 1.F.2; 1.F.3; 1.F.4; 1.F.5; 1.F.6).
Many parents did speak to their children about safe sex, but this didn’t extend beyond an abstinence message: ‘no sex is safe sex’ (2.1F.5) that could be based on a number of motivations. This included spiritual or philosophical beliefs:

Um, yeah, my mum is like, um, she, her philosophy on the whole safe sex thing... like she doesn’t... she only wants like me to have sex with one person in my whole life. Her philosophy is really strict. (4.1M.5)

or based on age

Mum’s like pretty into like “don’t have sex for like if you can’t help it”, she wouldn’t want me to have sex at this age like yeah I just know like. She likes to know like I’d have safe sex but I just know like she wouldn’t, she’s pretty much against sex at like this age and like even next year I just don’t think she’d be comfortable with it. Some parents are different, like make sure it’s safe, mum’s like “don’t do it.” (11.1F.2)

For a number of young people, having a parent who was in a medical field meant that they were given the message to abstain based on expertise in the area:

12.1F.4: My mum’s like an infectious disease specialist and she also specialises in like STDs so a lot of the time she’s like “just stay away from it.”

Facilitator: Stay away from sex?

12.1F.4: Yeah.

Parents often used medical knowledge in a way that promoted fear or inspired horror:

My mum’s friend is a GP and she said that there was this girl who came from a school and had like warts all over her [genital] region ... and my mum was just like “yeah, so just so you know” and I was like “okay.” (12.1F.6)
This abstinence message was also delivered with a basis of fear about contraception effectiveness:

My mum always says that even like condoms and the pill aren’t really fool proof, like it can break and sometimes the pill doesn’t always like [work], so she still thinks, she always tells me like to wait so then I don’t really have to worry if it does because it’s like not a big deal then. (14.F.4)

There were a number of parents who communicated to their children that they’d prefer abstinence: ‘my parents just say, “don’t have sex, full stop”‘ but did provide a safe sex message: ‘“but if you are going to have sex, use a condom”‘ with the proviso that they not have to know about it: ‘“but just don’t let it get to us”‘ (16.F.3). Not wanting to know about it was also common:

My sister like went on the pill ... I think it was year 12 and she [mum] was like “I’m going to get you this pill but I don’t know why you want it, like I don’t really want to know why you want it”, I’m just going to like get that. (11.F.2)

Not wanting to discuss beyond a basic message to ‘just “make sure it’s safe”‘ (6.M.1) or provide a ‘basic run down’ (1.F.1) was another common message from parents. However, this information did sometimes present as more than just: ‘“you should get protection. Don’t be stupid and not use protection”‘ (17.F.1) and included actual — however limited — information: ‘“aw, this just happens, use these [condoms]”, and that’s all pretty much. And I’m just like “oh, okay”‘ (1.F.5). Some parents feared that providing contraception would just be enabling their child to have sex — a theme particularly evident in focus group discussions of the contraceptive pill for some of these young women when it was prescribed for other medical reasons including heavy menstruation:

My sister went on the pill this year ... it was more because she gets really bad periods and stuff but it’s also the fact that you know she has a boyfriend and all that stuff. But mum like didn’t want her to go on it but my sister like she’s come to me at school like she
couldn’t walk her period was so bad like she needed it but mum was well like “oh no, you only want it for this”. And I actually had to like, like I had my sister’s back, I will back her up with all this stuff and so it’s like, I was like “mum, seriously she has come to me at school — like “can’t walk because I have like period pain,” and I have like period Nurofen in my bag and I have to give it to her because she’s like in so much pain”. But Mum’s like “no, like she’s going to have sex every weekend now”. (11.F.3)

and skin problems:

Well, I’ve been on the pill this year but it’s for my skin, like to benefit my skin … she jokes around about it and she’s like “just because you’re on this pill I don’t want you thinking you can sleep around.” (11.F.4)

However, there was one mother who was happy to know that although the contraceptive pill was being prescribed for medical reasons: ‘my mum wanted me to go on the pill because apparently it also helps with evening out your periods’, it had the added benefit of contraception:

And then she’s, like, “and also it will help because if you start having sex and you don’t tell me, I just don’t want you to get pregnant.” So I was, like, “righto” and she said, “we might as well start you on it now.”… (9.F.3)

Young women, in particular, commonly received mixed messages when it came to contraception. Parents informed them that they should use contraception: ‘my parents, they’re very pro-condoms and the pill and stuff but not have sex: ‘but they’re very anti their daughters having sex. It’s just a conflicting message’ (13.F.2).

This was also delivered as a directive from a mother that sex should only happen while taking the contraceptive pill: ‘she’s like “no, if you want to do it you need to go on the pill”’ knowing that her daughter was having sex with her boyfriend, but not being willing to be seen to give permission: ‘but you’re not going on the pill because you’re too young’ (10.F.2). There were instances of fairly open conversations:
The other day I went grocery shopping with mum and we passed the condom section. And she actually made a comment. It was — I think it was the day after I had actually told her that I had a boyfriend and she goes, “that’s scary” and I go, “yeah” and then she was, “look, in the next few years it’s going to happen. It’s quite normal. I’d prefer that you didn’t until you were out of high school because neither me nor your father did, but, if you do, you have to tell me and go on the pill and use condoms.” (13.F.4)

Again there was a fear that giving the information was akin to giving permission: ‘she said that and then she was, “but I’m not giving you permission at all,” so I don’t really know … how that would be received’ (13.F.4).

Some parents had tried to broach the topic of contraception: ‘they’ve tried but I usually just sort of run’ (12.F.1), ‘when my mum tries to bring it up I’m like “no”’ (12.F.3), but have little success due to it being ‘too awkward’ (12.F.3). Avoidance was fairly common: ‘I try to avoid the topic’ (9.F.2). However, some parents used successful strategies to start these conversations, such as co-viewing: ‘sometimes they like use TV, so if I’m watching TV and then there’s like a sex scene they’ll use it to just like start a conversation’ (12.F.4), which others also mentioned as working for them (14.F.3; 14.F.4). Another successful strategy was: ‘I usually have those sorts of conversations in the car driving because it’s less awkward; you don’t have to look the person in the eye’ (14.F.2). It became evident that parents who had started these discussions earlier on had much greater success in a continued openness around this topic:

My parents just love to talk about sex … when we were little, my mum used to always talk about sex to get us used to it. She wanted us to be comfortable talking about these things. (16.F.3)

This young woman appeared to display no embarrassment about this openness. While not common, a few young people spoke about having parents who were not embarrassed to discuss sex and sexuality with their children: ‘my mum talks to me about everything. I haven’t had the chance to say that but my mum’s really open.
She talks about everything, her and my dad’ (9.F.4). This was supported by one young woman, whose mother communicated that:

If you want to have sex, come to me first and I will give you everything you need and I’m not going to judge you for it; I just want to know that you’re doing it and you’re doing it safely.’ (14.F.1)

While she didn’t require a discussion yet, she saw that it was genuine from her sister’s taking their parents up on that offer: ‘like, my older sister did; she went straight to mum and like the fact that like my mum and my dad and my sister can talk openly about sex’ (14.F.1). She recognised that others with a less open relationship might think ‘like it would be awkward ... for some people to like look in and that and say “oh you talk to your parents about sex” ...’, but was glad because she ‘would like to be able to talk to someone’ (14.F.1) who was not just a friend.

Discussing contraception was fairly limited for young men. One group spoke about parents jokingly discussing safe sex: ‘kind of like in a more funny way...like when I go out to a party or something like, “don’t forget always have safe sex”’ (3.M.1), which was attributed to knowing that a serious discussion was not required:

Yeah, I suppose they already, well my parents already know that we do like heaps of Sex Ed at school. So I think they already know that that’s already been covered...yeah, so they just kind of like joke around with it a bit, I suppose.’ (3.M.1)

The group of young men from the lowest socioeconomic background largely displayed the most open relationship with parents about sex. One of the young men had received a surprise Christmas gift from his grandmother:

Oh she gave me condoms for Christmas and then any day of the week that she comes home. She’s like “here you go”, massive pack of like really expensive good ones. (19.M.3)
His grandmother gave him the condoms without any explanation, but this was a conversation he had already had with his parents:

No she gives them to me, but mum and dad usually, they talked about it when I was like, I dunno, 13. And they’re like saying all this stuff and I’m like “okay.” (19.M.3)

The conversation included ‘just the usual sex, and...that time of the month for women. And how you should respect them and yeah — usual stuff’ (19.M.3). This was supported by another young man: ‘they normally say due to the fact of diseases like chlamydia and try not to get girls pregnant’ (19.M.2). When asked if this was a one-off conversation, it emerged that the information was repeated if necessary: ‘oh, it depends if you forget about it; if you don’t forget about it they just give up like you know it all’ (19.M.2).

**Parents rarely or never communicate about good sex**

Good sex was not an area that parents communicated much information about to their children. Overwhelmingly, when asked if it had been discussed or mentioned, the answer was ‘no’ or a variation on it (1.F.1; 1.F.5; 1.F.6; 2.F.3; 2.F.4; 2.F.5; 4.M.2; 4.M.3; 5.F.1; 5.F.2; 5.F.5; 6.M.1; 6.M.2; 8.F.1; 8.F.2; 8.F.3; 8.F.4; 8.F.5; 9.F.2; 9.F.3; 9.F.4; 10.F.1; 10.F.3; 11.F.1; 11.F.3; 11.F.4; 12.F.1; 12.F.3; 12.F.4; 13.F.2; 13.F.5; 13.F.6; 14.F.2; 14.F.3; 16.F.3; 17.F.3; 18.M.1; 18.M.2; 18.M.3; 18.M.4; 18.M.5; 19.M.4; 20.F.4). When good sex was presented as a topic in the focus groups, young people often referred to the safe sex or abstinence message that they had received: ‘they’re kind of like anti-sex before marriage. So, that comes up occasionally, but apart from that...’(2.F.5), or parents and their children had only generalised discussion: ‘they only talk about sex, but they don’t talk about the difference between good and bad sex and stuff like that’ (16.F.3).

Many young people particularly saw this topic as ‘way too awkward, I reckon’ (6.M.1) for discussion with parents. One of the reasons offered for this by a number
of participants was not wanting to think of parents having sex: ‘you don’t think of your parents as, you know…’ (5.F.2), ‘you don’t see your parents doing that… because it’s your parents’ (5.F.1), and because ‘they’re old’ (5.F.3). One young woman did not have a discussion about this as such, but when asked about good sex, she spoke about *hearing* what she assumed was good sex:

I hear my parents all the time and it’s kind of put me off all that sort of stuff…every morning it’s kind of disgusting. And like we’re banging on the wall telling them to shut up because their room is next to mine…and then every morning I get up and like next time can you guys shut up because I don’t want to hear youse.’ (20.F.4)

This young woman’s parents deny responsibility:

Well, if I’m telling my dad to shut up he said, “well it was [stepmother’s name] not me. Say it to [stepmother’s name]”, and it’s like “it’s your dad tell him”. They just blame each other for the noise they make. I know who it is and I don’t…just don’t do it it’s disgusting. (20.F.4)

These young people largely felt that this was not an area that could be taught: ‘I think it’s something you should more like learn for yourself, like rather than having someone tell you’ (2.F.2) because ‘this is stuff you just find out for yourself’ (4.M.3). But some young people did get some unexpected ideas from parents about this:

The other day, when mum was talking with my aunt, she made a joke about my dad being well hung. And I’m, “whoa” and then she just said, “well, it’s true”, and then I was, like, “mum!” . Then later on she was, “no, well, it’s very important that the guy has [a big penis]”, and she doesn’t talk about that at all so I was quite shocked. (13.F.4)

For one young woman, the message from her father about good sex was based on his friends from university and their experience:

My dad told me lots of stories about his friends having — doing it the first time and how lots of them did it and enjoyed it because
they just had no idea what they were doing. One of my dad’s friends had sex on a bar at college. (17.F.1)

Many of the young women spoke about losing virginity when asked about this topic, and about parents communicating instead about how it would be bad for the first time: ‘my mum was telling me about the first time she had it [sex]. She had no idea what she was doing and she said it was really unpleasant’ (17.F.1), or how it would be good if you saved yourself:

My mum thinks that like the best time or when you have the best sex is like after you get married. She thinks that you should save yourself because like then you’ll really know that you’re giving it to the right person so she says that’s when you’ll be most happiest. (14.F.4)

This message about needing an emotional connection was the most common one from parents in this area:

My dad…like talk[s] about you have to trust them. I think he then kind of — he’s a bit paranoid about mum, like how it didn’t work out so well, and so I think he’s really — he wants it to be really good for us, so he’d say everything on an emotional level, and then build something else from there … he considers it as a really high level of intimacy, and you’ve got to really know and trust in the familiar context, where it’s not just physical. (10.F.2)

This message was also delivered in a spiritual context:

Mum says, “when you have sex, you give a part of your spirit to them.” But that’s just her spirituality…a part of you becomes, attaches to them and then you lose that part of you. (9.F.1)

However, these types of messages about emotional connections were largely seen as clichéd:

Parents sometimes like, actually my mum is always like it’s always better if you like the person and they like you but like that’s cliché isn’t it; it could still be horrible, it can still be crap. (14.F.1)
Or just not very realistic:

I think he’s a bit extreme on it, I reckon it can just be physical, and I think it can be fun as well, and he’s of the opinion that it’s a lifelong thing, you’ve got to sort of — you’ve really got to commit to it, but I don’t think that’s the case, like I think you should commit for other reasons, not just because you’re having sex. I think it’s okay to have sex with a casual partner as — not as well, but in a different relationship, like having a lifelong thing. Everyone has it for different reasons, and that’s important, and I don’t really quite believe dad. (10.F.2)

This young woman had already had sexual intercourse with her boyfriend, and her father wanted to ensure that it was a good experience:

I’ve had sex, and my dad — like me and [boyfriend] told him about it and he’s like well — like he didn’t say did you enjoy it and stuff, but he was like — he did care that it was a good experience, and so like — I think he actually did ask if it was — not if it was good as in oh my god, but like did I regret it sort of stuff, like no I don’t, and I think he cares about that, whether it was around having fun, doing it... (10.F.2)

The young men from the lower socioeconomic background had received the most parental communication about this topic (although no conclusion can be drawn on whether this is corollary due to the low number of participants from this background) — particularly how to make sex pleasurable for their partner:

Facilitator: Okay, how to have good sex.


Facilitator: Yeah? Where did you find out about that?

...  

19.M.3: I think it might have been my parents.

19.M.3: My dad was like yeah the G-spot, but every girl has a different G-spot they say. I don’t know.

Facilitator: Just tell me more about the G-spot because what’s that got to do with having good sex?

19.M.3: It makes them feel good like it...gets a really good spot and it’s like it feels really, really, really nice for them...that’s all I know. Laughter. So, yeah.

19.M.2: It’s normally like up near the belly button somewhere, so you’ve gotta like point it [your penis] up.

This chapter has shown that most parents are struggling to even address sex and sexuality, let alone deliver useful and meaningful information about this to their children. The number of young people who were able to point to their parents as good sources of information was unfortunately very low. As was seen in the Literature Review, there are a number of factors that contribute to this lack of communication, and this research demonstrates the importance of providing parents with support and resources to better address sex and sexuality with their children. The next chapter will examine the media and the part it plays in educating young people about sex and sexuality.
Chapter 6. Data Analysis — Sexuality Information - Media

We know from previous research — as seen in Chapter 2 — that young people get the bulk of their information about sex and sexuality from four main sources: media, parents, school, and their friends. This chapter will look at the messages they receive from the source that some researchers often see as potentially the most damaging: the media.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the media in its many forms are often seen by researchers to be providing too much sexual or sexualised content (Bleakley et al. 2011; Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009; Brown and Bobkowski 2011; Brown, Keller and Stern 2009; Brown and L'Engle 2009; Chandra et al. 2008; Collins, Martino and Elliott 2011; Collins et al. 2011; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005; Eyal and Kunkel 2008; Eyal et al. 2007; Hennessy et al. 2009; Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999; Peter and Valkenburg 2009; Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein 2010; Nixon et al. 2011), and some researchers are concerned that this content influences young people to initiate sex or engage in sexual behaviours earlier than they would have otherwise (Collins et al. 2004). When discussing sex and sexuality with the young people in the focus groups it appeared that the media was one of the more positive sources of information in this area that provided a large amount of information about all of the topics discussed in the focus groups surrounding healthy sexuality.

The media provides information about navigating relationships

When speaking to the young women, it was clear that they consumed large amounts of media from a number of different sources. They read books and magazines; watched movies and a variety of television shows — from comedies, to teen drama, to shows aimed at a younger demographic, to more adult shows; surfed the internet; and downloaded smartphone apps. Magazines such as Dolly and Girlfriend were cited in every female focus group as a vital source of information about sex and sexuality, along with Cosmopolitan (or Cosmo) — referred to as ‘the girl bible’ (9.F.5)
— and Cleo. One area where young people pointed to the media as providing the most information was in navigating relationships.

Information from the media covered all stages of being in a relationship, from start to finish. This included the basics of deciding whom to ask out, and the seriousness of this choice due to the impact it can have on yourself or the other person: ‘make sure you’re making the right decision. If you only like them a little bit, don’t ask them out’ (9.F.3). Magazines spoke to how to ask someone out: ‘Girlfriend and Dolly ... has asking people out’ (9.F.2) and taught young women to be assertive:

12.F.4: Like I used to read Girlfriend and they had like that section like the sealed thing, like the love, not the sex bit and it like talked about a lot of issues and sometimes it was about girls asking out guys.

12.F.3: They tell us to ask guys out instead of waiting for them to ask us out.

Magazines spoke about getting what you want from that relationship: ‘well, they [magazines] say that you should always know what you want in a relationship’ (10.F.3) on your own terms ‘and you shouldn’t let the other person...pressure you into things that you don’t want to do’ (10.F.3), and how to conduct yourself: ‘those [magazines] are more like what you do in a relationship’ (9.F.3), ‘like Dolly magazine, they post a lot about dating and all that stuff about it’ (2.F.4). ‘The movies and the teenage drama shows’ (15.F.4) such as ‘Gossip Girl, OC, any of those sort of dramas’ (15.F.5) provided examples of things going wrong in relationships: ‘you see the bad experiences from the dramatic programmes’ (15.F.4), ‘yeah, and then something happens in the love and they have to apologise. You see it everywhere’ (15.F.6).

When the relationship becomes untenable: ‘teen magazines in general have information on how to break up and that stuff’ (9.F.1) and the foremost message about breaking up was to make a considered decision: ‘but if you’re breaking up with them, think about it a lot. Don’t just get a feeling that you want to break up with
them and then do it and then regret it later’ (9.F.3), ’be careful about it; make sure you’re doing the right thing’ (9.F.1). In the end, the media tells these young people that 'break ups always are meant to hurt' (9.F.5). While these young women often were not able to point to specific sources, they reported receiving messages about dating from a number of media sources:

10.F.3: Like, you see it in like movies and stuff.

10.F.2: I don’t really know where [you], like pick up information about dating and like stuff like that. I think I just pick it up subconsciously from probably like all of those things but I don’t really; it just all comes together and I know a fair bit about it but I’m not like “oh, yeah; I remember that one media report” or, I’ve just got a general idea.

According to these young people, sometimes the media, often in the form of television reality/drama programmes, provides a bad example. But the media savvy of these young people means that they are able to discern the bad from the good and see these programmes as an example of what not to do. Programmes such as The Hills and Jersey Shore, which are classed as ‘dramality’ programming — reality shows with elements of scripted drama — were mentioned in a number of focus groups in the context of navigating relationships: ‘sometimes on drama shows, it sort of shows you ways that people ask other people out and how they break up...like...The Hills, those sort of shows’ (2.F.1). When asked if they learned anything about relationships from this show, two of the young women spoke to the bad example set by the stars of the show: ‘just...don’t be like them’ (2.F.3).

Yeah, sort of from Spencer and Heidi’s relationship; you just don’t want to be like that. Because they don’t really treat each other very well, so you kind of learn from their... mistakes. (2.F.1)

One focus group of five young women spoke about Jersey Shore, with all but one of the participants stating that they watched the show. One of the young women laughingly informed the facilitator that ‘it’s actually a great show; very educational’
(8.F.2), ‘but they aren’t role models’ (8.F.1) added another participant, ‘no...they’re definitely not’ (8.F.2) . The other group participants echoed this sentiment by shaking their heads when asked if they concurred that the show’s stars were not role models.

The amount of media young men consumed was vastly different from the prolific amount consumed by young women: young men’s media use was much more limited. Young men occasionally watched television soaps, but predominantly watched comedy programmes, movies, sport, and listened to music. While they were largely reluctant to admit it, some of them also watched online pornography. This reluctance to admit to watching pornography, and the implications of this will be explored further in the discussion in Chapter 8.

When it came to navigating the beginning of a relationship, the young men also pointed to the media as providing information in this area: ‘oh, well, like all the movies you see somebody ask somebody out’ (18.M.3), ‘and stressing about asking people out’ (18.M.4), and soap operas such as Home and Away or Neighbours were cited as showing:

Like trying to break up and get with people, ah, sometimes they take a more intimate, um, direction towards it. Like they either might like go talk to them or just go up to them and like kiss and make out with them or something. (4.M.1)

‘Yeah, then they generally ask them do you want to go out; they’re like “come to the café” or something’ (4.M.4).

And when it came to breaking up, the media provided strategies:

Um, I’ve seen one thing. But then it’s just, ah, like one of the comedy shows. Take them to a public place so they don’t like get angry because they don’t want to look like idiots in front of a lot of people. (4.M.2)
This information, in this instance from ‘one of those Neighbours kind of shows where I watched a bit of it once’ (3.M.1) also extended to how to conduct yourself while in a relationship: ‘don’t be too forceful, I suppose. Like don’t just...yeah, don’t be forceful; be nice about it’ (3.M.1) because in this programme, the participant ‘kind of saw a guy being rude to a girl and just like do this, and she didn’t want to. So...it ended’ (3.M.1).

And getting what you wanted from a relationship: ‘seeing things in sitcoms and things like that how people in a relationship ask each other — like it’s almost in every show’ (18.M.4) was quite a complex process that involved asking for things subtly:

Well, I don’t know, just rather than just, you know, like telling them exactly, you just kind of, say like, okay, just a bit of an example. Say if you’re asking for directions to go somewhere, rather than saying, you know, how to get from here asking how to get to there, you might say, “I want to go here” and that suggests that they should give you directions, kind of thing, saying something else which suggests what you want to ask. (18.M.2)

Examples of ways in which this might be done included making ‘a joke about it...but there would be an element of truth to it’ (18.M.5) or dropping ‘hints’ (18.M.4; 18.M.5). Like the young women, the young men reported receiving relationship messages from numerous sources when unable to point to specific media: ‘just they’ve got it in all types of media basically’ (18.M.3).

The media provides information about navigating consent

The young people in these focus groups also reported the media as a source of information about consent. When the topic Saying no to sexual advances you don’t want came up, the media was listed in a variety of ways as providing information. For one group, this topic was interpreted as being about the ‘rape stories’ (1.F.5) seen in ‘SVU [Law & Order: Special Victims Unit]’ (1.F.2; 1.F.6) and ‘A Current Affair’
to what ‘you hear in the news about people being raped and getting charged for it and stuff’ (1.F.2), or ‘it’s even in some TV shows because there’s like molestation in some TV shows’ (1.F.5).

For the other groups, this topic pointed to issues around consent within relationships. These young women spoke about the complexities associated with navigating consent within relationships: ‘lots of people are scared to say no’ (11.F.3) because:

   People will kind of be like too “oh god, I don’t want to like, I don’t want people to judge me” or “I don’t want to hurt his feelings” or something like that so they just won’t say no and they’ll just kind of go along with it. (11.F.4)

Many of the examples these participants spoke about seeing in ‘drama programmes and things and movies’ (13.F.4) spoke to the perceived pressure put on young women by young men:

   They usually show the guy really — he’s kind of pressuring the girl against the wall for example or she’s too weak and she just goes with the flow. I see that in the movies a lot. (13.F.6)

These programmes demonstrate the complex issues around consent. When asked if in this situation the girl would go with it, or give in to the pressure, this young woman said that ‘yeah, she wants it but she’s not really certain about it. She’s not that sure about it. She wants to, but she's not sure.’ (13.F.6) echoing the uncertainty that can accompany the decision to say yes or no to sexual advances. Some of the young women felt the media provided ‘kind of the wrong message, probably’ (15.F.2), and when asked what message that was, it emerged that saying yes was associated with a perceived judgement: ‘not to just say no. I don’t know. They have weak characters’ (15.F.2) or ‘easy characters’ (15.F.4), ‘really, really, easy.’ (15.F.2) and other members of the group echoed this sentiment (15.F.6; 15.F.3).
This pressure within relationships to take the physical aspect further is shown in the media:

11.F.3: Yeah like usually on TV shows you can see like guys, like and in some movies it’s like guys pressuring girls to go further and like...

11.F.2: And I suppose there’s like cases of guys like being like if you don’t do this with me like we can’t hang out together, I’ll break up with you.

Facilitator: And that’s from like TV?

11.F.3: And if you’ve ever seen or read Looking for Alibrandi that’s a classic example, like her boyfriend wants to like have sex with her and she’s like no I’m not ready and then he’s angry at first but then he’s like...

One group of young men was critical of the unrealistic nature of some of these storylines because ‘with all movies, it includes everyone, everyone lives happily ever after’ (18.M.1); they felt that when:

In things like movies where there’s a relationship and like the girl or the guy wants something more than the other person in the relationship, doesn’t want to and then, that sort of thing. It’s pretty common. (18.M.4)

The outcome in these storylines was not always the reality:

I mean usually it will result in some kind of, I don’t know, break up and then they’ll both realise that, you know, they should just be happy with each other, and then get back together. (18.M.4)

The overwhelming message that young women, particularly, received was that they should be able say no if they didn’t want to go further:

Yeah everyone, I would say parents, school, friends, the media, and everything else, always talks to you about how you need to be able to say no if you want to, and how to say no.’ (10.F.2)
When asked if any of these sources told these young people how to say no, the media emerged as the predominant source of this information:

Facilitator: Do they tell you how to say no?

10.F.2: Yeah definitely, magazines definitely.

10.F.1: Yeah.

10.F.3: Yeah.

When discussing the example provided on how to say no in reference to television shows and movies, one group spoke about how ‘you see examples of it. It’s not, “don’t do this”’ (16.F.5) because ‘it’s not like a tutorial. It’s just like…’ (16.F.3) ‘how to say no’ (16.F.2). The book *Girl Stuff* was mentioned as using ‘like this funny thing with sex and it’s like half a joke and half not, well I don’t know if it was meant to be a joke, but it’s funny’ (14.F.2).

This group felt that ‘the media just kind of want to make it interesting so they don’t really care about putting a message across’ (15.F.3) because it presented what could be realistic situations for dramatic purposes, in that saying no does not always mean that someone would stop:

Like in *Gossip Girl* when Chuck tries to get with Jenny and then she's saying, “no” but — it’s almost teaching us even if you do say no, it still will happen sort of thing ... because not every time someone like your older brother [the character’s brother rescues her in this instance] is just going to come in and warn off the guy. (15.F.5)

15.F.6: I guess the media is if you saw a TV show and the girl was, "no," the guy wouldn't be, "Alright. Yep, I'm gone."

15.F.5: Yeah, it still happens in the end.

15.F.6: They'd pressure her probably into it. They wouldn't just walk away. They wouldn't film that; it's just not interesting.
The young men in these focus groups largely felt that saying no was a gendered issue because in this context: ‘they usually just talk about girls’ (4.M.2) and ‘girls would be the ones saying no more often than guys’ (6.M.1). This young man pointed to ‘sort of a broad message’ (6.M.1) provided by a relatively popular amateur vlogger on YouTube who uploads from ‘somewhere else in Australia’ (6.M.1)

called Mr Teddy, because he’s saying when a girl has sex with the guy and it’s like the girl’s choice basically because the guy’s — he’s saying that a guy is a definite yes, and it’s — because the guy’s a legend if he has sex and the girl’s a slut because it was her choice or something. (6.M.1)

The young men further emphasised this sentiment with ‘it’s girls that seem to say no. Never really care if the guys turn them down, turn down sex or you know’ (4.M.5). When the facilitator asked if this translated to them feeling an expectation that they should all want sex, one young man said ‘that pressure’s there’ (4.M.3).

**The media provides core information about sex and good sex**

Another area within sex and sexuality that the media is overwhelmingly providing the most amount of information is about sex and sexuality, and particularly about why and how sex can be good. Young women in the focus groups all pointed to teen magazines such as ‘Girlfriend and Dolly. Those two are the big ones for our age when it comes to sex for our age’ (13.F.6). Both of these magazines have a ‘sealed section’ (5.F.4), which was referred to as ‘the part where you peel off and they have a sex part’ (13.F.6), ‘yeah, there's just that one section and you rip it off’ (13.F.4). And women’s magazines Cosmo and Cleo were also spoken about extensively as one of their primary sources of information and a starting point for further discussion among their peer groups when it came to sex and particularly good sex: ‘I think we get the idea of having the sex from reading magazines and talking about it with other people’ (9.F.1).
Something that emerged from discussions with these young women was a confirmation of the self-selection of information according to developmental level as discussed in the Media Practice Model (see Chapter 2). For some of these young women, teen magazines such as *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* provided sufficient information: ‘they really go into depth about everything’ (8.F.3), and, when asked by the facilitator if that level of information was helpful, this young woman stated that ‘it actually is; some of it’s like “I don’t need to know this”, but other — it’s like okay’ (8.F.3), demonstrating that they recognise when too much information is provided for their level of development. When discussing the sealed sections of these magazines, some of the young women (in this case, a group of five with a mean age of 15) thought that ‘some of them are really funny’ (13.F.6) and when asked in what way they were funny:

13.F.6: I don't know, they're just too far. Too much information. I know they're anonymous so they can give as much information as they want but — and then thinking about people our age doing that kind of stuff. Some of them are full on already.


13.F.6: Yeah, some are — yeah, 13 year olds are getting it on.

13.F.2: Yeah, but usually the people in those magazines know nothing and they're asking really...

13.F.6: That they should — the kind of basic knowledge.

Facilitator: What's basic knowledge though?

13.F.6: Just — well, some people don’t know you have to use a condom or just basic knowledge.


13.F.6: Or to do it when you’re comfortable.
Whereas for another group (of five young women with a mean age of 14.2), these magazines, and the *Dolly* sealed section in particular, ‘was so boring I almost died’ (5.F.3) because for these young women, the information provided in *Dolly* is ‘more like tween than teen’ (5.F.3). When these participants were ready for more information, they turned to the more adult magazines such as *Cleo*: ‘like *Cleo*...*Cleo* does good sex bits, but *Dolly* doesn’t anymore. Well, the one I read didn’t do anything’ (5.F.3), and *Cosmo*: ‘*Girlfriend* or them [are] about...guys liking you, but *Cosmo*’s basically all about sexuality’ (9.F.3) ‘and sex techniques’ (9.F.1) because ‘*Cosmo*’s uncensored’ (9.F.4) and it provides information about sexual topics that these young women were interested in, such as ‘sex techniques types of pieces’ (9.F.3).

*Cleo* was particularly mentioned as a major source of information about having good sex:

11.F.4: *Cleo*, like the cover of *Cleo*, every month there’s like 101 ways to guarantee great sex.

11.F.2: It’s like how to have the best sex because I remember one trip I got a *Cleo* on the plane there and on the plane back and it was like exactly the same thing, it was like you know like best positions and stuff and I was like...

Because of the dearth of information in this area from other sources (discussed in Chapter 7), the fact that good sex is ‘definitely something that is so covered by the media’ (11.F.4) and magazines ‘like *Cleo* especially’ (11.F.3) or ‘all those women’s magazines’ (11.F.4), it was clear that this was a vital source of knowledge for young women who were ready to seek out further information:

11.F.2: I’m pretty sure that’s like one of *Cleo*’s appeal that makes it slightly different from a lot of other magazines otherwise it would just be a normal fashion magazine so they just have a lot of sex articles so people who want to know about sex can buy *Cleo*. 
11.F.4: The entire magazine is sex.

Again, another group (of six girls with a mean age of 15) spoke of reading ‘a lot of stuff about like good sex in magazines, like there was this article [in Cleo] that was like make sex better’ (12.F.2), but this young woman stated that she ‘didn’t really get anything’ because she ‘didn’t really know what they meant or anything’ (12.F.2).

Another member of the focus group demonstrated an awareness of what media was suited to this group when she stated: ‘that’s probably because Cleo’s meant for an older audience’ (12.F.6), and, because of the slower sexual development, and media literacy of this young woman, she was able to acknowledge and recognise that this article was for ‘like people who would have already had sex; that’s why I probably didn’t understand’ (12.F.2).

The young women mentioned some other sources of information about good sex, and what constituted good sex, including ‘Google’ (9.F.4), which was corroborated by another group participant: ‘Google as well’ (9.F.1) who added: ‘yeah, reading books that contain sex scenes in them. That helps as well’ (9.F.1), and ‘movies, like, Friends with Benefits, No Strings Attached sort of films’ (13.F.4), which featured similar storylines in which:

They were using each other but like just for that [sex] and I think like I think in the end they actually did have good sex and then they found like it caused them to have like a really serious relationship even though at the start of the storyline it was just like no, just friends but it turned into something more serious. (12.F.6)

When asked about having good sex, one of the male groups spoke about sexual positions such as ‘69’ (4.M.1), ‘doggy’ (4.M.4), ‘missionary’ (4.M.2), ‘cowgirl’ (4.M.2) and ‘reverse cowgirl’ (4.M.3). They said they had learned about these positions from ‘TV shows’ (4.M.2) such as ‘Friends’ (4.M.1) and movies such as ‘Harold and Kumar Take Over Guantanamo Bay’ (4.M.3). One group of young women also spoke about sexual positions in relation to good sex, but had found ‘iPhone apps’ (9.F.2) such as ‘Sex Facts, [and] Sex Positions’ (9.F.4) and ‘Sex Dice Game’ (9.F.5) to be a ‘very
important’ source of information that they agreed they are learning from (9.F.1; 9.F.2), ‘but not as much as from reading’ (9.F.5). One group of women mentioned that the overall message that they received in relation to media and good sex was that ‘good sex is a combination of things’ (13.F.4), ‘I think good sex as the name suggest, sex that is good that you enjoy, that it's, yeah.’ (13.F.2) ‘That you orgasm and everything else that's good.’ (13.F.4).

One media source often regarded as troublesome, particularly for young men, is pornography (Bryant 2010; Nixon et al. 2011; Peter and Valkenburg 2006; Brown and L'Engle 2009), but one group of young men spoke about pornography as a place where ‘you actually see it on porn first what actually happens’ (6.M.1). Contrary to the idea that young people perceive pornography as real, these young men demonstrated a substantial amount of media literacy in relation to pornography when they stated: ‘I know it’s not like that because that's crazy’ (6.M.1), ‘yeah, that’s obviously over exaggerated when you watch it [sex] on that [pornography]’ (6.M.2). When asked by the facilitator to elaborate on what they meant about pornography being crazy, and how it would differ from real life, they recognised that ‘well, if it’s your first time, no one’s going to know what you’re doing. You're not going to be as confident’ (6.M.1) and ‘yeah, you'll be more experimenting rather than knowing what you're doing and what to do and all that type of stuff’ (6.M.2). These young men further demonstrated their media literacy in relation to pornography when asked by the facilitator if they had ‘learned anything from porn about what sex acts are pleasurable for different people’:

6.M.1: Different people react differently. It's hard with porn because a lot of it’s put on and acting.


6.M.1: Well, most of it is staged.

The media provides information about safe sex

Safe sex featured overwhelmingly as a topic that these young people knew a lot about because ‘it’s constantly shoved down our throats that we need to be safe’ (8.F.4), and for these young women, this came from ‘school’ (8.F.4) ‘and like TV’ (8.F.1); ‘it’s everywhere’ (8.F.4). School and parents will be discussed further in the next chapter, but the media emerged as an important source of information in this area, too.

The possible consequences of having unsafe sex has featured in the media — and particularly in dramatic programs aimed at young people — for many years, and the young people reflected this in our focus groups discussions. Unsafe sex can lead to two possible negative outcomes: pregnancy, or contracting an STI. For these young people, unexpected pregnancy featured as the worst of these two outcomes (discussed further in Chapter 7) and this emphasis was reflected in some of the media they consumed:

Also, safe sex is like really promoted through the whole like fear of falling pregnant as a teenager because it’s such a common storyline in TV shows that people our age watch. And it’s just like basically in every show targeted at us; there’s always going to be a teenage pregnancy storyline so you’re kind of like, it kind of gives you the impression that it is pretty common or like really possible. Like it isn’t really common but because it happens on TV so often you don’t really think, “oh it’s not going to happen to me”. (11.F.4)

When asked if storylines on these programmes showed young people contracting an STI or STD — these terms are still used interchangeably for these young people — one young woman said: ‘yeah, sometimes’ (11.F.2), ‘but it’s not as common as like getting pregnant’ (11.F.1) ‘because like as a teenager like being pregnant seems like much more of like a feared thing’ (11.F.2).

This fear is capitalised upon with two reality programmes aired on MTV Networks. The first is 16 and Pregnant:
An hour-long documentary series focusing on the controversial subject of teen pregnancy. Each episode follows a 5-7 month period in the life of a teenager as she navigates the bumpy terrain of adolescence, growing pains, rebellion, and coming of age; all while dealing with being pregnant. Each story offers a unique look into the wide variety of challenges pregnant teens face: marriage, adoption, religion, gossip, finances, rumors among the community, graduating high school, getting (or losing) a job. Faced with incredibly adult decisions, these girls are forced to sacrifice their teenage years and their high school experiences. (MTV 2014a)

16 and Pregnant feeds into the second programme, Teen Mom:

In 16 and Pregnant, they were moms-to-be. Now, follow ... [young women who featured on 16 and Pregnant] as they face the challenges of motherhood. (MTV 2014b)

MTV has faced criticism for these programmes, with claims that they glamourise teen pregnancy and parenthood (Chang and Hopper 2011), and this was mentioned by one young woman:

On 16 and Pregnant, you’re like you do not want that to happen to you, so...I mean I think it’s really bad that they sell the whole like I had a baby’ (8.F.1)

However, she went on to say:

But I think it’s good because other people are like kind of warned by it when they see how hard it is to have a kid when you’re like at school. (8.F.1)

For many of the young women in these focus groups, these programmes were cited as important sources of information about the possible consequences of engaging in unsafe sex:

12.F.1: There’s 16 and Pregnant, which is teenagers who get pregnant and how they deal with that with their families and stuff and it’s pretty upsetting.

12.F.1: Yeah like they’re teenagers and they’ve gotten pregnant and some of them are like really freaked out about it, they don’t know what to do but some of the other ones will be just like oh I’m having this baby, I’ll be a responsible mum and they go out partying. It’s really upsetting; just can you not get pregnant; it would be much better.

The ‘life changing’ aspect of teen pregnancy was something that many of these young women had considered: ‘you can’t really go anywhere without your Grade 12 certificate and having a child when you’re trying to work’ (15.F.6), and this message was reinforced by the young mothers on Teen Mom:

Yeah, and even on … Teen Mom, they were, “I love my child”, but they still — every single one of them still said, “don’t do it. Don’t do it”. They were giving out advice: “don’t do this. It’s not worth it”. (15.F.5)

As much as the factors of life coming to the problems, the issues overweigh it. You have more — on this show they were crying the whole time. They were fighting. And I think I would rather not have that. (15.F.5)

Teen pregnancy is also often shown in programmes viewed by young people. A number of young people cited Neighbours for a teen pregnancy storyline featured some time ago: ‘actually, Neighbours had something about sex in it. It was, “will you marry me if I’m still pregnant?”’ (9.F.5), ‘yeah, that was about two years ago. That was that one about the girl getting pregnant and then she was…’ (9.F.1), ‘I think Neighbours is a G [rating] and one of the characters got pregnant’ (15.F.5), ‘there’s teenage pregnancies’ (15.F.6). Movies can also provide cautionary tales that point to the need for contraception use: ‘sometimes, in movies if it’s about a teenage girl getting pregnant and it might be they might be talking about, “you should have used a condom” or something’ (9.F.3). For young men, the message about safe sex could come down to the fear of getting a girl pregnant. These messages sometimes have slightly misogynistic overtones, but provide an overall safe sex message:
There’s one thing that I got off of a YouTube video. A guy called Phillip DeFranco, it was one of his videos. But anyways the thing is his message was if you’re having sex with a girl without a condom then you’re having sex … with a blank cheque. And then he quoted Kanye West saying bitches be getting pregnant on purpose, and the video ended. But it was really entertaining and it, yeah…the whole condom and blank cheque message thing is funny. (4.M.2)

In addition to showing the difficulties the young women experience on *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, the programmes reinforce this message by highlighting supplementary information on the their websites:

I remember…actually I think I was at someone’s house and we were watching *16 and Pregnant* and they went “like to learn about safe sex go to this…” and we did it … we were like reading through, like what the hell, like reading it all … it’s like a website. And we were just reading through and it told you about all the stats and everything.’ (1.F.5)

The *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* websites’ information spoke to contraception efficacy:

It had a picture of a condom; they had a picture of everything and you could put your mouse over it and then it would tell you like...what it is, what’s the...like…” (1.F.5)

‘What it does’ (1.F.3), ‘what’s the percentage that you would get pregnant and what’s the percentage that you wouldn’t’ (1.F.5), and this information is also shown in *Teen Mom*:

That’s such a good show … but then it’s also they do — there’s a casual story every now then. And it would be, “this many people get pregnant, and this many people don’t wear condoms, and this many condoms break, and blah, blah, blah”. So, it's, like, yeah.’ (15.F.4)

While these young women often access the sites associated with these shows on a whim or for a laugh — ‘we were reading it because we were mucking about
watching the show [16 and Pregnant]; I’m like, “oh let’s go on it”’ (1.F.5) — they often take away a large amount of information: ‘but we ended up like reading it like full intent like, what the hell...yeah’ (1.F.5).

One episode of a television show that provided information about condom efficacy, which affected — and informed — a large audience when it originally aired in 2002 was Friends. Collins et al. (2003) spoke about the reach that this particular episode of Friends had and the subsequent education it provided, particularly to adolescents, in their research. This programme is being re-run on one of the local free-to-air channels, and was mentioned in a number of the focus groups, with this episode mentioned in particular:

Um, you know the TV show Friends? ... like there’s an episode where they’re like full-on talking about like condoms and stuff. And I dunno, they sort of do it in a joking way and like Joey finds out they’re only 98%...effective. (1.F.2)

These young people recognised the educational aspect of this episode: ‘it sort of teaches you stuff but they do it in a joking way’ (1.F.2) and the use of humour cemented the message in their minds: ‘it’s funny; like, it catches our eye but yet you’re learning at the same time’ (1.F.5).

Condom efficacy was mentioned a number of times as a storyline that features in the media; this can include novels: ‘I read about the effectiveness of condoms in a John Marsden book, I think it was’ (18.M.1) and in movies:

1.F.1 And like on, um, Juno ... They, um, they have sex but the condom was like five years old or something, or his dad gave it to him at the start of, um, Grade 8.

1.F.5 That’s in Grease as well.

1.F.1 Yeah, but, um, it broke and, yeah.

1.F.5 But they still just...yeah, the same as like in Grease, doesn’t that happen in Grease? And he was like, oh
damn, it broke. And he had it like since he was 12 and it was always like in his wallet.

1.F.1 And like in The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants

1.F.3 I was just about to say that! Yeah.

1.F.1 That happens as well.

Condom use is also discussed or shown in the media that these young people consume. *Friends* shows Joey speaking to the need to be safe: ‘Yeah. Joey's — you just need a raincoat. So Joey just pulls out the whole string [of condoms]’ (16.F.3) and in *Pretty Woman*, when she pulls out the condoms: [she says] “I'm safe to go” (9.F.2). For these young women there was a discussion about the frequency of use of condoms in film:

9.F.5: 90% of the time in movies when people have sex, they usually wear a condom unless they're trying to have a baby.

9.F.2: You don’t know that because you can’t tell.

9.F.5: No, but they usually say, "do you have protection?" and then before they have it [sex].

Myths surrounding sex are debunked in programmes aimed at teens and young people: ‘In *Glee*, a PG show, Quinn gets pregnant because she isn't wearing a condom. And then she is, “yeah, we did that in the spa”, but that's not true’ (15.F.6). In the programme referred to here, the character, Quinn, convinces her boyfriend that she became pregnant when he ejaculated in the hot tub after receiving manual stimulation from her. Magazines are also important sources of information for debunking myths. One group of young women discussed the withdrawal method of contraception: ‘well, I have heard a story where they ... didn’t have a condom so they were just like doing like ins and outs’ (2.F.3), ‘oh, yeah, I heard that’ (2.F.4). This young women was unsure: ‘I don’t know if that’s true, if it works’ but her friend had found this information in a magazine:
Yeah, apparently, I read in *Dolly* that actually it is like 75% chance well that you’re going to like get pregnant by doing like the...pull out sort of thing. (2.F.4)

Young people can get information that they relate to having safe sex from unusual sources like the programme *Find My Family Australia* (Lifestyle 2014):

> Have you guys seen the show, Finding [sic] my Family? Lots of them, their parents accidently had them and their family had to make her go into an orphanage so the baby had a, yeah. So the media [provides information about safe sex] as well. (15.F.1)

The safe sex message is reinforced throughout the media from a diverse range of sources, which can include books: ‘*Girl Stuff* has all that [safe sex] stuff again’ (5.F.3) and magazines: ‘yeah, they’re like “always use it no matter what”, *Cosmo* and everything they’re like “make sure you always use protection”’ (8.F.2). This message is not always didactic, but can be framed in a real-life way:

> And they have — not case studies, but examples of life stories of people who have...like, my life was ruined by this, so it’s kind of like a warning as well. (8.F.1)

Safe sex is talked about in ‘*Girlfriend*’ (13.F.3): ‘yeah, the part where you peel off and they have a sex part...they talk about that’ (13.F.6) and ‘in *Dolly*’ (2.F.5) they say ‘use a condom or you’ll get chlamydia-slash-gonorrhoea-slash...’ (2.F.5)

STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and HIV/AIDS are mentioned by these young people as being a large part of the safe sex message they receive from the media. A campaign about genital herpes called ‘The Facts’ (*"The Facts"* 2013), run by a pharmaceutical company and included television, bus, and toilet door advertisements, was mentioned a number of times in different groups: ‘because there was that ad for herpes on TV and there’s like all these different people’s underwear’ (2.F.2), ‘oh yeah, the one on the toilet doors’ (2.F.3), ‘do you remember the undie ad...where it had lots of different undies and they get one ... yeah, it was, like, it can happen to anyone’ (17.F.1). These advertisements gave the young people
in the focus groups something to think about without using the lurid pictures of STIs often shown to them as a warning (discussed in the following chapter): ‘it’s just scary how you get it and it never goes away, like some of them’ (2.F.5), ‘but like you can give it to other people’ (2.F.2), ‘it was, like, it can happen to anyone’ (17.F.1). While these advertisements focused on herpes, they realised that the message extended beyond that one infection: ‘and it was also AIDS and a lot of sexually transmitted diseases’ (17.F.3).

The young women also mentioned a range of governmental advertisements in the context of safe sex. One advertising campaign, The National Binge Drinking Campaign, run by the Department of Health and Ageing (2008) (Now called the Department of Health), called Don’t turn a night out into a Nightmare was mentioned by a number of young women because it depicted a drunken girl having unprotected sex in the bushes, ‘like, just those, Don’t turn a night out ads; it’s like the same kind of message’ (8.F.1). The Australian Government (2009) also has a specific campaign, The National STI Prevention Program: Sexual Health Campaign, which:

Launched in May 2009 with advertising in magazines, on the radio, online and outdoors to reach young people aged 15 to 29 years. The advertising provides young people with important information about the transmission, symptoms, treatment and, most importantly, the prevention of STIs. (Australian_Government 2009)

The advertisements featured in this campaign were mentioned specifically:

On like buses and stuff like that there’s always like — you know how they have the ad going over a window, there was like this campaign with a girl like hugging over a guys shoulder, and it was like “don’t” — it was like a warning about STIs or something. (8.F.1)

Placing these advertisements on buses appeared to be an effective delivery method because: ‘if you’re by yourself on the bus and you have nothing else to do, you read it’ (11.F.3).
Young women also mentioned television programmes with a younger audience as providing information or including storylines around STIs. While one young woman felt that ‘they don’t talk — I don’t think they talk about so much about STIs and stuff in the media’ (16.F.5), it emerged that they had seen STIs mentioned: ‘and on Gossip Girl, remember when Gossip Girl said that Serena had the HIV’ (16.F.4), ‘yeah, on TV shows, there’s always dramas about did the condom break or something’ (16.F.3). A different group also mentioned Gossip Girl as providing a message about responsible safe sex:

On Gossip Girl it was like, like every time they started going out they were like, “oh, yeah, are you ready to get a medical test because she was like rumoured to have an STD” and then he was like, “oh, yeah, but when we started going out we both had like medical checks.” (12.F.2)

Participants mentioned Glee in this context also: ‘like, they explained it that, um, when you’re sleeping with someone, you’re really sleeping with anybody that they’ve slept with.’ (2.F.3)

One group spoke about the promiscuity of some characters on television programmes and questioned the safety of these behaviours: ‘[he] sleeps with everyone he’s seen. How can that be safe? Like he’d be a walking...’ (5.F.5)

Yeah it’s like ... all guys or whatever in TV shows, they like to have sex with so many women and they like never get infections. And if they do, it’s like for one episode and then it’s all fine again. (5.F.4)

These young women raised Two and a Half Men as an exemplar; although, contrary to the perceived lack of consequences of unsafe sex, in the episode they discussed, the character, Charlie, was possibly facing the effects of risky sexual practices:

On Two and a Half Men I saw ... the guy said to this, to Jake, he was like, because Charlie walked in and he’s like yeah, I might have Chlamydia.’ (5.F.5)
This was the subject of a joke within the show: ‘then the dad of the son was like, “oh yeah, he invented chlamydia because he gets it like all the time”’ (5.F.5).

Young men also spoke about receiving messages about STIs from ‘TV shows’ (4.M.2) such as ‘Californication’ (4.M.2) where ‘the guy gets syphilis’ (4.M.2). When asked what he knew about syphilis from this programme: ‘it’s bad. And something about burning when he pees I think. Or it could have been chlamydia’ (4.M.2). Home and Away was also a source of information when ‘they had something about STDs on there — oh STIs’ (4.M.2) when one of the characters got ‘itchy genitals’ (4.M.4) although the students didn’t remember the details of which STI the character had contracted. What they did learn were the symptoms, such as ‘how it burnt when he pees’ and ‘something to do with barbed wire on his down there’ (4.M.2).

One of the most prevalent safe sex messages that the girls in the focus groups spoke about was from a comedy movie aimed largely at young women. Mean Girls features a high school physical education teacher, Coach Carr, who is given the job of sex education. The two speeches Coach Carr gives about sex in the film are caricatures of the sex education lessons delivered in high schools:

Don’t have sex, ‘cause you will get pregnant and die! Don’t have sex in the missionary position, don’t have sex standing up, just don’t do it. Promise? OK, everybody take some rubbers.

At your age, you’re gonna be havin’ a lotta urges. You’re gonna wanna take off your clothes, and touch each other. But if you do touch each other, you will get chlamydia. And die. (Fey 2004)

These were quoted in half of the female focus groups in the context of safe sex, and this was often almost verbatim:

5.F.3 I guess on Mean Girls it’s like, you know, you will get chlamydia and die.
13.F.2: Yeah, but, no, what's that movie? What movie is it? ... There's a PE teacher and he's standing in front of a blackboard and he goes, “If you have sex you will...”

13.F.2: Mean Girls.

13.F.4: If you have sex you will get pregnant and you will get chlamydia and you will die. Just don't have sex.

16.F.5: Mean Girls. Don't have sex

16.F.4: You don’t have sex standing up. You don’t have sex.

16.F.5: Just don’t have sex. You’ll get pregnant and die.

16.F.1: You’ll get pregnant and die. Everyone take some rubbers.

16.F.5: And then they pass around condoms.

17.F.3: The Mean Girls quote.

17.F.1: Don’t have sex or you’ll get pregnant and die. Don't have sex standing up. Don't have sex in the missionary position. Just don't have sex. Everybody take some rubbers.

17.F.2: I said to mum the other day, “always making Mean Girl references.”

This humorous speech was quoted a number of times without directly attributing it to the movie, but it was clear from the suggestion that you would ‘get pregnant and die’ (2.F.4; 2.F.5; 8.F.1; 9.F.1) that Mean Girls was the source of the vernacular.

The media provides information about self-esteem
An area where young people perceive the media as providing equally good and bad messages is in the area of body image and self-esteem. Many of the young women spoke about the apparent difficulties of living up to the ideal of beauty demonstrated in the media and particularly in magazines:

I reckon like the media is a massive influence on the way that girls like shape themselves and the way that they think, like it’s really, I don’t know what the word is but like it influences your decisions on things and it impacts you as well and like say for instance like the models in the magazines can be like really, can influence like girls our age especially and which can also lead up to like really serious cases of like anorexia and bulimia and also about the weight issues and the way your body looks to others, like I’m really self conscious personally about things yeah. (12.F.6)

The young women spoke about what they thought was the ideal look: ‘like in society like, pretty at our age, like pretty is like getting a tan, skinny’ (14.F.2), ‘yeah, like good body, tan, long hair, like clear skin’ (14.F.2). These young women felt that when it came to having relationships, they needed to live up to this media ideal of beauty in order to find someone:

It has a lot to do with like TV and magazines because like they’re all really beautiful skinny women and they always get all the really good looking guys and so you kind of think that you have to look almost exactly the same as them to even have a chance. (14.F.4)

One girl spoke about how ‘there’s lots of different kinds of pretty. I think pretty has opened up. I used to have a very small narrow-minded, different view, but now...’ (11.F.2), but one of her peers stated that ‘there’s still definitely like a universal kind of like recognition of what is attractive although to not like one specific thing’ (11.F.4). When asked what the ‘universal recognition was, another young woman said: ‘well, it depends on what country; like, if we’re thinking about the western world where it’s like skinny, for girls especially, it’s like skinny, big boobs, long legs’ (11.F.3).
Having ‘big boobs’ (14.F.3) emerged as a common ideal for many young women. When one group was asked if they thought that big breasts were important, the answer was ‘no, I don’t think that they’re important’ (12.F.6), but this young woman went on to say ‘but, like, I just think, like, to have the best body you need to be, like, skinny with a nice...with boobs’ (12.F.6). This idea apparently came from ‘TV’ (12.F.6) and ‘models’ (12.F.3). Large breasts mattered because ‘guys will want to have sex with you if you have big boobs’ (1.F.6). This was something they had ‘seen...in movies’ (1.F.6) because in movies ‘you see the really pretty, voluptuous girls get the really hot guys and then where...where like the other people sort of get left at the side’ (1.F.6). In this context, these young women saw ‘voluptuous’ as being ‘skinny, big boobs’ (1.F.6).

This pressure or ideal to look a certain way was something that one group of young women at first felt did not translate for young men: ‘generally, I don’t think they care as much [about their appearance]’ (5.F.4), ‘like, they wouldn’t care about, like, obviously make-up or whatever like that’ (5.F.4), but, on consideration: ‘they probably care more about, like, I don’t know, muscles or something like that’ (5.F.4), ‘I guess some guys would care’ (5.F.5). When discussing this with young men, it emerged that they did feel that there were messages from: ‘the media...the media’s the strongest one’ (6.M.1), ‘yeah, through the media’ (6.M.2) about what the ideal look or body type was for a male. For this group, ‘the perfect guy’ (6.M.1) was the ideal provided in the media, and these young men felt this was evident because: ‘you don’t usually see guys that aren’t perfect on TV because they obviously want their show to look good’ (6.M.2), ‘and in magazines, there’s a lot of — even male magazines, all the guys that are in the ads would be the perfect guy’ (6.M.1). They spoke to the aspirational nature of advertising: ‘oh, if I had this watch I’d be the perfect guy’ (6.M.1), and were able to unpack the reasoning for using this ‘perfect guy’:

They wouldn't do something that would down their brand. And if you have — if you're advertising a watch; for example, if you have a
watch and then you have some really fat wrist on it, then it would make it look really small and not fitting well, then no one would buy it. (6.M.2)

When asked for specific examples of products that had been advertised using ‘the perfect guy’: ‘I think in the shaving ads. They always use the men that — the athletes that are always bulked and worried about a shirt and all that stuff’ (6.M.2) showing that for men, the ideal appears to be an athletic physique: ‘athletes are used a lot in ads. In Rexona, they use the athletes, and Lynx ads they use the pretty guy that gets all the girls or whatever.’ (6.M.1)

At the forefront of the discussion for young women about the dichotomy of media messages came from magazines. They recognised that magazines actively provided positive messages about self-esteem and feeling good about yourself; in this case, ‘it was either Dolly or Girlfriend’ (2.F.5): ‘it said that you should look in the mirror every day and say something good about yourself to your reflection...you feel better’ (2.F.5), and ‘a lot of those magazines as well [say], “Be happy with yourself”’ (13.F.6). One young woman said ‘and then you read this story about, like, you know, girls feel insecure and like this is what guys really think; they don’t care about make-up’ (5.F.3), but she felt the positive message was counteracted: ‘and then, like, you turn to the next page; it’s, like, this beautiful model like decked out and it’s like...’ (5.F.3). This was echoed by other members of this group, with digital manipulation such as airbrushing and Photoshop at the forefront of their critiques: ‘and then it’s like the natural look, but then it’s just like all perfect skin and you can tell it’s been airbrushed and everything’ (5.F.4), ‘they’re very, you know, airbrushed and things’ (5.F.2), ‘yeah, like the photos are always like perfectly pretty’ (5.F.3). Although this digital manipulation is employed, one young woman spoke to the underlying issue of pressure to live to an ideal: ‘and even though, like, you know like everyone’s always telling us, “oh they’re not real”, like they’re Photoshopped; even though you know that, like, clearly they’re still like gorgeous’ (14.F.2). Often, the positive messages provided in the media, such as ‘I’m going to be myself and show my true colours’
were discounted: ‘but no one really takes it seriously’ (11.F.1) because ‘it’s really corny and it’s also like attractive people in all the magazines and stuff’ (11.F.3).

Many of these young women felt that any positive messages in the media were ‘clichés’ (13.F.4) and some gossip magazines were contradictory: ‘and they tell you like diets that all the stars are on and all that’ (5.F.5),

Yeah. I think — I saw in a magazine and it was Lara Bingle on the beach — I didn't really read the headline but I think it was something about being fat or being overweight ...and it’s, like, what about girls that look at that and they go, “well, I'm the same size as her”...you know.’ (15.F.5)

Young men also saw the pressure to look a certain way, but this message appeared to have come from the media:

I think there’s also, well, I’m not 100% certain, but what I believe is happening from what I’ve seen adverts about, like people having low self-esteem and they look in the media and they see the models in there, and they don’t feel quite as good. (18.M.3)

One group revealed that the beauty ideal was something that was present in their minds. They had had a discussion about how this archetype of beauty that is held up as the ideal was transient because of changing tastes over time:

15.F.5: We were talking about this on Saturday actually. I was at a friend’s house and they were — my friend said, “It’s funny how Twiggy pretty much changed it all,” because before that — it was good to be voluptuous and Marilyn Monroe, she was a size 12 or 14 or something like that. And as soon as Twiggy came along it was amazing how skinny was in. So I think that models are what set what’s in because, think about it, that’s what their job is, for clothes. So of course people are going to be...

15.F.4: Will model their appearance on what they see.
I notice every now and then — this year for models it was girl with gappy teeth and really skinny arms. But then next year it may be really pale girls with blue eyes. It changes. It changes what’s in at that moment.

But that really skinny.

Yeah, but that could change soon.

Another area of the media that these young women mentioned as providing contrasting messages about appearance and beauty was popular music: ‘I think also in the media music is also a big factor … there can be some songs that would make girls feel a little pressured to look good’ (15.F.5). When asked what songs they were referring to, these young women said that the songs that sent negative messages came primarily from male artists: ‘Eminem plays a big role in saying shit about girls’ (15.F.5)

Songs like the guys sing ... guys sing interesting songs about girls. It’s always about their appearance. If you notice they’re not, “she’s got such a great personality.” It’s like, “damn, she’s a sexy bitch.” (15.F.6)

One group of young women spoke about how ‘there’s heaps of songs about feeling good and being happy’ (16.F.3), ‘don’t worry’ (16.F.2), ‘be happy’ (16.F.5) and another group spoke about the inspirational message that many of these songs and musicians provide:

All the celebrities are in like self confidence and all that — like all these new songs are coming out about like “you’re beautiful, no matter what” and all that stuff, and then there was all these people who say, “believe in yourself; you’re capable of whatever.” (8.F.1)

Another group pointed to particular musicians who incorporated this message into a song: ‘I like the One Direction song. That’s a good song...What Makes Me Feel Good? [What Makes You Beautiful]’ (15.F.4), ‘and Bruno Mars, Just the Way You Are and stuff’ (15.F.3) although the positive messages are diminished because ‘there’s still
stuff in that that’s about her appearance’ (15.F.6). Some of the young men acknowledged that some popular music was intended to make the listener feel good about being themselves: ‘yeah, some, well, I reckon some songs are about, yeah, and so what if you’re this just be who you are’ (6.M.1), but that some music would make young women in particular feel negatively:

But there are some other songs that are like really not that healthy for girls; it’s really bad. They’re saying, “oh, you’re fat” and outcasting them. So some of the songs are good and some of the songs are bad for your self-esteem. (6.M.1)

The young women pointed to particular female musicians who were ‘role models … that we all look up to…and they’re like really pretty and they do the right thing’ (2.F.4). One of these musicians was ‘Taylor Swift…because she, like, like she seems like very…she doesn’t sell herself out kind of. Like she hasn’t taken naked pictures or anything’ (2.F.5), ‘yeah, she, like, whenever I see her on TV she’s like smiling and…like helping someone’ (2.F.5). Another group spoke about how they felt that the need to conform changed with age: ‘I kind of think, like, the older you get, the more you don’t care about being accepted; like, you just care about being yourself’ (14.F.4), ‘and being different sort of becomes like sort of like a novelty if you’re interesting rather than like different’ (14.F.2). They pointed to a musician as embodying this message: ‘Lady GaGa, like, she wasn’t different when she was in high school, but then like now she’s like so cool because she’s different and that’ (14.F.4).

These young people named television and movies as media that also delivered a large amount of messages about body image and self-esteem, speaking about the idealised images presented to them: ‘on TV, you know how all the actors and actresses again are perfect and so you’re like, “oh wow”’ (7.F.2). Particularly, they mentioned the difficulties of living up to these images when asked about what they see on television:

I think a lot of the media, when it has these … pretty girls and stuff, like models or whatever, it kind of brings down anybody who’s not
like that because they think I want to be really that pretty...they think that they're not actually pretty, because they think, “well, that’s what you have to look like to be pretty and I don’t have any of those aspects, so I’m not pretty”. That's how I look at it.’ (9.F.2)

This was discussed again:

5.F.2 Well, like the TV shows, like the actors are always so pretty.

5.F.5 And, like, skinny.

5.F.2 And you’re, like, “oh, if I was like them maybe I’d have” no...“I’d be like more popular”, and things like that.

This perceived message about body shape was mentioned numerous times: ‘like you see...on TV, you know, like, for all the hair and beauty ads. You don’t see like a bigger girl’ (1.F.5)

And, like...all the peoples in, like, movies; always the popular people are, like, the really pretty and really skinny, like, you've never...I've, like, probably never see like a bigger girl.’ (1.F.1)

On reflection, though, this group was able to name an instance where this was not the case: ‘except in Hairspray. That’s actually, like, one of the popular people’ (1.F.1).

Participants discussed a number of times the media — in this case television — providing positive messages about body shape:

Yeah, they all say, like, it’s not really important, but even though, like, the media are just, like, oh no, it’s not important, you can be like not completely skinny and you’ll still be beautiful. (5.F.4)

However, these young women felt that this was a hollow message because ‘they don’t really change anything about it’ (5.F.4). These positive messages often translated to a deeper one about being beautiful on the inside counting for more than external beauty:
In, like, all those, like, Disney fairy tales, there’s all this stuff about, you know, it’s the inside that counts and the evil queen, you know, is the kind of one that doesn’t get...like the nice people will always...’ (5.F.3)

These positive messages are often discounted because: ‘society isn’t like that; it’s just a TV show’ (5.F.3), ‘it’s just a fairytale’ (5.F.4).

One group spoke about a reality programme, Dating in the Dark, which works on the premise of finding out whether or not looks really matter:

Like Dating in the Dark USA...I was watching it last night...but, um, it’s like a show where people talk to each other in the dark and go on dates. And then they see each other in the light and they choose whether they want to see them again or not. (5.F.5)

In the episode this young woman had viewed, all of the men chose not to continue to see the women whom they had liked prior to seeing them: ‘and all of them left last night’ (5.F.5). When asked by the facilitator if she felt that the women on the show were unattractive:

Ah, I don’t think it should, but I don’t know. I think they were pretty. But the guys were all like, “nah, they weren’t pretty enough; men usually wouldn’t go for them”. And they were saying, “oh, I had the best dates with them, they had the best personality, we really clicked”. And then it was like they saw them and it was like, “oh, going home”. (5.F.5)

For this young woman, this programme sent the message that ‘your personality doesn’t matter; it’s like what you look like, really. You can try as hard as you want but you can’t change the way you look’ (5.F.5). This message was also reflected in the opposite way in a reality programme from the UK that had been viewed by one participant:

I was watching this TV show...it was like “Cherry” something. I don’t know; she does different things every week...it was about this girl trying to accept her body after she had had a child and there was
like all these different people and there was this one quite large lady and she had accepted her body for what it was and she had spent all of her high school like trying to fit in and like it was really horrible how people treated her, like people would throw things at her like they started throwing bottles out of their cars and that at her telling her that she was too fat and that. It was really horrible. It was in the UK. But she was still really happy even though that was happening because she was like proud of herself to be who she is. (14.F.4)

Talking about this message prompted one young woman in the group to speak about the difficulties surrounding body image and self-esteem for these young people: ‘I’m so jealous of people like that. I wish that I could accept myself but it’s so hard.’ (14.F.2)

This message that looks really do matter was a recurring one, but in a number of focus groups, it emerged that television shows and movies quite often counteracted this idea by often demonstrating that being beautiful or looking good, or popularity — which is frequently interwoven with looks in these discussions, was not the ticket to happiness initially perceived by these young people. The discussions would often begin with the idea that success and happiness did come from beauty, looks, or popularity. When asked if there were self-esteem or body image messages in the media: ‘yes, the popular girls are always the happiest’ (9.F.5), a debate sparked within this group: ‘I don’t think so. The popular girls are always the ones who get in trouble’ (9.F.4), ‘they’re most happy with their relationships with boys and stuff’ (9.F.1), which led to: ‘about their appearance, but sometimes it can be the ugly girls who feel happy about themselves because they’re not trying to be as good’ (9.F.5). A comparable message was recognised in another focus group when they discussed how movies and television had storylines demonstrating that looking good didn’t make you a good or happy person:

Well, in a lot of like teen films, the popular girl she’s usually blonde and skinny and she’s like got the big bust, but then, like, you, like, go through the plot of the film and it turns out she’s actually really mean. (12.F.4)
‘Usually she has a lot of issues and stuff’ (12.F.1). Young men also discussed the different messages they observed from film and television regarding being yourself:

There’s lots of cases where you have guys trying to impress girls by being different and maybe trying to be the...pretend to be sporty and stuff. The whole thing that always turns out in the movie is that the guy decides to, for the girl, decides to act like themselves to get the girl on the day. (18.M.3)

And the message about looks not necessarily winning out in the end, which resonated with the young women, was reinforced for these young men as well:

Usually at the end of, like, a typical American movie, the girl ditches the muscly guy ... and then goes for the honest, you know, instead of the muscly guy. (18.M.2)

Participants also discussed how different cultures represent looks in the media differently. One group of young women noted that the majority of characters in Australian and American media are exceptionally attractive:

I think also the media is really bad for people because, honestly, in the media, especially ... American and Australian ... but American movies and everything, everyone's always really, really, hot. And it’s like, well, that’s not realistic. (16.F.5)

This portrayal held up an ideal of beauty that is often unattainable and seen by this group as having ‘such double standards’ (16.F.2). They felt that European media did a far better job of showing a diversity of people and body types:

16.F.5: But when you watch French movies and stuff they all look like — they’re not like...


16.F.2: Sometimes they’re an exceptionally good-looking person, but that's just Europeans.
The overarching theme that emerged within these discussions — particularly for young women — was that the media provided some excellent messages about self-esteem from a variety of different sources including books:

Like in *Jane Eyre*, like...at the beginning they’re like, “oh you’re ugly” and, like, they admit that they’re ugly, but at the end, like, they’re so beautiful because they, like, built this relationship.’ (12.F.4)

And television:

On shows like *Degrassi* and stuff, but that’s, like...if people are feeling down then somebody sends this really emotional message about how beautiful you are and all that. (8.F.1)

The media was seen as providing an equal amount of negative messages: ‘yeah, it [media] can make you feel bad about yourself’ (15.F.4) although ‘it is changing, the media, those girl programmes, they’re good’ (15.F.5).

**The media provides information about puberty**

When discussing the information these young people received from the media in regards to sex and sexuality, it emerged that there were a number of sources they had received messages from when they were younger. The media was particularly useful in providing information about puberty and the associated changes that occurred with this milestone. These sources included novels: ‘coming of age books, like, I don't know, just books in general like teenage books are a lot about puberty and that sort of stuff’ (9.F.5) and magazines: ‘in magazines there are always — always that stuff’ (8.F.3), ‘*Cosmo* and *Cleo*, more like the *Girlfriend* magazines’ (8.F.2), ‘the teen...[magazines]’ (8.F.1), ‘they really go into depth about everything’ (8.F.3), ‘I got some of the information [about puberty] from, like, you know, those sealed sections in like *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* magazines’ (1.F.1), ‘yeah, magazines’ (1.F.4), ‘they help a lot. I find that they help a lot...yeah, and they’ve got, like, family things, like puberty, sex, and all that stuff’ (1.F.1), ‘yeah, *Dolly Doctor*’ (10.F.1). As discussed earlier, for some of these young women, these magazines were seen as
being for a younger audience: ‘it’s kind of for younger girls, they’re, like, in Grade 7; like, I already know that stuff, so I don’t really read the magazines for it’ (10.F.4) but, when they were younger, they did find this information provided in these magazines to be helpful: ‘that was useful I suppose, yeah’ (10.F.4).

Television programmes were also an important source of information about puberty: ‘I kind of had the general idea sort of thing from TV shows and stuff; like, they’d have little scenarios and stuff of what would happen’ (7.F.2). When asked about the kinds of television shows that featured this information: ‘just like Nickelodeon stuff; like, it’s really weird, they put all, like, the life lessons into their shows and stuff. It’s just, yeah, well whatever I watch’ (7.F.2),

I remember there’s this one, Degrassi, from, like, back in the 80s; like, they have like a new one that came out and that’s kind of gone through everything and so pretty much learnt through that, but, yeah.’ (7.F.2)

Degrassi was mentioned in another group as being ‘a gumby show’ (16.F.2). In this context, the word ‘gumby’ refers to something simple or childish, but this young woman went on to speak to the importance of this programme: ‘it's where I learned everything’ (16.F.2). Another group spoke mentioned ‘Disney Channel. I would say Disney Channel’ (15.F.6) and ‘Sleepover Club’ (15.F.5) as sources of this information. One group spoke about an option that they were able to use if they were not getting information from anywhere else: ‘well, you can — Google does like everything, so if you’re ever stuck on something you can just go ‘what is happening?’’ (8.F.1).

When asked where they had found out about puberty, the book, Girl Stuff, was mentioned a number of times as providing a wealth of information in this area for young women: ‘Girl Stuff. Girl Stuff has helped me an awful lot’ (9.F.2) and:


12.F.1: Yes, the pink and blue one.
12.F.4: What’s it called again?

12.F.1: *Girl Stuff.*

“So the first chapter is, like, changes: like, physical changes, like periods, boobs” (10.F.4), ‘but there’s also a lot about sex’ (10.F.2). These young women pointed to this book as an excellent resource for younger girls — many of them first read this book when they were younger: ‘it’s kind of the thing in Grade 7’ (10.F.1) — but found that they were not as interested in reading it once they had absorbed the knowledge: ‘yeah, and then after that you sort of know it and you don’t need to read it’ (10.F.2) or felt that they were too old for the information:

10.F.4: It was really good in Grade 7.

10.F.1: Yeah, it’s a bit boring.

10.F.4: It’s not supposed to be interesting.

10.F.1: I found it interesting in Grade 7.

10.F.2: I found it interesting in Grade 7.

10.F.1: Me and my friend used to sneak out to the oval and read it under a tree.

Facilitator: Why what kind of stuff is it?

10.F.1: It’s just, like, everything.

10.F.2: Everything.

One of the only areas where young women felt that the media presented an unrealistic idea about menstruation was in advertising: ‘yeah, and then on ads on TV they’re like — they have their period, they’re like spinning around, it’s like that’s not what it’s like’ (8.F.1), ‘it’s not that fun, trust me’ (8.F.2). But they acknowledged that the purpose of advertising in this context was:
Just to sell their product, but, seriously, it’s so misleading; they’re like having — like laughing, like going out with their friends, having a good time, and then you’re like, “no, that’s not it”. (8.F.1)

It is clear that the media is providing some excellent messages to young people about sex and sexuality — but these messages are often discounted as being ‘not real’. The next chapter will look at peers as a source of information and additionally examine the ways that they unpack the information from all of their sources.
Chapter 7. Data Analysis — Sexuality Information — Peers

This chapter will examine the information that young people receive from what is arguably one of their most influential sources: peers. Young people often see peers, particularly those with previous experience, as a trusted and knowledgeable source of information about sexuality. This reliance on peers for information can be highly ambivalent. Privileging ‘experience’ over knowledge can both problematic and helpful: problematic due to potentially dubious information being passed on — and helpful because it can allow them to learn from their peer’s mistakes.

This chapter will look at the sexuality information that young people have themselves — condensed from the information they’ve received from all of their sources — as this, combined with their experiential knowledge is the information that they sometimes share with each other. This information is often presented as something that they just know but often the sources of this information can either be traced back to another source, or, more often, the information has been unconsciously taken from a number of sources.

Peers as a source of information about puberty

As seen in the previous chapters, many young people do not find out about puberty from the expected source: parents; instead, their key source of information in this area is school — with peers coming in second. While schools provide young people with information about the technical and scientific aspects of puberty and what will happen to their bodies, their peers often provide important experiential knowledge.

Many young women cited peers as an important source of information in this area of sexuality: ‘I think also a lot of friends like they’ll talk about a lot of that kind of stuff and I learnt a lot of the things I know via my friends’ (14.F.4) even when they didn’t strictly see it as information: ‘it isn’t like an information thing; it’s kind of just talking and’ (7.F.3), ‘relating stories’ (7.F.1), ‘yeah.’ (7.F.3). For many young women learning via peers can be problematic due to the secrecy and embarrassment associated with
puberty and menstruation in particular. Young women discussed a number of reasons in the focus groups for being secretive or embarrassed to talk about menstruation with each other. One reason for general embarrassment or awkwardness around the subject was the taboo or stigma attached to discussing this topic. This can in part be attributed to the awkwardness passed on from parents as seen in the previous chapters. One group of young women at a co-educational school agreed that they did not discuss these topics with each other: ‘yes, it’s something kind of secretive, I guess (laughing). I see it as secretive’ (2.F.3), and when asked about why they saw it as secretive:

2.F.3 Well it feels like it’s personal, its kind of, you don’t really need to share it. Like because we’re all going through the same things, I don’t really have to go and be like, “well yeah, this happened”, and I can just...know that everyone else is kind of doing it.

2.F.1 It’s kind of weird if you mentioned it as well to your friends, because even though they’re going through it they don’t really want to know...any details.

When asked if they would tell their friends that they had their period: ‘no’ (2.F.3), ‘not straight up like that, no’ (2.F.4), ‘unless you need to borrow something’ (2.F.5). This reluctance to discuss menstruation with each other extended to other aspects of puberty. When asked if they talked about the other changes to their bodies that accompanied puberty: ‘nuh, not really’ (2.F.2), ‘Nope’ (2.F.4).

Young women spoke about a fear of being mocked if they did not know what was happening to them and had to ask someone, or were caught looking it up in a book:

5.F.3 Some of them are, like, awkward, like, you know: “is this supposed to be happening or what?”

5.F.4 Yeah, I think it’s like...in society today, people, like, if you say something that you don’t know or something like
that, you ask, people think you’re silly because you don’t know it because, like, “oh everyone knows what that is.”

The discomfort that parents modelled to these young people when they were younger was evident in this lack of discussion, but this could change over time. When asked if they were open with friends about puberty and menstruation: ‘yeah. I used to, in Year 8 just not — I would never tell anyone about it, but now we’re older, I talk about it to my friends’ (15.F.5), ‘yeah’ (15.F.6). For some young women, this secrecy and embarrassment meant that they experienced these changes alone because they were unaware that puberty was something that happened to everyone:

Like in primary school like I was like the early bloomer and I was like, “oh everything’s happening to me and no one understands” and then like we go to high school and then everyone’s like, “oh my god, like, I got my period”, then I was like, “why didn’t you tell me? I thought I was the only one”, and, like, you go through thinking like you’re the crazy random who things start happening to you but really it’s happening to everyone else; they’re just too scared to talk about it and then when you grow up in high school like you can talk about it openly and like you don’t even care. (14.F.1)

Young men did not receive much information about the changes experienced by young women, and, therefore, young women were hesitant to openly discuss menstruation for fear of being overheard by a boy:

Because I remember in primary school when girls had it in Year 7 — I didn’t get it. But they would — it was really hard for them to talk about it because if a boy walked past they would have to be really secretive. It was really funny. (13.F.6)

It emerged that the young women who attended an all-girls school had increased comfort levels when discussing the changes to their bodies, while — as seen previously — young women who attended co-educational schools were uncomfortable discussing menstruation and puberty openly with each other. The
young women in the focus groups who attended a single-sex school felt that this enabled them to have a more open discussion with their peers about menstruation:

I think it's definitely the all-girls school, people put their hands up in class...and are like, “can I go to the bathroom?” the teacher’s like, “no, we’re doing this”. “Please I have really bad cramp; I’ve got to go to Sister and get a heat pack” and all of that, or they’ll be like, “I’ve got my period, can I please go to the toilet?” so it’s really open. But then I think it will be different at the co-ed school because you can’t go, “I’ve got my period.” (8.F.1)

This openness was reflected in other discussions with participants from an all-girls school: ‘it's really good being at a girls’ school because you can easily talk about your period. Like, “oh, I got my period today so don't bother me”’ (13.F.6), ‘yeah, you don't have to be embarrassed about saying it’ (13.F.4), ‘actually, girls are really comfortable talking about when they got their periods ... in our school’ (11.F.3), and was not limited to discussions between friends:

10.F.2: But, like, you don’t even need to have close friends to talk about that; like, any girl is fine.

10.F.4: Any girls who’ve done it, like, who have gone through it, it’s generally okay.

There were similarities between young women and young men when it came to aspects of discussion about puberty. Some young men spoke about learning from their friends:

6.M.2: Yeah. I probably learned it from friends at primary school actually.

6.M.1: Puberty?


But for many young men, this was not an area that they discussed with each other. When asked if they spoke about puberty: ‘not really...not the changes in my body’
(3.M.2), ‘yeah, not with my friends’ (3.M.1), ‘didn’t talk about it at my school. “I’ve got hair on my balls”’ (19.M.3). If they did discuss puberty, like one group of young men who said that they spoke about ‘the voice breaking’ (18.M.3), it was discussed in a mocking or joking way:

18.M.3: Like, you might say, if someone yells out and their voice breaks, you might say, “that’s a nice testicle” sort of thing.

18.M.5: Yeah, you would just notice it or something you wouldn’t actually have a deep talk about it.

Most young men agreed that, at this age, they would never discuss their sexual development in anything but a mocking or slightly bullying way: ‘with friends, it’s more like a joke. It’s not, it’s never serious’ (4.M.5). While young women feared that not knowing something would be embarrassing and something to be used against them — a fear that was not mentioned as being realised in this context — young men would use a friend’s ignorance in this area to taunt them:

Like, generally, like when you’re talking about it with your friends you find out whether or not they know something. And it’s like if they do, like if they want... like if you want to bring it up but like, they use something like out of place, like “do you even know what that is?” and like that, but that’d be like one of only times that you talk about it and if they don’t you usually laugh at them. (4.M.2)

It would be interesting to know if the way that young men talk to each other around this topic would be different if they attended a single-sex school — as it was for young women — but as all of the young men who participated in these focus groups attended co-educational schools, this cannot be determined at this time.

**Peers and self-esteem**

Many of the young people in the focus groups felt that the topic, *Feeling good about yourself whatever people say*, was one of the most difficult aspects of their everyday
lives. This was particularly true for the young women, who felt the most pressure to look and act a certain way. The initial reaction to this topic was often that it was: ‘hard’ (9.F.5; 10.F.4; 11.F.3; 17.F.3), ‘not easy’ (14.F.1), or ‘difficult’ (9.F.1; 12.F.1).

*Feeling good about yourself whatever people say* was an area where young people received information from all of their sources, as seen in previous chapters. This was information that they felt was highly ambivalent due to the equally negative and positive messages they received — and the messages and information received from peers could be equally ambivalent.

Young people recognised that appearance was not the only factor at play here:

> There are so many like different aspects of that, like it’s not just appearance but you also need to like feel good about yourself and like your academic thing, your personality, your friends, like if you’re concerned by popularity or something, there are so many different ways. (11.F.4)

However, much of the discussion on this topic focused on appearance and its importance. And, as with other topic areas, there was a dissonance here — young people feel that ultimately looks and appearance are relative:

> I don’t think there’s any definition of pretty; like, I think that for every guy there’s one girl who’s extremely pretty to them even if they don’t think they’re pretty, and I think every girl has their soul mate, but I don’t think that there is an actual definition of pretty, like, because I think that really everyone is pretty. (14.F.4)

Or they felt that looks should not matter: ‘I don’t think it matters, but there’s a lot of pressure to kind of try’ (7.F.3). However, these statements about appearance not being important were always accompanied with a ‘but’ because of both societal standards: ‘it’s very important in our society today. Like it shouldn’t be but it seems like it’ (5.F.2), and, in their lives, looks are extremely important:
I’d like to think that like looks aren’t important, but, like, when it comes down to it, I think, like, people actually take them into account, like, a lot of the time. (12.F.4)

Particularly in the context of others:

Being a girl is hard, hard work; it’s very competitive because we’re all at this age where we want to look good and some of us want to impress people so, looks do count I think. (12.F.6)

Other people’s opinions can be particularly influential on the way young women feel about themselves: ‘sometimes people just say things and it can put you in a good mood and that. But then they can say bad things and then you feel really bad’ (1.F.1), ‘people can crush your confidence so easily and then it takes a long, long time to build it up’ (9.F.1) because ‘you want other people to accept you’ (10.F.1). Self-esteem was an area where many young women spoke about how important friends were in relation to how they felt about themselves, and how they relied on friends to offer honest opinions:

15.F.3: Yeah. Also with friends it’s for self-esteem and stuff, they’re always doing nice little things that make you feel special.

Facilitator: So are your friends important for how you feel about yourself?

15.F.4: Yeah.

15.F.3: Yeah.

15.F.1: Yeah.

15.F.2: Yeah.

15.F.5: Yes. I wouldn’t go out if — you know when you just ask your friend’s opinion, “how do I look?” because you trust them. I trust my friends.
15.F.6: You tend to be, “no, take that off” or, “that doesn't go with that.”

15.F.5: Yeah.

15.F.6: I trust them to be, “okay, head to toe me.”

15.F.4: And if they do say something, it means so much more because you can trust them and their opinion matters.

15.F.5: Yeah.

15.F.6: Or if they're, “just move your hair to the side” I'm, like, “thank you.”

In addition to friends making young women feel better about themselves, it was also possible for a friend’s confidence to contribute to their own confidence levels:

11.F.3: And also, we feel better about ourselves because we’ve got, I think [name] is what helps me become so much, our friend, [name]; she’s the most confident person I’ve ever met. At the beginning of the year, she shaved all her hair off because she was bored; like, it was so short and everyone loved her for it. Like it was her hair, it was, like, down to here; she just shaved it off because she was bored, and, like, the fact that she can do that and do whatever she wants. She’s, like, crazy, like, I could never do that but just hanging around her all the time, like, you thrive off other people’s confidence.

11.F.1: Our group has a lot of, like, we’re all different but I think everyone is really uplifting and, like, supportive of each other; like [name], she’s such a sweetheart and, like, just everyone is so lovely.

11.F.3: Although, like, some of us have bad days where we’re like I feel like fat and ugly and no one likes me but...

11.F.2: And during exam time, it’s pretty bad.
But when we’re around each other like I know for me I just, I feel so much better about myself because when I’m around my friends I forget in a way, like because we just joke around about everything, like we don’t take ourselves too seriously or anything.

Exactly yeah.

While friends were one of the biggest support systems for many young women, it emerged that, conversely, friends could also be extremely judgemental and untrustworthy:

Facilitator: So like do you think that your friends are judgemental?

Yes. Oh my god.

They’re the worst, I think.

Even like your closest of friends can be really judgemental and then it’s uncomfortable because you don’t feel comfortable being different from other people, like personally I’ve been brought up to be happy with myself and not care what other people think and so I’m happy to be different and I don’t really care if people judge me or what not but like it still matters as well, like you still kind of think about it and you’re like yeah.

It’s just like a really horrible thing to say but like there are very few people in my group that I could actually say I am really good friends with them, like the rest like yeah they’re my friends, like they’re good friends but like I could not rely on them to have my back, I could not rely on them to, like they’re not like frenemies, they’re just like...

Like you like them and they’re friends but you wouldn’t trust them with like...

I think you only like trust people like certain types of people, like yeah and you kind of know that other person...
who you wouldn’t normally trust would trust someone else anyway so it’s not like you’re angry about that, it’s just kind of frustrating because you can’t trust all of your friends. I would rather have someone who I can trust and like tell more than like one person about if I was worried about something rather than worrying about them judging me.

Many of the young women spoke about how their pre-existing feelings about themselves could counteract any positive comments they might receive:

Even like what about people say, even if other people aren’t saying bad things to you about yourself you can feel really down on yourself and it doesn’t really matter what other people are saying, if they’re being nice to you about it, it’s kind of like that’s disregarded because of your own view. (11.F.4)

It also appeared that their feelings of self-esteem were extremely tenuous:

Even if you tried to be happy with yourself, deep down there’s something in you going, “you’re not worth it,” or whatever. It depends how confident you are in yourself. (13.F.6)

This dissatisfaction was not always related to actual appearance, but instead to people’s perception of themselves, and, as noted by this young woman, this dissatisfaction could extend to very [conventionally] attractive young women:

Because no matter what, someone is always going to be self conscious, like you can be like the prettiest thing out and you could still be, “oh, I hate my body”... There’s a girl in our grade...she’s like a model and my friend, she’s really good friends with her, and, like, she always complains about how she hates her, like, her forehead and stuff and, like, she’s on the cover of [large department store]; like, she’s the face of, like, [large department store], she’s the person, like, [clothing brand] and I’m, like, “how can you hate yourself?” (14.F.1)
Many of these young people considered conformity and fitting in to be important factors, and, for some, it meant changing themselves to ensure that conformity:

When people do judge, and people say, “don’t listen to them”, it’s kinda hard because you want to change so you don’t get judged by them ... So then you have to try and change yourself just to like fit in and stuff. You shouldn’t have to do that...I feel that I can’t be myself at school...I didn’t have any friends ‘cause I was myself at the start and then I had a complete change. And now I might have two or three friends.’ (20.F.4)

Striving for this conformity, and attaining it at a level where a young person was considered ‘popular’ or, as they are referred to at a number of schools, ‘TC’, meaning ‘too cool’ (8.F.4) often came with a certain amount of dislike from other young people. These ‘TC’ young people were often considered ‘popular’ or ‘TC’ because they were the most physically attractive group, but their popularity was questionable, and there was an interesting dynamic at play, in that they were the group who everyone hated, but also wanted to be like:

5.F.4 We don’t really talk about, like, appearance as much. I don’t know, like, it’s better just laughing the whole time.

5.F.5 There’s one group that probably would, the TC group.

Facilitator What’s TC?

5.F.3 It’s a popular group.

5.F.1 They’re not really popular.

5.F.4 But no-one likes them, so it’s like they think that it’s so good or ... They don’t say anything because like a TC is just like, it’s kind of turned into like bad because you just...

5.F.2 You think you’re higher up than everyone.

5.F.1 But they’re really not.
Facilitator: So if they’re not, if no-one likes them, then why would you still call them popular?

...  

5.F.3: They’re the Barbie dolls.

5.F.2: The popular group is actually different. It’s almost like a different, you know, sense, you know, being popular now.

5.F.5: All everyone, like, every party, they’re the ones on the inside we kind of want to be, but don’t.

5.F.1: Yep.

Facilitator: Why do you want to be them?

...  

5.F.5: They’ve got...power.

5.F.4: It’s like everyone knows them, but it’s not because that they’re like so nice and pretty and stuff like that. It’s because they’re like bitchy.

5.F.3: Intimidating.

5.F.4: Yeah, it’s like...

5.F.1: Yeah, intimidating.

5.F.4: You want to be a part of them but not to enter them because you know that what it is is just so bad.

5.F.3: You know that you’re not like them, so you want to be like them anyway.

5.F.4: Yeah.

5.F.5: And they just really make you put other people down, and I hated it. So...
Facilitator: You escaped.

5.F.5: (nodding head).

For many young women, the pressure to conform or look a certain way often stemmed from wanting to look attractive to the opposite sex. The young women who attended the single-sex school felt that they were at an advantage while attending school in not having young men around to impress, and spoke about seeing the differences in comportment and appearance when attending a sports carnival with other schools:

I think it’s different between — this is weird but this is just what I noticed, we went to this sports carnival between all the schools, and ... all these girls who were like from co-ed schools, they were like sitting there eating carrot sticks and then...all the girl schools are like sitting there stuffing their face with food...they've [co-educational girls] got their hair all straight and nice, and everyone who’s from a girls school ... we don’t care. (8.F.1)

However, for most of the young women, what young men thought of them and their appearance mattered a great deal:

I know it’s like really bad me saying this but like being accepted, like really like I would feel so much more comfortable about myself and I know this is really bad but like if like a boy told me like you’re beautiful, that would just make me feel so like, “okay well a boy likes me” and so... (14.F.1)

Thinking that they were not attractive enough to attract a boyfriend could be disheartening and have a negative effect on their self-esteem:

Like usually if a guy is going to like get a girlfriend and stuff, sometimes, like, most of the time they’d be like really pretty or popular and stuff. And if you’re not, if you don’t think you’re pretty and popular then you think that you’re like, never gonna...
1.F.1 Yeah and then, like ... guys when they think that they only get like pretty and popular girls and all that, then like, sometimes those who aren’t as pretty or popular they, like, feel really bad and all that because they’re just like, “oh, well, no guys like me because I’m not like her” and all that.

While young women felt that their appearance was extremely important in attracting a member of the opposite sex, young men did not feel as much pressure in that regard, and one group felt that personality was more important than looks in attracting — and keeping — a girlfriend: ‘you’ve really got to focus more on your personality to get people to like you more because appearance that’s just ... people trying to get with you.’ (19.M.2)

Appearance is more like if you’re just like really good looking, and it’s just like for parties and stuff but if you’re like in a relationship it’s more about personality and stuff. Because I see some like these guys that I think how the hell, how the fuck did she, you know, get with him and it’s probably like their personality. That they’re in a relationship with. (19.M.4)

For young men, as mentioned in previous chapters, self-esteem was related more to self-confidence than to appearance, but appearance was still a factor:

6.M.1: You can get paid out for stuff.
6.M.1: And that lowers your self-esteem and that. That’s annoying.
6.M.2: Yeah, features and stuff like pimples or whatever or you’re fat or anything like that.

It emerged that for these young men, while you could get ‘paid out’ for appearance, seeming to work too hard on their appearance — and particularly using beauty
methods that are traditionally employed by young women — was more likely to attract negative attention from peers than inherent characteristics:

6.M.1: And you don’t want to be like a pretty boy, sort of, because then you get paid out for that as well.

Facilitator: So what does that mean, pretty boy?

6.M.1: Probably a guy’s got the perfect body and then the other guys want the perfect body. The other guys would probably pay you out for being...

6.M.2: Like straightening your hair and that. Taking — doing stuff what girls would usually do like shaving legs and stuff like that.

6.M.1: Yeah, I shave my legs and you get paid out. Now there other guys doing it, so it’s — you’ve just got to be brave enough to do it at the start. There’s quite a few guys doing it now.


6.M.1: Because other guys have done it and, “oh, well, they’ve done it.”


Facilitator: So you mentioned being overweight and that’s not a good thing.

6.M.1: Well, health wise it’s not a good thing, but I think if you’re still happy that...

6.M.2: Yeah, I mean, if you want to live like that then that’s your choice. You wouldn’t pay someone else out for it, but personally I think that you need to be fit and you need to, you know...
6.M.1: If I was fat, I'd still probably — wouldn't be as happy and I'd lose some weight and I'd probably gain some self-confidence.

**Peers and navigating relationships — Establishing and ending**

As seen in previous chapters, the information that young people receive from all of their other sources is highly varied, and somewhat lacking — with advocating safe sex often being prioritised over providing the skills needed to manage and navigate relationships. As in other areas of their sexuality, this leaves young people to draw together the information that they have from these sources and combine it with experiential knowledge attained either through their own dating and relationship lives, or through their peers experiences. Navigating relationships was an area where this experiential knowledge was once again combined predominantly with information attained through the media, with some snippets thrown in from parents. This section will look at how young people do navigate this area of their lives, and their attitudes and feelings about dating and relationships.

For a number of these young people, when the topic *Asking people out and how to break up with them* was discussed, they agreed that it was an area that was ‘awkward’ (2.F.3; 2.F.4; 7.F.2; 7.F.3; 8.F.4; 14.F.3):

Facilitator: So, the first topic is asking people out and how to break up with them. So, what do you know about it? Is it difficult?


14.F.3: It can be awkward.

Facilitator: The asking out or the breaking up?

One of the key discussions here was around the etiquette of both asking people out and breaking up with them — but particularly the latter — a large number of the focus groups agreed that using mediated technologies such as ‘Facebook’, ‘text’, ‘email’, or ‘MSN’ to establish or end relationships instead of doing it face-to-face should not be acceptable (1.F.1; 1.F.3; 1.F.5; 1.F.6; 2.F.5; 2.F.6; 3.F.5; 4.M.5; 5.F.1; 6.F.1; 6.F.2; 8.F.3; 9.F.2; 9.F.5; 9.F.1; 9.F.4; 10.F.3; 10.F.2; 10.F.4; 12.F.6; 12.F.1; 15.F.5; 15.F.4; 16.F.6; 15.F.3; 15.F.2; 16.F.3; 16.F.1; 17.F.1; 17.F.3; 19.M.2; 19.M.3) because: ‘I think it’s really dodgy if you do it not in person’ (8.F.1) and ‘people who break up over text and Facebook are really, really…’ (9.F.5) ‘they’re considered rude and inconsiderate’ (9.F.1). However, within these discussions, there was an understanding of why someone would use technology to do this:

Facilitator: Why is it do you think that they do do it that way, like via text?

12.F.5: Because it’s not as awkward.

12.F.6: They probably don’t want to see like their face.

12.F.5: Like their reaction.

12.F.1: It gives them more time to think.

12.F.4: It’s hard, like if the person still likes you that you’re breaking up with you could be like really hurting them and you don’t want to see their reaction when you do it yeah so like text messages is just like.

12.F.1: Easier for them.

And one of these young women attributed this discomfort in facing these situations head-on in part to the lack of information they receive on how to navigate these situations:

I’d have to say a lot of us really don’t know how to go about doing that; like, there’s no excuse, but it does make sense why a lot of these break ups don’t go so well.’ (12.F.1)
Another common practice for starting and ending relationships among these young people — that was again attributed to a way of avoiding potential embarrassment — was to employ peers as mediators. This could either be done in two ways. First, in a quite direct way when asking out: ‘through other people ... people come up and they’re like, “oh, you should ask such-and-such out”’ (1.F.1) and breaking up: ‘yeah, I was going out with this guy and he got (1.F.5) to dump me’ (1.F.2), ‘and I didn’t want to but he was just, like, “do it”’ (1.F.5). Second, in a roundabout, hypothetical way: ‘and with the guys, so that they don’t get rejected, they get their friends to ask you, they go, “oh, what would you say if...”’ (7.F.3), ‘yeah, “what would you say if he asked you out”; it’s like, “I don’t know, ask him to ask me out”’ (7.F.2). This mediation process could be extremely complex and involve a number of people:

14.F.1: Yes. It usually takes like about five girls to ask one boy out like because you have the person who’s asking them out and then the friends who come behind and they go, “oh, do it now; I’ll talk to this boy and he’ll talk to him and see if he likes you” and like yeah.

Facilitator: Does that happen regularly?


14.F.3: Yes.

Facilitator: So do girls ask guys out like a fair bit then?

14.F.2: No, no. It’s like in the lead up, like sending signals.

14.F.3: It’s very involved.

14.F.2: It’s like very involved.

14.F.3: They will talk to the boy or they will talk to the boy’s best friend and like push it along.

Facilitator: And say what kind of things?

14.F.3: “Yeah she likes you; this is the perfect day to go out”.
Facilitator: Oh really, so just get all of the information.

14.F.2: “Of course I won’t tell her, no” and then immediately go tell her everything.

14.F.3: And they’re like, “oh, yeah, you can say that just kind of thing and then you can tell him that I said that” or something.

But again, these methods were used as a way to avoid potential awkwardness, and could be viewed in an ambivalent way: ‘it’s pathetic, actually’ (14.F.1), ‘it’s kind of annoying’ (7.F.3), ‘it’s annoying, but it’s, like, that’s just the way. It’s kind of cute in a way’ (7.F.2). Sometimes this group approach causes more embarrassment, particularly when it is the young men approaching the young woman — there appears to be a performative, and somewhat competitive, element to the way in which these young women had been asked out that was intimidating and embarrassing:

It’s never like, “oh, can I talk to you” sort of thing; it’s not like, “let’s go talk somewhere privately”. It’s like, “oh, yeah, all my friends are behind me; it’s just you and, like, a pack of 20 guys...Another one of my stories — I liked this boy in Grade 8, I think it was, and he was one of the cool kids and he was a really big joker and he sung *Single Ladies* to ask me out and he had like all of his friends behind him and it was the most embarrassing thing. So I didn’t know how to react, I was like, “what am I supposed to do now; is this you asking me out?” I was like, “do I... what am I supposed to do?” and it’s like, it’s just really awkward and embarrassing having all of their friends there. (7.F.2)

From the young men’s point of view, this group approach was sometimes due to the competitive nature of their friendships: ‘friends are the main influence when you’re asking someone out back at school because they’re always pushing you to do it’ (6.M.1), ‘yeah, and sometimes there’s a lot of peer pressure in it, too’ (6.M.2).
For many of the young women, when it came to establishing a relationship, it emerged that traditional gender roles still very much played a part, and they therefore felt that it was the male’s responsibility to do the asking: ‘I think guys should be the one who ask girls out’ (12.F.6) because ‘the guys are meant to be doing it’ (2.F.1) ‘and it’s — I don’t know, traditional’ (9.F.2), ‘because it’s a guy’s job…yeah, it’s a bit — I don’t know. I guess women can ask guys out now but I always still like it the other way around’ (15.F.6). As noted in previous chapters, this was information that they received from a number of their sources, and they therefore appeared to perpetuate this information among themselves. When this group was asked where they got this idea from: ‘tradition and I guess media and friends’ (13.F.4). A number of young women also attributed this gendered difference as being due to the (perceived) perception of young women who are assertive as being desperate: ‘I think the girl’s, like, is seen as desperate if she asks a guy out’ (14.F.3), ‘it depends; if you're really desperate, yeah’ (13.F.6). While many of these young women would not ask a young man out, some of them did not have a problem with it in theory, but they did not how to go about it, and were happy to go with the established modus operandi:

11.F.2: Yeah but then again I don’t think it’s like unacceptable.

11.F.1: I don’t think it would be unacceptable.

11.F.2: But I’ve just never heard — it’s really uncommon so.

A number of young women fell back on stereotypes about gender differences, such as girls being more ‘emotional’, to explain their ‘traditional’ attitudes:

Girls are also, like, more emotional outwardly, so, like, if a guy gets rejected, all his friend will be like, “oh, whatever; yeah, yeah, whatever”, but then girls are like, ah, girls are actually crying to their friends about it and like talk about every little detail and where they went wrong and how embarrassing it was. (11.F.3)
They also referred to girls’ perceived lower levels of confidence: ‘I think it’s just a confidence thing; girls, like, doubt themselves quite a bit so they don’t want to be embarrassed, so they won’t do it’ (11.F.4). One young woman had recently moved from overseas, and felt that this was a society-specific ‘tradition’:

But I think [it] also depends on where you are because in Australia it’s different to where I used to live [overseas]...and girls were a lot more open and more aggressive. Well, not aggressive but you know what I mean; they kind of like — they — it was like a girl could ask a guy out and it wasn’t a weird date. Lots of girls did it.’ (16.F.5)

When asked how they felt about young women doing the asking, one group of young men spoke about how they would like it if it happened more often:

Facilitator: Is it alright for a girl to ask a boy out?

All: Yeah.

19.M.3: They can go for it if they want.

19.M.4: That’s even better.

19.M.3: Yeah because it takes pressure off us.

While most young women were reluctant to directly ask a young man out, they would employ a number of other methods in order to get the young man to ask them out, including one of their most common methods of getting what they wanted — hinting around it:

9.F.3: I’ve given them hints.

9.F.4: One at a time.

9.F.2: Yeah, the same.

Facilitator: Sorry, you’ve given them hints?

9.F.3: Yeah. Like, you want them to ask you out.
9.F.5: You give them to boys and you suggest little things.
9.F.3: It’s doing — you’re suggesting about how the people ask you out.
9.F.3: Then they can’t — and how you like to be asked out.
9.F.1: You give them a lot of attention.
9.F.2: Yes.
9.F.3: They get what it is they want, yeah.

‘Generally, the girl will make hints but she won’t — unless she’s desperate or very forward and good at that kind of thing, then she’ll ask them out’ (16.F.2). While young men did not ‘hint’, they did have other approaches to asking young women out in a casual way that took some of the embarrassment out of the situation: ‘Basically, I think the best way is to say that you’re already going somewhere, like to the movies or something, and ask them if they want to come with’ (18.M.2).

While young women were largely not comfortable in asking young men out, it emerged that this embargo did not extend to breaking up:

13.F.2: I think either the girl or the boy can break up with them.
13.F.3: Yeah.
13.F.2: It’s more that they can break up but it’s more the asking out which is sort of restricted to men.

Although, breaking up could be difficult, and again, ‘awkward’ to deal with: ‘but if it’s kind of just, like, you know ... kind of over with and you’re like this is really awkward but...’ (7.F.2), and therefore it was preferable to have a valid reason: ‘it’s easier if
they screwed up’ (7.F.2), ‘like screwed up or something, then it’s kind of like I don’t think this is working and they kind of know it’s coming’ (7.F.3). Many of the young men felt it was easier to let the young woman take care of this side of the equation, whether that was by inaction, doing ‘something stupid’, or steering them in that direction in order to avoid fallout:

I’ve never broken up with some girl. They’re usually breaking up with me only because I’m too lazy to break up with them, so either I’ve done something stupid, or I’ve actually tried to lead them up to it and be like...and then I was actually, one time I was going to break up with someone but she broke up with me, like I don’t know a couple of days before. And I was trying to lead her up to it and she broke up with me first. And I was like, “whatever”. (19.M.4)

For many of these young people, the majority of relationships at this age were seen to be extremely ephemeral: ’and can I just say, a lot of people in our grade who date would only date for like two weeks or three weeks’ (5.F.5), ‘everything is really quick now as well; like, people are getting to hear about breaking up after a week and stuff like that’ (12.F.1), ‘like, some people have had like 15 boyfriends in the last year’ (12.F.4), and this was sometimes due to inexperience:

You can’t really get that serious, like, well some do, I know. But it’s like you’re still so young in a sense of things and so it’s kind of, like, “oh, we don’t really know what to do now.” It’s been built up so much but sometimes maybe it’s just not what people think it’s going to be like. (5.F.2)

It was also due to ‘relationship’ being a fluid term: ‘people usually think that, “oh, I’m in a relationship; this is my boyfriend” but they’ve only been together, like, a day’ (12.F.1), and this relationship status was often — literally — for show, with Facebook being the medium used to show off this status:

Relationships seem to be official once it’s on Facebook, and that could happen in a matter of minutes and it will be like [the person] is in a relationship, there’ll be a bunch of comments, and then by
the next week it’s changed from being in a relationship to being single. (12.F.1)

The reason for this show is that ‘on Facebook, it’s just more like for the attention’ (12.F.5), ‘yeah, being “Facebook official” is a bit stupid’ (11.F.3). Participants suggested that many of these relationships predominantly existed in mediated technologies: ‘so many relationships start from Facebook or texting. They never just start meeting and then just only seeing each other in person.’ (15.F.5)

It was clear within many of these discussions that friends could be an important resource and source of advice for young men in relation to asking people out: ‘yeah, I get some advice from friends...they say, like, “be yourself” really. And...don’t look at the ground’ (4.M.4), ‘I’ve had guys ask me because I did ask girls out in Year 8 and they hadn’t asked a girl out, and they were, like, “how do you do it?”’ (6.M.1), but — due to the sometimes competitive and mocking nature of their relationships — some young men would only ask for advice from people they considered to be close friends:

Yeah, it depends how close you are with them. If I wasn't close with [6.M.1], I wouldn’t ask him, “what do you say?”’, I’d just say, “did you do it?” Stuff like that.’ (6.M.2)

Yeah, I’m like...this might just be just me, but I’ve got like one really good friend he’s my best friend for like...a lot of years. And, yeah, he’s like the only one that I talk to about like asking girls out and stuff.’ (4.M.2)

18.M.4: Unless you’re terribly close to the person who was in a relationship and they were keeping you up to date ...

Facilitator: Have you ever?

18.M.2: Most people try to keep it a secret that they’re going out or that they break up or whatever.

Facilitator: Even from their friends?

Young women relied heavily on their friends for advice and support in navigating these stages of relationships: ‘yeah, and ask her [friend] for really good advice and then think it through before I actually do something’ (12.F.6). Many of the young women spoke about the importance of personal experience in managing relationships (1.F.3; 1.F.5; 10.F.2; 10.F.3; 10.F.4; 12.F.6; 14.F.2; 15.F.5). This included learning from their own personal experiences: ‘well, personally, I think it’s like a personal experience. Like, if it happens to you then…and if it goes wrong then you know what to do next time’ (1.F.3), and also learning from their friends personal experiences:

Facilitator: So your friends?

15.F.4: Yeah.

15.F.1: A lot.

15.F.5: You can get, yeah, advice from bad experiences.

15.F.4: From speaking with friends.

15.F.6: Yeah.

15.F.5: Hearing stories.

15.F.4: And friends because they’re your support group. If you did have to ask, it would be, “I don’t know how to ask this guy out.”

15.F.5: Yeah.

15.F.4: And everyone would just join together and help you through it.

Facilitator: How would they help you do it?

15.F.6: Well, they might have been through it themselves so they might know what to do.
Peers and navigating relationships — Asking for what you want

Many of these young people, as mentioned previously, are lacking the assertiveness and negotiation skills required to manage, and get what they want, from a relationship due to being given a very limited amount of information in this area. They are therefore left to figure this aspect of their sexuality education out for themselves with the help of their peers and the media. There were many similarities for a number of young people between how they started and ended relationships, how they managed the relationship, and their place within that relationship. A large part of this management and navigation was covered by the topic: Asking for what you want in a relationship.

For some of the young women, asking a partner or boyfriend for what they wanted from the relationship was something they were not sure they would be able to do, or feel comfortable doing (2.F.5; 2.F.2; 2.F.4; 9.F.5; 13.F.5; 13.F.6; 14.F.4; 15.F.6; 15.F.5; 16.F.2; 16.F.5; 16.F.4; 17.F.1; 20.F.4; 20.F.3; 20.F.2), and for one young woman, this had been the case when it came to moving things further sexually in a prior relationship:

Facilitator  Alright, so, um, more about that, so asking for what you want in a relationship. Would you feel comfortable doing that?

2.F.5     No, I’m really too shy to, like...I kind of like need them to push me forward into doing stuff or I’m not sure that I want to. Like I can never ask if they’re not wanting to...

Facilitator  What do you mean?
Like, um, I had a boyfriend in Germany, but like I needed him to do... like, like he needed to ask if I was ready for stuff. I was too shy to ask him if he wanted to do stuff.

Facilitator Like you, stuff that you wanted to do?

2.F.5 Yeah, I wanted to, I was just too shy to ask.

There were a number of fears that young women communicated in relation to asking for what they wanted and for a number of them, these appeared to be connected to gendered stereotypes, in that there was a fear that asking for what they wanted would ‘sound controlling’ (5.F.2), ‘demanding’ (9.F.1), or ‘bossy’ (9.F.1). ‘No, I think it would be kind of bossy if you just go, “I want this, this, this and this.” And they’d go, “go away.”’ (13.F.6).

Instead of directly asking for what they wanted, many young people said that they would use the same methods as when initiating a relationship — with hinting again featuring as an approach: ‘yeah. You hint at it’ (15.F.6) because:

You don’t want to freak them out...you don’t want to say, “look I want this, I want this, and then in a few years we can get married and have 16 children”’. (1.F.6)

Young men also said that hinting was a way to move things along in their relationship:

Like, the way you talk you might, I don’t know, make a joke about it and like, but there would be an element of truth to it...yeah, hints. (18.M.5)

However, as seen previously, one young woman said that when it came to moving things along sexually: ‘no, that just happens; you don’t ask’ (15.F.6) while other young women said that it was the young man’s place to do the asking: ‘well, in terms of what type of stuff they want sexually, that’s all said. They ask you’ (17.F.3), ‘with that, it’s kind of like asking someone out. It’s usually the guy who’s asking what they want in the relationship’ (13.F.4), as long as they ‘aren't going to push too far’
(17.F.3) because the young woman’s wants and needs should be taken into account: ‘it’s also for what you want as well. You want someone who’s going to be happy to be comfortable with what you’re comfortable with’ (17.F.3). This means that the young man is placed in the difficult position of walking a fine line between asking for what he wants, and guessing what his girlfriend does not want. Without this open discussion, young men do just go ahead and try to take things further without talking about it:

3.M.2 My friends just do it; they don’t ask.

3.M.1 Yeah.

3.M.2 They get rejected and that’s the end of that, would never see the person again, so.

3.M.1 Yeah, there’s no like talking about it, they just like dive into it. Just kind of, yeah, the only way they know how to do it. And if it’s not okay with the girl then that’s it.

3.M.2 Because it’s always the guy, to tell you the truth.

3.M.1 Yeah.

Facilitator Who has to...

3.M.2 The girl never does anything, like, from what I, from the guys I know.

Or, young men resort to trying to use ‘body language’ to either ‘suggest’ taking things further:

Oh with the whole how do you ask, ah, taking it to the next level, like usually, like you’d just sort of like suggest it with like body language and stuff. Like it wouldn’t just be like, like you wouldn’t just like walk up to a girl and just be like, would you like to make out or stuff like that. (4.M.2)
One young woman also noted men using body language as an approach: ‘(laughing) ...they get really close [when they want to kiss]’ (5.F.5). Or young men try to gauge their partner’s willingness by reading their body language:

Well it’s, like, hard to explain really, because if you see somebody, like ... if you see their body language like you can kind of just like read it and know all the sort of meaning. (4.M.2)

Young men felt that it was important to communicate what they wanted, but acknowledged the difficulty in doing this:

I think it’s important for the other person to know your preferences and what you sort of want in a relationship. And I think it is difficult to tell them that sort of stuff. (6.M.1)

They had no idea about how to broach this in the context of a relationship: ‘no, I wouldn’t know’ (6.M.2).

One group of young women was more comfortable using ‘games’ such as ‘Truth or Dare’ (17.F.1; 17.F.2; 17.F.3) to ask questions of young men in a playful way without seeming like they were directly asking questions: ‘you can — finding out stuff from boys, like, if you ask them to play games like truth or dare or something’ (17.F.3), ‘but then you play without the dare’ (17.F.2) because ‘you can find out a lot from games’ (17.F.2). This fear that young women have of directly addressing what they want also extends to addressing what they don’t want:

Oh, well, yeah, I’m really, really scared because I don’t believe in sex before marriage, but I’m like really scared that I’m not going to find a guy that’s like willing to wait and stuff ... I’ve got friends that are guys and I’m like, “oh, what do you guys think about it?” and they’re, like, “you’re never going to find a guy that’s willing to wait” and stuff. And ... I don’t want to have a boyfriend and the first thing I say to him is like, “look we’re not going to do it”, sort of thing. Because I don’t want them to, like, back away sort of thing. But I wouldn’t know when to tell them. Like if it gets late into the night or whatever, I don’t want to be like it’s time to go home, but...’ (1.F.2)
'I guess that’s true...you go into your room and he’s got no clothes on: “ahhh! Get out!” (laughing)’ (1.F.5).

Many of the young people in these groups felt that they should feel comfortable asking for what they wanted in their relationships: ‘I think if you’re in a relationship with someone, you should feel comfortable’ (8.F.1; see also 2.F.2; 8.F.3; 10.F.2; 10.F.1; 10.F.4; 11.F.1; 11.F.3; 12.F.1; 12.F.5; 12.F.4; 13.F.4; 14.F.3; 14.F.2), but many of these young people also acknowledged how difficult that actually was in practice:

Well, basically, you just should be able to feel, like, comfortable in asking, but it’s just not the way it is these days. I don’t know why but it’s just, like, yeah.’ (2.F.2)

A number of young people did say that they would be comfortable asking for what they wanted, and these were predominantly the young people who had prior relationship experience; again, demonstrating that experiential knowledge — or figuring things out for themselves — is one of the only ways that these young people are learning how to navigate these relationships:

Also who’s more comfortable. They’ve been in several relationships beforehand sort of thing. For example, I’ve been in a few relationships and ... yeah, basically, in my last relationship, I had the most experience so I was able to say, “I want this, but I don’t want this” because I was comfortable to be able to do that. (9.F.2)

Privileging experience in this way was something that was communicated among peers:

Facilitator: So do you all feel like you'd be comfortable asking for what you want?


Facilitator: Okay.

9.F.5: Well, actually not me because I haven’t been in a relationship first.

9.F.3: She hasn’t even gone to first.

9.F.5: So I’d be a bit hesitant. And then after I’d had my first relationship, I’d be fine.

And for those young people who did have experience, exchanging knowledge with other friends who were also in relationships was considered an important source of information: ‘you talk about your friend’s relationships and your relationship and you sort of learn from each other; I think that sort of helps as well’ (10.F.2). Some of these young people who did have experience said that they would feel comfortable communicating what they wanted, and spoke about the importance of doing this, or setting ‘boundaries on, like, what everybody’s expecting of it kind of thing’ (8.F.1) prior to the relationship:

Well, beforehand, when you know that they’re going to ask you out or something, because you talk about it and everything, and you go, “oh, yeah, maybe”, it might happen. Or usually at the beginning of the relationship and you just kind of say, “yeah, well, I want to go slow or blah, blah, blah.” (9.F.2)

However, this was not de rigueur, and many young people would just wait until something ‘starts to become an issue’ (9.F.3). This was the case even for the young woman who said that she would establish what she wanted prior to the start of the relationship: ‘so if it’s just running smoothly, I would just go with it and if something isn’t happening right, then I’ll say something about it and usually it changes’ (9.F.2).

Peers and consent
Consent — and how to navigate and negotiate it — is an area where young people are receiving very little to no information from all of their sources aside from the media — as seen in Chapter 5. Therefore, the information that they convey to each other is a distilled form of all of these messages from other sources in conjunction with some personal experiences. This section will speak more to the attitudes and beliefs of these young people towards this topic as a result of this lack of information and the subsequent lack of discussion. Within this topic, a number of issues will be discussed here. Firstly, examining the way that these young people think about consent within a context of sexual assault, or unwanted sexual activity, that includes some of the young women’s related experiences. Secondly, exploring the ways that young women think and deal with consent within their relationships, and the struggles they experience in navigating something that they are ill-equipped to deal with due to the lack of information they receive. Finally, looking at young men’s ideas and issues with consent, and, particularly, the pressure they receive from peers that they should never need to say no to sexual activity and should always be wanting to engage in it.

When the topic, *Saying no to sexual advances you don’t want*, came up within the focus groups, for some young people, sexual assault from a stranger was the first thing that they though of. Due to the way in which rape and sexual assault can be framed in the larger public discourses (Freedman 2013; Horzepa 2011), it was somewhat unsurprising to hear an element of victim-blaming within these young women’s discussions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Saying no to sexual advances that you don’t want. We kind of talked about it a little bit…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.F.5</td>
<td>Isn’t it like...rape?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>It can be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.F.1</td>
<td>I don’t know ... if it was me, I’d just be like, “yeah, no, I don’t want to.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.F.5 Yeah, I'd just say no. Do you know what I don't get about rape? It's like some people just get raped and then, but wouldn't you fight back...rather than just let it happen?

1.F.6 But sort of, they can roofie you and stuff, they drug you up.

1.F.2 Sometimes people get drugged.

1.F.6 But if you get raped in the park...they're usually like...

1.F.5 No, but, like, if someone’s, like, chasing you, you could always just turn around and kick them in the balls.

1.F.2 Yeah, but sometimes people drug you before...

1.F.5 Yeah, that’s true...

Particularly problematic within this discussion was the otherness of sexual assault, and the idea that only an unknown stranger would commit this act, instead of — as is more often the case — someone known to the victim (ABS 2006a). Perhaps due in part to this othering and lack of discussion, as mentioned in Chapter 4, some young women are unable to effectively communicate with their partners and can end up having unwanted sexual encounters that they feel extremely uncomfortable about, but don’t always identify as sexual assault because they lack the skills or confidence to assert themselves:

9.F.2: There was one time that I didn't want it but...

9.F.1: You didn't say no.

9.F.2: I didn't say no because I didn't really have enough confidence and I'd never really done that sort of thing before. But if the chance came where I wanted to say no then I would. But, yeah.

This group also raised the issue of regret in unwanted sexual activity:
And then it’s once you — sometimes you say “no” to something sexual that your partner wants to do, and then it happens anyway just because you end up doing it anyway. And then you feel kind of bad about it afterwards. (9.F.1)

This young woman’s friend then voiced an eventuality that some young women will face: ‘or … you might have liked it, even if you didn’t want it’ (9.F.5) because sometimes unwanted sexual activity can still be pleasurable, which can leave young people even more confused.

Another group of young women spoke about a peer who had discussed consent with her partner prior to a sexual encounter, but tried to revoke that consent when they were about to undertake the act:

Well, like, I heard a story that, um, this girl, she was like, they agreed to it and then, like, she...her and her boyfriend agreed and, like, after, um, she...like they were about to, and then she’s like “no” and then he just went ahead and she didn’t stop him or anything. So it was kind of like rape. (2.F.3)

The fact that these young women were unsure whether this constituted sexual assault or not, thinking that it was ‘kind of like rape’, highlights the lack of information these young women receive about consent, which therefore lessens their ability to deal with these situations. When asked if this young woman had reported this to anyone apart from friends, it came out that she had not, as is often the case (ABS 2006b):

Oh, like [name], who’s friends with her...I suppose it’s really hard, like...but like I think you always like...[use your] fists and...get away. I don’t know; she sort of just stayed there. She didn’t like do anything. (2.F.3)

The ensuing discussion further cemented that these young women did not see this as a serious issue, and, if put into the same situation, they would also likely not report this to any authority figure: ‘if that ever happened, like, I wouldn’t stay with
them because that means they’re really, like, really jerkish’ (2.F.4). A young woman in another group spoke about the circumstances in which she would report a sexual assault to authority figures: ‘if it actually was rape, if it actually was rape, I’d tell an authority; like, I’d tell my parents and I’d tell the police’ (1.F.5) but again, due to the othering of rape and rapists, this is problematic because these young women do not appear to see sexual assault as being something that could happen to them, particularly within the context of a relationship, and would therefore not be sure ‘if it actually was rape’.

When asked if they thought that they would tell anyone if something were to happen to them, the answers from one group were again troubling but, sadly, unsurprising. Three of the young women said that they would ‘tell my parents’ (1.F.4; 1.F.3; 1.F.5), one said that: ‘I’d be embarrassed. I’d be embarrassed’ (1.F.6), and another young woman stated: ‘I…I actually wouldn’t ...I wouldn’t say anything...’ (1.F.1). When asked why she would not tell anybody, it emerged that she might tell someone:

Um, I dunno. Like I’d just ... I wouldn’t tell anyone until I’m ready to tell people because I would still be really scared and freaked out, like...I get freaked out really easily and ... and, um, and yeah, so I just wouldn’t say anything because I’d still be like processing it and all that. (1.F.1)

The final young woman in the group gave an answer that again reflected the victim-blaming mentality that surrounds this issue: ‘the one thing I’d be scared about telling my parents is that somehow I got into that situation’ (1.F.2). Two of these young women again revealed how ill-prepared they were for the possibility that sexual assault was something that could happen to them when they stated that they would not ‘know what to do until I was put [into that] situation’ (1.F.3; 1.F.6) because ‘I guess once it happens to you, then you know’ (1.F.5). One of the young women amended her statement to add: ‘I think, but I will definitely tell someone because you can’t let that happen to other women’ (1.F.6), to which a young woman, who
had previously said that she would tell her parents, also said: ‘but then if I was ever in that situation, I might think differently’ (1.F.4). That these young women think that they would have to be put into the position of being sexually assaulted before knowing how to react is extremely troubling.

For many of these young women, when asked specifically about consent within the context of a relationship, it emerged that they would have great difficulty in saying no if they did not want to engage in a sexual activity that was being asked of them: ‘no, I don’t think it would be easy’ (2.F.4) for a number of reasons, including because it ‘depends on who you’re with and if you, like, feel comfortable with them’ (2.F.2). For one young woman, consent was relative to factors such as ‘how sexy the guy is...like, how seductive he is’ (9.F.5). The facilitator, believing the young woman may have misunderstood, reiterated that this was in relation to unwanted advances, but it was apparently still relative: ‘oh, well, it depends what you don’t want’ (9.F.5). Saying no was challenging for some young women because they were afraid of disappointing their partner:

8.F.3: I know I’d be nervous to say no, though; like, I would definitely want to but I know I’d be, like...

Facilitator: Why?

8.F.3: Mostly because you wouldn’t want to, like — you don’t want to disappoint him; like, I would say no but I would find it hard like because then...

8.F.1: You feel bad.

8.F.3: Yeah, I’d feel bad.

8.F.2: Yeah.

Further to that, this young woman spoke about the difficulty of saying no when it is a person that you really like:
7.F.3 It, like, sounds kind of weird, but, for me, like, guys that I don’t like, I find it so easy to say no. Like, I’m, like, “what are you doing? Come on” and if, yeah, if they try something you can kind of just get angry and, like, it doesn’t matter afterwards, but I find it harder to say no.

7.F.2 To people you’re in a relationship with.

7.F.3 Or even just like...

7.F.2 Not in a relationship?

7.F.3 Yeah, but if you like them and you know they like you and they’re using that whole have the relationship later thing; I don’t know, it’s hard because I’m kind of in a position a while ago with that guy and I didn’t want to say no because...

7.F.2 You didn’t want him to...

7.F.3 Lose interest or, like, give up kind of. Like, some guys it’s kind of like they have a reputation and, like, before I saw him on the weekend one of the guys came up to me and they were like, “oh, do you realise since you’re going to go see him, everyone is either going to say: ‘one, you’re a slut for going with him and you’re frigid if you don’t do anything with him.’” So I was kind of like “oh, great options.”

This damned if you do and damned if you don’t dichotomy in which a young woman is either ‘frigid’ if she will not engage in the sexual acts that a young man wants: ‘you’d get called like names and stuff. They’d say that, like, you were frigid and stuff [if you say no]’ (2.F.5) or a ‘slut’ if she does: ‘if you do get with him, you’re immediately a slut’ (7.F.2) means that young women can’t win when it comes to their sexuality. Young men see this disparity, but don’t appear to question it, perhaps because young men are not viewed through the same cultural lens: ‘and with the...too much sex, not with guys but for girls, it’s, like, definitely slut’ (4.M.5).
There were a number of young women in these focus groups who did say that they’d be comfortable saying no to any unwanted sexual activity:

Facilitator: Would you feel comfortable saying no?
Together: Yes.

5.F.1: I would, because I wouldn’t want to do something that I don’t want to do.

5.F.2: And the thing is, if you do something that you do regret, you’re going to regret that your whole life.

Other people’s perceptions of them still played a part in this decision though: ‘and what people will think of you’ (5.F.5). One young woman spoke about how she’d be more comfortable saying no than if she said yes and then regretted it afterwards:

I’d feel more uncomfortable saying yes if I didn’t want to do it. I think it would be really awkward, it would be, like, “oh yeah sure, I really don’t want to do this.” … I reckon it would be more awkward if they were, like, “can we go further?” and you’re like, “oh yeah, okay” but you don’t actually want to. I reckon that would be worse than saying no, like, because it would feel weird or wrong or whatever, but, saying no, it’s, like, “you know what I want; you know that I’m not ready” or “I don’t want to do that yet”, something like that. (7.F.2)

For one group of young women, if there was prior discussion, the place where they were asked about going further with sexual activity made a difference; they felt it was easier to say no, or negotiate consent, over mediated technology than in person unless they were somewhere public like a school dance:

9.F.3: Anyway, no. In person, I think I don’t really say no ‘cause it’s kind of awkward. Especially if it’s someone that you’ve got a thing with because then it kind of just ruins it or makes it awkward. If it’s at a dance, that you’re kind of just, like, “yeah, get away from me”…Over Facebook, if they talk to you about it over Facebook, then it’s kind of
awkward. If they’re, “let’s go to second some time”, it's kind of like, “say what?”

Facilitator: Over Facebook?


9.F.2: Or texting or whatever.

9.F.3: I’ve had that. They would suggest things and you're like, “what?”

9.F.4: “Nah. I'm good.”


9.F.3: “I'm pretty good at the moment.”


Young men are often placed in a position — as discussed in previous chapters — of not having to worry about consent because young men are perceived to not need to, or to not have any difficulty saying no:

3.M.1 Yeah, because…I mean, yeah, guys wouldn’t have so much trouble, I think, saying no if they didn’t want to.

Facilitator And is that just based on your own...your own experiences?

3.M.1 Yeah.

3.M.2 Yeah, and probably just would want to...

3.M.1 Yeah.

Facilitator So guys probably would just want to, did you say?

3.M.1 Yeah.

3.M.2 Yeah.
And particularly that this was an issue that young women only need to worry about, as they are positioned (as mentioned in previous chapters) in a gatekeeping role:

Facilitator: So you were saying — you just said that it’s girls who have to say no more than the guys.


Facilitator: Now, it’s not the school that’s giving you that message, so how do you know that it’s...

6.M.1: Friends, basically. Just knowing guys, because most of them would be willing, and they wouldn’t — they’d be the one asking the girl. And the girls would be the one making most of the decisions.

6.M.2: Yeah, it’s just sort of a general perception that guys...


6.M.2: Yeah, lead on the girls.

Facilitator: So that’s the perception you get from your friends. Do you think that’s true outside of your friends? Do you think it’s true more generally in Australia?

6.M.1: I think it would be.


6.M.1: Girls would be the ones saying no more often than guys.

The only caveat that young men receive from peers about needing to say no would be in the case of an unattractive girl: ‘generally, guys don’t really say no unless, like, the girl’s repulsive’ (4.M.2). Expecting that young men should want to have sex whenever they can get it does place pressure on them, and their peers are predominantly the source of this pressure:

Facilitator So do you guys feel an expectation that you should all be wanting sex?
4.M.3 Yeah.
4.M.2 Yeah.
4.M.3 That pressure’s there.

Facilitator And you get that from, well, not from your parents, obviously, not from the school classes. Does it come from your friends?

4.M.2 Friends, media.
4.M.5 (nodding head)

This leaves young men ill-equipped to deal with the issue of consent should it arise, as shown when this young man was asked if he thought it would be easy to say no to an unwanted sexual advance. At first, he thought it would be easy:

Yeah, I wouldn’t have a problem with that. But if you’re actually like...yeah, I reckon if you were, like, really going somewhere with them you’d have to like...you’d be alright with it. But if you didn’t want to have sex then (pause), I don’t know. (3.M.2)

For one group of young men, it came out when discussing the topic, Having good sex, that they had received some advice from peers about attaining consent from their sexual partner and it’s place in good sex:

6.M.1: But, well, I have had friends that have given some advice on how to have good sex. Be respectful. ... Yeah. Don't be forceful. If she wants — make sure she wants to do it. That’s having respect for her.


*Peers and safe sex*
As seen in Chapter 4, safe sex was an area that was heavily covered in schools, but primarily in a ‘scientific’ and impersonal way, with a focus on contraception and an implicit or sometimes explicit push for abstinence. Much of the information that they received from all of their sources also tended toward a fear-based approach, which translated into these young people sensationalising any discussions that they had on this topic and left them to (mis)inform each other with the more dramatic ‘facts’ that they were able to glean. Due to this scientific and risk approach, it emerged that, while young people discuss sex quite often, and had been doing so for a number of years: ‘yeah, I first found out about sex in general in primary school, from my friends and only from my friends’ (3.M.1), ‘yeah, the same. Your friends come before the sex talks do’ (3.M.2), they rarely discuss safe sex with each other: ‘we talk about sex but we don’t really talk about contraceptives, though’ (16.F.3), ‘not safe sex, no’ (3.M.1) because they felt that they heard enough about it at school and from their other sources of sexuality information:

**Facilitator:** Alright, having safer sex.

10.F.4: At school.

10.F.2: You hear that everywhere, parents, in school, media.

10.F.1: We hear that — yeah, in biology.

10.F.4: We don’t hear that from friends though (name).

10.F.2: Yeah, well sort of, but at this point we don’t really have to worry about that yet because...

10.F.1: Yeah you do.

10.F.2: No you do, but you wouldn’t talk to me about it because you know that I know like from school.

10.F.1: Yeah, it’s not like you need to discuss with your friends.

10.F.2: Friends don’t really talk about that aspect of it, but, like, definitely school.
When young people did discuss safe sex with each other, it was predominantly in an offhand joking way, directing each other to use contraception:

We sort of joke about it a little bit...sort of like...I don’t know just like, “oh yeah, use a condom” sort of thing...but we don’t actually talk about it. It’s just sort of like a joke. (2.F.2)

‘Yeah, I guess your friends would be, “are you on the pill?”’ (15.F.6)

The first thing that many young people spoke about was clearly informed by the message they received at school: ‘condoms’ (1.F.1; 1.F.5; 2.F.5; 8.F.3; 13.F.4; 16.F.5), ‘yeah, condoms’ (13.F.2; 15.F.6), ‘contraception’ (4.M.5; 6.M.1), ‘using a condom’ (13.F.6; 18.M.1), ‘wear a condom’ (6.M.1), ‘protected sex’ (2.F.5), ‘use a condom. Use as many things as you can’ (17.F.3), ‘condoms, the pill, you know, the usual’ (19.M.3), ‘the pill’ (1.F.5), ‘if it’s not on; it’s not on’ (4.M.3). But, as seen in Chapter 3, young people were often given misinformation about the efficacy of these different forms of contraception, or the efficacy was called into question. The discussions many young people had about safe sex therefore focused more on the consequences of unsafe sex, as opposed to how to avoid those consequences.

Pregnancy was at the forefront of many of these conversations, particularly for young women, and it surfaced that, for a large number of these young women, pregnancy was of higher concern than contracting an STI. Pregnancy was clearly a message that was reinforced by all of their sources, and therefore the aspect of unsafe sex that they discussed the most with each other. When asked which they would be more concerned about — pregnancy or an STI — a number of young women said that getting pregnant worried them more (1.F.1; 1.F.3; 1.F.4; 1.F.5; 2.F.4; 5.F.4; 9.F.3; 9.F.5; 10.F.2; 10.F.3; 10.F.4; 11.F.2; 11.F.3; 12.F.6; 15.F.5; 15.F.6). The young women gave a number of reasons for the higher level of concern about getting pregnant, including thinking that ‘it’s easier to get pregnant than it is to get [an STI]’ (9.F.3) and the perceived impact pregnancy would have on their lives:
Because, well, you hear about more scary stories about teen pregnancies than about STDs...and so the idea that, right now, if you got pregnant, your life would be ruined; that’s really scary for all of us, and so you just don’t want to take that chance. (10.F.2)

In addition, they highlighted the social stigma and visibility attached to being a pregnant teen: ‘for us, it’s probably less about when we talk about safe sex, but more about the fear of getting pregnant, like being a pregnant school girl’ (11.F.2).

The other thing about that is though, that you can tell if someone’s pregnant but you can’t tell if they have an STI; like, that’s why being pregnant’s more, like, obvious because you can actually see it. (11.F.3)

When it came to discussing the options available in the case of unprotected sex and possible pregnancy, many of these young women were clearly confused. Only two of the focus groups spoke about Emergency Contraception — commonly known as the morning-after pill: ‘and there’s also the day-after pill in case anything...’ (16.F.5), ‘there’s, like, the morning-after pill or something’ (8.F.1). Again, there were questions about efficacy and correct usage that stemmed from either misinformation or a lack of information:

8.F.3: So they’re [the morning-after pill can be used] like 48 hours or two hours after [unprotected sex] or something.

8.F.1: I don’t know if that’s always as effective.

In addition, participants were confusing the morning-after pill and the oral contraceptive pill — commonly referred to as The Pill:

16.F.4: No. No. People take it just for their periods.

16.F.1: Yeah.

16.F.2: It makes them less painful.

16.F.1: And your skin and stuff.
16.F.5: And I know, yeah, people just have it with them just in case.

16.F.1: [Name]'s going to get it at home because it helps her skin.


16.F.1: No. No. Her doctor told her that.

16.F.5: No, but that's the normal pill.

16.F.1: Oh.

16.F.5: Then there's the day after pill, which actually makes everything go out.

When it came to access to the morning-after pill, these young women were further confused: ‘but then you have to go to the doctor to get it’ (16.F.3) and only one participant knew the details of how and where to attain this emergency contraception: ‘you have to get your parent’s consent unless you’re over 16...you’d have to pay the chemist’ (16.F.4) and, therefore, through this discussion, as was the case a number of times, these young women figured out how they would access this pill:

16.F.5: I think I'd like — or you could get an older person to get it for them.

16.F.4: Yeah, I'd do that. I'd get an older person to get it for me.

16.F.3: True.

A number of young women spoke about the option of abortion in the case of an unplanned pregnancy (1.F.1; 1.F.5; 2.F.3; 12.F.4; 12.F.6; 14.F.1; 14.F.2; 14.F.4; 15.F.5; 15.F.6; 16.F.1): ‘if I got pregnant...I’d abort it’ (1.F.5), and some young women had an abortion agreement as a contingency in the event that one of their friends fell pregnant:
And I know heaps of friends that are supportive. My friend has a group at school and they’re all talking about and they’re, if anyone did [get pregnant], we’d all put in $100 each or something for abortion money and all that kind of stuff. So I guess friends are very — they’re the people you talk to. (15.F.5)

Some of the young women who mentioned abortion had a moral objection to this option (1.F.1; 14.F.4), and had thought briefly about what they would do if they became pregnant:

Ah, I just hate the idea of killing something that hasn’t even had a chance to live yet ... like, see, if I was going to do it, I would have the child and then maybe, um, give it to an adoption agency and then, but, see, I’d still want to stay in contact with it like as a close friend or something. Or...or I’d like give it to my parents and then, um, I’d just be like, can you just raise this and make it seem like we’re sisters or something. And yeah. (1.F.1)

A slightly smaller amount of the young women we spoke to felt that contracting an STI was a greater concern than pregnancy (1.F.2; 1.F.6; 2.F.3; 2.F.5; 5.F.3; 5.F.5; 9.F.1; 9.F.4; 12.F.4; 14.F.1; 14.F.2; 14.F.3; 14.F.4). At the forefront of this fear was one particular STI: ‘I’m worried about AIDS’ (1.F.6). Again, this concern stemmed from a number of reasons, with the most prevalent based on the somewhat outdated belief — circulated among themselves and gathered from all of their sources of information — that contracting HIV/AIDS, or another STI, would kill them (the figures show mortality rates are actually relatively low: ‘between 1997 and 2009, infection with HIV, syphilis, and gonorrhoea was the underlying cause of death for 1,549 Australians [118 were women].’) (ABS 2012): ‘no, but generally isn’t it, like, if you get AIDS, you’re pretty much going to die’ (1.F.5), ‘there’s more risk of dying from an STD than from pregnancy, I think’ (14.F.4). These young women also showed concern over the thought of living with an STI for life, or giving it to a sexual partner: ‘I’m more worried about AIDS because you have that forever and then you can pass it on to other people, which is worse’ (1.F.6), and felt that there were options for pregnancy, while there were none for STIs:
I think the STDs [are worse] because, like, some of them are with you for life and they can, like, completely alter your life, but if you had a baby, like, you’ve got options and, like, you can, like, get an abortion or you can have it and then, like, give it for adoption or something; you’ve got stuff you can do, but with a lot of, like, the STDs, you’re stuck for life. (12.F.4)

The young people in these focus groups were largely aware of the importance of safe sex: ‘only safe sex...too much of a risk otherwise’ (9.F.2) and particularly the importance of condom use to prevent STI transmission:

5.F.3 Well, the only way to not get an STI, I hear, is use a condom, because pills and stuff you can still get like...

5.F.5 You can still get germs but you can’t get pregnant.

This was information that appeared to be part of the collective knowledge: ‘everyone just knows generally you have to wear condoms to stop STDs’ (15.F.6) and many of these young people — young women in particular — said that: ‘I would never have sex without a condom’ (9.F.2), but when discussing negotiating condom use with a partner, they spoke about how difficult that would actually be: ‘it’s a really difficult position to be in. It’s expected that you check [if they have an STI] just to be safe right before you have sex’ (9.F.1). Getting caught up in the moment was one reason given for possibly not using condoms when having sex: ‘but then when I was, like, actually just, like, having sex, I wouldn’t think about it [STIs], actually. It would be out of my mind’ (12.F.5). One young woman spoke about a friend who had recently had sex and was not embarrassed or afraid to ask her partner to wear a condom when required:

And then they [her friend and her partner] were going to do it. And then the guy was — she was, like, “do you have a condom?” he was, “no” and she was, “well, go get one” and he was, like, “no. I don’t want to because I would have to go to a store to get it” and she made him go get it. (16.F.5)
However, when one group of young women was asked what they would do if they wanted to have sex, but didn’t have condoms, one participant in the group said that they ‘wouldn’t do it’ (9.F.2), while some of the others said:

9.F.3: I’d probably do everything else but sex.


Another in the group spoke about consuming alcohol and its place here: ‘well, if you were drunk...your judgement is off...and then you leave it up to the other person to kind of be safe’ (9.F.1). As mentioned previously, some of these young women mentioned the withdrawal method as something they’d heard friends using: ‘well, I have heard a story where they...didn’t have a condom so they were just, like, doing, like, ins and outs’ (2.F.3), but they were unsure about the efficacy of this method: ‘I don’t know if that’s true, if it works’ (2.F.3). This was discussed in another group of young women, where one acknowledged that they had considered it:

16.F.3: Yeah. I have heard someone happy with it. I was going to do that but then...

16.F.5: Yeah. I've heard it happen as well. Yeah, I know girls that have done that and it’s like...

16.F.4: It’s probably not a planned thing though because if you're planning it, you get a condom. But in the moment — “I'll just pull out, I'll just pull out, I'll just pull out.”

However, the young woman who had considered it as a method of contraception recognised that ‘it’s stupid. It’s slack’ and again, demonstrating the importance of peers with some experience, cautioned her friends against it: ‘and you guys don’t want to do that’ (16.F.3).

For a number of young people in our focus groups, the predominant reason discussed for possibly not using contraception was that they assumed, because of
their age, that a partner would not have much, or any, sexual experience, and would therefore be safe:

Yeah, well I don’t think so as much now because we’re in Year 10, so it’s like first sexual partner type thing, and then maybe I don’t think they’d have STDs because obviously they haven’t had sex before so — but I think that when you’re older, it’s important to make sure you know before. (8.F.1)

Additionally, some of these young people assumed that they would be able to tell if a partner did have an STI. When considering the pictures of diseased genitalia that many of them had been shown in school, this was troubling, but not surprising:

1.F.6: Maybe, like have a look first maybe. Maybe just even have a look first and see if it looks... *(mimes holding up a torch)*...get a torch in there...

Facilitator: Have a look at what?

1.F.6: Have a look at their sexual organ *(laughing)*.

A key finding in the focus groups — for both male and female participants — was the distinction between planned and unplanned sexual activity. There was reasonably widespread agreement (explored further in Chapter 6 and in the next section) that for sex to be good, it needed to be spontaneous:

8.F.4: I like the idea...no. I reckon, like, good sex would probably be spontaneous as well because then you’re not, like, sitting there waiting; like, you’re not sitting there freaking out about it, it’s just like what if this happens or what if that happens. Instead, it’s like a spontaneous thing where it’s just like you haven’t been worrying about it up to then.

8.F.5: Yeah, like, it’s not planned; planned sex doesn’t work out.
However, for a number of the young women, they perceived the subtle differences between planned and unplanned sex in the context of a relationship. For these young women, sex was never completely spontaneous:

Facilitator: Well, if you haven’t really spoken about, you’ve kind of said that unplanned sex is hotter or whatever; what would you - if it’s unplanned?

9.F.2: But if it’s unplanned usually you have actually talked about it before together because unless you’ve talked - you don’t do it unless you’ve actually talked about it with the other person. And so if it does happen to become unplanned then you already know that you already know him.

And while many of the young people spoke about the difficulty associated with negotiating condom use and talking about STIs, a number of young people — predominantly young women — felt that, particularly in relationships, ‘if you’re going to have sex with them, then you should be comfortable enough to talk about if they have any diseases’ (8.F.1)

For young men in particular, condom use, and negotiating condom use was problematic for a number of reasons. First, inherent in the majority of the focus group discussions around condom use was that participants assumed that the young man should or would be responsible for providing the condom. When young women were asked if they knew they were going to have sex and how they would be safe: ‘you’d ask the partner if they have anything’ (20.F.3) and ‘um, just say that like… if you’re already planning on like having sex, well wouldn’t you just be like, “if there’s no condom, I won’t have sex with you”’ (2.F.5). The female condom was mentioned briefly in some of the focus groups, but the young men were unsure about it: ‘I’m not sure what form of the condom females use’ (18.M.4), ‘they do, they do have something though’ (18.M.3), and the young women appeared to find them unappealing: ‘there’s, like, female condoms, but they’re massively large condoms that you just shove up your vagina’ (9.F.3).
The second reason condom use was problematic for young men was the idea that they should not be planning or expecting to have sex:

3.M.2 Because I don’t know anyone who would go out — well I do actually, but, like, a lot of the people I know who would have sex like they wouldn’t go out and buy condoms specially for it; it would just happen on the spot.

Facilitator Why do you think that is? Why wouldn’t they get a condom?

3.M.1 Um, because it’s kind of frowned upon, I suppose a bit. Like with our age group. Like, you know, if somebody went out and bought like a packet of condoms it would be like, “oh, you know, what are you expecting?”

For a number of the young people we spoke to, they had some perceived roadblocks to procuring contraceptives. They were embarrassed about buying condoms:

People, but they — it’s easy to tell someone to go, “you need to use a condom, you need to use the pill” or something, “you need to be safe”, but it’s so much harder for them to actually get there and go to somewhere and ask for it because it’s so — it’s kind of embarrassing. (8.F.4)

They were also confused about whether they were able to buy condoms: ‘Yeah, you can’t get them til you’re 16 unless you go to one of those things and pay two bucks’ (3.M.2), which tied into the planned/unplanned aspect of engaging in sexual activity:

Mmm, if one of my friends was going to have sex, I don’t know if they would use a condom because they couldn’t get one. Like, they could go and buy one but I don’t know if they would, to tell you the truth. And if they were going to have sex, I don’t know if they’d actually plan it. (3.M.2)

Some young people spoke about what they thought they should do in this case: ‘always have a condom with you’ (16.F.5), ‘I reckon it’s good for the ones that are
around our age maybe just to have one [a condom] in case’ (6.M.2). This group addressed the problems associated with the efficacy of condoms that were kept in a wallet:

And especially if you’re going out with some mates and you’re going to be seeing some girls. Don’t keep it in your wallet because it can get all hot and break, but if you’re going out with some mates and you may meet some girls, I’d have one with me just for that night. (6.M.1)

The young men in this group also knew that they could buy condoms as required:

Yeah. It’s the easiest because you can buy them. You just go to the store and you — they can’t refuse to sell them to you. And they have to give it to you. (6.M.1)

Of interest in the discussion of condom use, was that the idea of intercourse being more pleasurable without condoms was only raised in one focus group: ‘well, generally, you hear like, “don’t wear a condom” because apparently it’s more fun without it’ (4.M.2). Only one group of young men mentioned condom use in relation to oral sex, and here pleasure was given as the reason for not using condoms, even though they recognised that condoms were required for safety:

6.M.1: But you don’t — no one uses condoms for oral sex.


6.M.1: You’re still meant to because of...

6.M.2: Yeah, because of the diseases.

6.M.1: Yeah. It wouldn’t be as good.

**Peers and good sex**

As seen in previous chapters, young people received very little information about having good sex from school or parents, while the media provided a substantial amount of this knowledge. Good sex was an area where peers were an extremely
important source of information to other young people; the information that peers provide to each other in this area is often sourced from personal experience, or the media, or distilled from a combination of these sources:

Facilitator  How do you think you would find out about having good sex?

5.F.3  Media. Oh, friendship, conversations.

5.F.5  Friends and the media.

These young people provided a number of ideas about what made for good sex, ranging from pleasure and enjoyment, emotional connection or love, and spontaneity, to physical or bodily aspects and attributes.

When the topic, Having good sex, was raised, a number of young people were initially confused and needed it to be clarified for two reasons. Firstly, because they were unsure what they were being asked:

Facilitator:  Okay. All right. Having good sex.


Facilitator:  It’s more like, what kind of messages do you get about this? What do you know about it?

Secondly, they felt that they were not qualified to talk on the subject due to lack of sexual experience: ‘well, I personally haven’t. I haven’t had sex and I haven’t done the sex thing’ (5.F.3). For many of the participants, their initial response was that they knew nothing about this topic: ‘I have no idea’ (17.F.1), ‘Me either’ (17.F.2). Upon discussion, however, many of these young people did have some ideas of what good sex was, or how to make sex good, and these responses tended to fall into four key areas: 1) pleasurable or enjoyable sex; 2) love, trust, and intimacy; 3) spontaneity; 4) physical or bodily attributes.
Some focus group participants thought that good sex was sex that was pleasurable (6.M.1, 8.F.3, 9.F.3, 18.M.4) or enjoyable (4.M.2, 4.M.5, 6.M.1, 7.F.2, 8.F.1, 13.F.2, 16.F.2), and provided variety of ideas about how to, or what made for enjoyable or pleasurable sex, ranging from if ‘both partners enjoy it’ (13.F.3, see also: 12.F.1, 12.F.5, 18.M.5), ‘I reckon when both people have a good time, just generally have fun, like they like it and they want more of it, probably’ (12.F.6), to having ‘experience’ (11.F.2, 11.F.4, 12.F.5, 16.F.2) or ‘practice’ (2.F.5, 12.F.5, 13.F.5) because ‘practice makes perfect’ (15.F.2).

For a number of young people, pleasurable sex meant ‘orgasm[s]’ (1.F.4; 1.F.6; 9.F.3); however, a number of these young women were not sure of what an orgasm was: ‘what are orgasms? I don’t even know. Like everyone talks about them’ (1.F.2), ‘is it, is it when you hit, like, a G-spot or something? That’s what...I don’t know’ (1.F.5). While the G-spot was mentioned in a few of the focus groups, the clitoris was mentioned only once — and this young woman attributed its existence to a biological — and by extension, religious — imperative for furthering the species, instead of solely for providing pleasure:

> If you look at it biologically, we have a clitoris so that we can continue making babies so that our population doesn’t die...it’s God’s thing to encourage us to have sex. (9.F.5)

Some of the young women discussed orgasms in the context of the experienced or perceived difficulty associated with achieving them: ‘I personally find it really hard to do when — for a girl, when having sex because, I don’t know, it’s just, I don’t know, it’s weird. It doesn’t...’ (9.F.2) ‘and, like, usually, like, you associate good sex with an orgasm because that’s like so rare for girls apparently’ (14.F.1), and, again, for those who had no experience, this information came from the same two sources: ‘a lot of friends and, like, movies and books’ (14.F.1). Also mentioned was the idea that orgasms were something that were supposed to happen, but — again showing the
importance of friends as a source of information — this was something that was dispelled within this group after discussion:

9.F.1: Aren’t you supposed to orgasm when you have sex?
Facilitator: What was that one?
9.F.1: Aren’t you supposed to orgasm?
9.F.1: Aren’t orgasms made for sex?
9.F.2: No.
9.F.3: No.
9.F.3: That’s just, like a sexual feeling.

*Good sex: love, trust, or emotional intimacy*

The second key area that was discussed in the majority of the focus groups was the belief that for sex to be good, there needed to be love, trust, or emotional intimacy. It was clear — as mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4 — that, to some degree, this was a message that came from parents and schools, but it emerged that this was an idea that many young people had, and shared with each other outside of parental influence: ‘I guess you sort of tell yourself that you’d rather do it with someone that you care about, rather than just do it with a random’ (1.F.5). Having sex with someone you love and not with ‘a random’ translated across different groups:

Well, I think good sex isn’t just about the physical; you have to be able to trust the other person, and I think I haven’t had that much experience, I don’t know what you guys think, but it’s much better when you do it with someone you love, or someone that you really
— and just not a random that you’ve only met, and — I don’t know.’

(10.F.2)

Some young women had romanticised thoughts within this idea of sex with someone you love that they had likely seen in media such as movies or television: ‘yeah, with someone you love. I think it needs to be romantic with flower petals on the bed and candles’ (17.F.1) Some of these young women felt that this notion of love being a requirement sounded clichéd, but still held to this belief: ‘I think doing it with someone that you love, it sounds like cheesy, but I think it’s true’ (8.F.3). For a number of these young women, expecting that the emotional aspect would either ensure that sex was physically good, or that sex being emotional or meaningful was more important than them receiving pleasure, was somewhat troubling. This is troubling in that sense of their privileging young men’s pleasure over their own, and the belief that their own pleasure did not matter as much. One group of young women spoke about this at length, and that they expected, or were willing to forgo, pleasure, as long as there was an emotional attachment to the person they were having sex with:

14.F.2: Well, it’s not necessarily like better but obviously it means better because it’s better emotionally because you feel more comfortable and you like the person and it’s like a connection like and it would yeah like you’d be happy even if the actual sex wasn’t that good like emotionally it would be good.

...

14.F.1: But see there’s a difference between like good sex and then like meaningful sex, like there’s a very big divide, like good sex is having good sex whereas important sex and meaningful sex is like having sex with someone that means something to me but it might not be good. Does that make sense?

Facilitator: Yes.
14.F.1: I don’t know, that’s what I just think.

14.F.4: To me though if it’s meaningful then it should be good.


14.F.4: I’m expecting it to be good if it’s meaningful, like if it was with someone who I love and what not then.

Thinking that sex should only be with someone you love, or should only be good if it’s with someone you love meant that a number of young people were judgemental and questioned the ‘self-respect’ of peers who seemed to be engaging in sexual activities purely for fun or enjoyment:

Well, I know one of my friends, she just does it, she just does it ... which is sad because she’s one of my best friends, and I’m sitting here ... I don’t feel that she has enough self-respect to want more than just — like she’ll sit there, she goes I don’t really want a boyfriend, and I was like well why are you with him, she goes because he’s fun, and I’m just like well you can — you’re allowed to want to love someone, you’re allowed to have a general boyfriend, you don’t have to just — which I think is sad, but... (8.F.4)

Some of the young mention also mentioned this idea that love would make for better sex:

19.M.3: But it’s also love. You can’t just have sex like just bang and go, because ... it’s not worth anything, if you’ve got like a love with it it’s more passionate.

Facilitator: So where did you find that out from?

19.M.3: Umm I think it’s just one of the values that I believe, that you need love, yeah. ...
getting it in’ (8.F.3). This stemmed from the gendered stereotypes about differences between males and females that were so prevalent in these focus groups:

8.F.4: I think for women, it’s more the emotional thing, like that’s just...

8.F.5: Guys are more, like, physical, like, “yeah, I had sex. I’m a legend.”

8.F.1: It’s not always like guys are more physical, but usually around teenage age it’s more of a get it in kind of thing more than a — “my god, my beautiful girlfriend; I love her so much”; it’s more of a — yeah.

Within the rhetoric of love and emotional attachment, there was a subtheme in which a number of young people spoke about sex being good if you are comfortable, both with yourself and with your partner: ‘maybe like having good sex would be like if you were comfortable and you’re with the right person and like having fun’ (5.F.1).

When one group was asked — after a discussion about love and trust in relation to good sex — if they thought that sex could just be a physical thing, they had some ideas that dispelled the need for love in a sexual relationship, as long as there was trust:

It [sex] could be [just a physical thing], but I think sometimes even with someone you trust it is just a physical thing, but it is better when you know the other person, and you’re comfortable with them and they’re comfortable with you, it’s just — it’s not awkward at all, and that’s a lot better than just — yeah, not knowing the other person. (10.F.2)

And more importantly within this subtheme, it came out that many young people recognised that communication was a significant way that sex could be good, or made better:

I think the best ... with sex is having a good...having a good partner that like you both like talk about what would be better and what you want, I guess. (5.F.5)
'I mean, if you know what each other likes and doesn't like...[which you’d know by] talking about it' (16.F.3).

6.M.1: Pleasurable? Well, it’s good if the other person — well, I don’t know if it’s good, but if the other person knows what type of sex you want that helps.

Facilitator: So you mean telling them what it is that you want.


When asked if he knew what made sex pleasurable for different people, this young man had previous experience of a partner who was open in communicating what made sex more pleasurable for her:

Well, rough and soft sort of. I had one girl who was open she’d say, “I like to start off soft and then get rough”. Well, if that ever happens I know what to do so that’s good. (6.M.1)

He recognised the value in being able to communicate with partners about sexual preferences:

6.M.1: It’s good when girls are open so you know what they like.


6.M.1: If girls are all secretive and don’t want to tell you, it’s going to make things harder.

*Good sex: spontaneity*

For a number of young people — young women in particular — the third key area was an idea that for sex to be good, it needed to have an element of spontaneity to it — or be unplanned. There was a key difference here between sex that was planned, and sex that was planned in a *romantic* way — as mentioned earlier, this would require ‘all the roses and stuff’ (16.F.1) and this was an idea that they had gleaned from ‘you know when they plan it on movies’ (16.F.1). It was clear that these
young women had been influenced by the media to some extent in their ideals of what romantically planned sex would be — and it often included the aforementioned roses and candles. But the other version of ‘planned sex’, which was not overly romanticised and was basically a decision to have sex at an agreed time and date, did not appeal to these young women for a number of reasons. They were daunted by the idea of the build-up and time spent worrying about it:

I reckon like good sex would probably be spontaneous as well because then you’re not like sitting there waiting, like you’re not sitting there freaking out about it, it’s just like what if this happens or what if that happens, instead it’s like a spontaneous thing where it’s just like you haven’t been worrying about it up to then. (8.F.4)

In addition, planning was unappealing because they felt that it would take away from the experience:

16.F.5: Yeah. But I also think planning it sometimes ruins it.
16.F.3: Yeah.
16.F.2: Yeah. It ruins the excitement.
16.F.4: It ruins the excitement.
16.F.5: Yeah. Because it’s, like, “oh, we're planning. We're going to do it now.”

Clearly this focus on spontaneity has an impact on contraception use, and can be highly problematic for this reason. Within one of the focus groups, one young woman with sexual experience took part in a discussion in which she (9.F.2) and her peer (9.F.1) advocated things happening ‘naturally’; however, when they talked about condom use, it was clear that, for this young woman at least, letting things happen naturally did not preclude being prepared:
9.F.1: You probably should be really ready for it. It happened naturally.

9.F.2: Yes, you have to feel ready for it.

Facilitator: You have to have naturally what?

9.F.1: I think you'd have to do it naturally, not planned.


Facilitator: For it to be good?

9.F.5: Does contraception...

9.F.3: It’s kind of like a moment thing.

[overtalking]

9.F.5: If you use contraception does that make it worse or better or not matter?

9.F.2: I would not know.

9.F.5: Because you haven’t done it without a condom.

9.F.2: Yes.

9.F.5: Thank you.

9.F.1: Thank god.

That these young women were able to have this discussion shows the importance of peers as an information source in this area. Even if peers were not sexually experienced, they were clear advocates for being responsible, even when getting caught up in the moment.

**Good sex: physical or bodily attributes**

The fourth key area that a number of young people indicated was needed for sex to be good or enjoyable was the idea — which again stemmed from a combination of
friends and media as sources — that it came down to a number of physical or bodily aspects such as penis size and shape: ‘with sex, girls are always talking about the dick sizes and stuff’ (16.F.3), ‘and then she was saying how short a penis is — there’s stubby penises and all that kind of stuff...yeah, it [stubby penises] feels nicer’ (17.F.3); however, one young man spoke about how this could be irrelevant:

It’s just how you use it really. I mean you could have a big cock and be boring all the time. I mean, yeah it’s good, but still I reckon people who have big egos probably have an incy wincy...dick (laughter). (19.M.3)

Participants also mentioned body shape: ‘this might be mean, but [good sex is] not with a fat girl’ (4.M.2), duration of intercourse: ‘and then you’ve got to wait until like the climax and then you ejaculate because if you go too early then that’s really bad’ (3.M.2), ‘tempo’ (18.M.1, 18.M.3) which for one group of young men meant ‘pumping away at her. Yep, for lack of a better word, pumping away’ (4.M.2), lubrication: ‘so you’ve got to go get all greased up at the beginning’ (18.M.2), differing positions: ‘like, different positions’ (4.M.3) ‘and you have to be experimental to have good sex, changing positions...if you just do missionary, it’s kind of boring’ (9.F.1), and vaginal tightness:

16.F.5: And apparently you feel a lot better if you’re tight.
16.F.3: Yeah.
16.F.3: Yeah, I heard it feels ... a lot better if you’re tight.
16.F.5: And someone does clenches.
16.F.3: Someone told me about the ways that you can get tight.
16.F.4: You can’t say anything?
Facilitator: Was that a friend or was that...

16.F.5: Yeah, a friend, a cousin.

Of interest here was the way in which the information from the sexually experienced cousin had apparently been disseminated to a number of young women who attended the same school but were not necessarily in the same friend groups. Upon cross-referencing, the information attained from 16.F.3’s cousin was mentioned in another focus group:

[16.F.3]’s cousin, I remember she was telling her all this stuff about it. And she [16.F.3] was telling us as well. And she was saying how her cousin has had sex everywhere: at South Bank, in the Captain [sic] Cook Islands, back of the bushes, in the kitchen, everywhere. And she was telling [16.F.3] all this stuff. And she was, “It’s better to have sex if you’re tight” if that makes sense.’ (17.F.3)

This demonstrates the currency, and importance to young people, of information from sexually experienced peers.

While this information about sexual experiences does hold currency and is of great interest to many of these young people, how much good sex was discussed within their peer groups varied. Some groups of young people stated that they did not explicitly discuss good sex or what made for good sex within their peer groups. This was usually among peer groups who had little or no sexual experience; in particular, young men rarely spoke about this topic with each other, but did sometimes talk to older peers:

Facilitator: Do you talk with your friends about how to have good sex?

19.M.4: Nuh

All: No, not really.

19.M.3: Don’t really talk about that.
6.M.1: No. No one really talks about how to have good sex.
6.M.2: No, not even friends do really.
6.M.1: Well, not many of our friends have had sex.
6.M.1: But mainly in Year 12 they'll give you advice sort of.
6.M.2: Yeah, or what they did and, I don't know, stuff like that.

However, on reflection it emerged that these conversations did sometimes happen within male peer groups, often in quite a paternalistic way — with advice dispensed about being respectful:

6.M.1: But, well, I have had friends that have given some advice on how to have good sex. Be respectful.
6.M.2: Respectful?
6.M.1: You have to.

Almost all of the young women in the focus groups discussed this topic at length with each other: ‘oh, yeah, we talk about this stuff all the time’ (5.F.3) including: ‘tips and like all the “to do” and “not to do” kind of thing’ (8.F.1) with a particular emphasis on the experiential knowledge:

13.F.4: You can talk to friends about it.
Facilitator: Yeah.
13.F.4: Friends who have and they know.

However, there was an element of self-selection here that was similar to the Media Practice Model outlined in Chapter 2 — whereby some young people within a peer group would opt out of conversations that they felt uncomfortable with, as these young women spoke about in regards to friends in their social circle:
And so we’re just pretty open about it, like we don’t...

Okay, so all of your friends are like really open?

Yeah we’ve got a pretty close open group.

We’ve got a big group but there’s sort of five people in the group that are — no, six or seven, but they’re really close. Then there’s about four others that are sort of...

Awkward.

Awkward, like they haven’t done anything, like even kissed yet, and so they just sort of sit out — like not that we exclude them but they don’t want to talk about it.

They just find it — you know.

And they get embarrassed.

... Yeah, but she just sort of — they just don’t understand, like they just don’t — and they don’t really care as well, but they don’t want to talk about it either. I think that people who haven’t done anything don’t want to talk about it.

Yeah.

You don’t think that they’re curious?

No.

No.

Definitely not.

I think some people are...

It would be more on personal experience.
10.F.2: Yeah I think some people are curious, but I think you do it and then they’re curious about what you’ve done or what you want to do then, I think if you haven’t done anything at the point, then you don’t.

It is therefore clear that, particularly for young women, their peers are one of their most important sources of knowledge in this area. The next chapter will discuss the key findings from the information sources examined in these data analysis chapters.
Chapter 8. Discussion

As seen in the data analysis sections of this thesis: Chapters 4 – 7, this research produced a wealth of information about what young people are learning from all of their formal and informal sources of education about sex and sexuality, and examined how these young people synthesise that information and apply it to their everyday lives.

This chapter will outline and discuss six key findings from this research:

1. Public discourses around young people’s learning about sexuality do not match young people’s experiences.
2. Parents and schools fail to provide young people with a comprehensive account of how and why sex might be a healthy part of their lives as adults.
3. The media provides young people with positive information and messages in some areas of their sexuality where parents or schools do not do so.
4. Young people are still subject to gendered differences in many areas of their lives and particularly in their education about sexuality, and this is true for all sources of information.
5. Young people are overwhelmingly not being supported to develop negotiation, assertiveness, and consent skills.
6. Self-esteem, something that many young people struggle with, is an area in which young people are receiving highly contradictory messages from all of their sources.

Key Findings

1. Public discourses around young people’s learning about sexuality do not match young people’s experiences

As seen in the introduction to this thesis, a number of public concerns exist about the sexualisation of children and young people, and these concerns are levelled at the media in particular. A key finding of this research project is that the concerns
that adults hold about young people’s sexual development do not bear much
relation to the issues that young people are struggling with.

Different facets of the media have become both the perpetuator and the source of
these sexualisation concerns. News media constantly reveals how sexual young
people have ‘become’ while seemingly unaware that their reporting of this
sexualisation makes these stories into a self-perpetuating problem (Snow 2013;
Shanahan 2010; Marriner 2013b; Tankard Reist 2013b; Tankard Reist 2013a):

Children’s sexuality — or their knowledge of sexuality — may be becoming
visible to adults in a way that it was not in the past, or at least in the recent
past. It is not so much that children have suddenly become sexual, more that
adults are now being forced to recognise this fact. (Buckingham and Bragg
2004, 4)

The news media points to entertainment media, such as magazines, pornography,
and movies and television as the source of this apparent new sexualisation. These
sexualisation concerns have sparked investigations in the US (American Psychological
Association (APA) 2010), the UK (Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011), and here in
Australia (Rush and La Nauze 2006). More recently, and particularly with the advent
of internet-capable smartphones, these sexualisation concerns have extended to
two particular anxieties about young people and their sources of information about
sexuality: social networking websites and the Internet, and pornography.

The first, and most prevalent concern, spoken about by media commentators in
regards to sexualisation is about young people watching or being ‘exposed’ to an
increasing amount of pornography. In particular, the perceived effects that
pornography is having on young people and their sexuality. The primary — and oft-
quoted concern here is that young people are seeing pornography everywhere, have
easy access to it, and will undoubtedly go on to mimic what they see there:
The single defining characteristic of teenage sex in 2013 is porn. Graphic, hardcore sex, free for anyone with a smart phone to watch. It’s so ubiquitous that the average age of first exposure to porn is now just 11 years old, warping kids’ ideas of what normal sex is years before they are likely to try it themselves.

“When you put a smart phone in the hands of a teen or tween, you’re basically giving them access to online porn,” says Liz Walker, the national director of Get a Grip Teenz education program. “How do we equip kids to understand the difference between porn and real sex? A huge percentage of people who watch porn then want to try it.” (Marriner 2013b)

These discourses are mirrored in articles consistently appearing in the media landscape (Marriner 2013a; Tankard Reist 2013b), and, as in the above quote, often point to research about the terrifyingly low average age of ‘exposure’ to pornography, and purport that ‘huge percentage[s]’ of young people are going on to try the sexual acts they have seen there.

Despite the public concerns, of particular note in these focus group discussions was the absence of comments on pornography as a source of information. As mentioned in Chapter 5, some of these young men demonstrated a significant amount of media literacy and knew that pornography was not an accurate representation of how sex would be for them: ‘but I know it’s not like that because that’s crazy’ (6.M.1), ‘yeah, that’s obviously over exaggerated when you watch it [sex] on that [pornography]’ (6.M.2).

My mate showed me this, umm, porn video and it’s so stupid and it was so fake. She sounded kind of like a monkey when she was having sex and I was like, “aw that’s stupid, that’s stupid”. (19.M.3)

Young women largely spoke about pornography as something that young men consumed:

10.F.2: I went on my brother’s computer once and I opened a new tab, one of the frequently visited was Redtube and I
was like...my brother is 16, but, yeah, like it’s sort of accepted when they do it because...

10.F.4: It’s a bit different for girls as well, like guys it’s okay to watch porn, but girls...

10.F.2: Because guys do it all the time.

10.F.1: Yeah I don’t understand that.

But it was also clear that young women were aware of the public discourses about pornography, and echoed them, while plainly being ambivalent:

Facilitator: But really why do you think that — like do you think that it’s okay for girls to watch porn?

10.F.4: I think it is.

10.F.2: Yeah.

10.F.3: Yeah.

10.F.1: It’s alright, but everyone else is just — it’s just not what society thinks we should do, like I don’t know why but they just don’t have a view of girls watching porn, it’s more of a guy thing, I don’t know, probably because it’s guys exploiting the women.

Facilitator: Do you think that it is guys ex...

10.F.2: It’s not exploitation but it is...

10.F.1: I don’t know, like more like it makes the guys have — like they think that they have a better body, do you know what I mean, like they expect girls to have a better body because they’ve been watching that.

10.F.4: Yeah it does give them expectations.

10.F.1: Yeah their expectations get a bit high, and then — yeah so I don’t think it’s...
Facilitator: Have you seen any?

10.F.1: No.

Many of the young men admitted that they had viewed or seen pornography, and as mentioned above, they took some basic information away from it, but it was clear that they did not see pornography as a source of information about sex and sexuality — which one young man quite explicitly stated, to the agreement of his peer:

4.M.5 What do you want to know about the porn...like what we actually looked up?

Facilitator What you learn about sex from looking at it?

4.M.5 Um, when I look at porn I don’t do it to learn about sex, I just do it for the feeling at that moment.

4.M.3 Well said.

The second concern voiced by ‘experts’ and media commentators is that young people are using social networks and the Internet to find out information about sex and sexuality:

Using social media is a new trend. You hear they ask for tips and advice on social networks and also they read blogs so they might not necessarily be professional sites they are getting their information from. (Power and Lentini 2012)

This is clearly a key concern for adults. However, I found that within the focus groups, none of these young people spoke about using social networks or blogs (in fact, blogs were not mentioned at all) in this way. Facebook, the most popular of the social networking sites, was mentioned as a communication tool, but not as a source of information about sex, with one young man explicitly stating this: ‘you know, you’re not going to learn anything about sex on Facebook’ (3.M.2) and one young woman joking about it: ‘Facebook - have you tried this [sex act/position] yet? Because I find it really worked!’ (5.F.3).
The absence of social media and pornography in particular as a source of information from these discussions was a significant finding of this research given the ferocity of the public debates on this topic. This further demonstrates young people’s agency and media literacy — young people are highly aware of public discourses about social media and pornography in relation to them, and will repeat those discourses — even if they do not believe them.

A key element of this research was to take a culture-centred approach to exploring what young people learn about sex and how they learn about it — rather than starting with unproven assumptions about the key elements of sexual learning. I did not assume that social media or pornography would be the most important sources of information. From the data gathered in my focus groups it seems clear to me that parents, schools and friends all emerged as more important elements of young people’s sexuality education than the media — in fact, the claim that the media did not represent their everyday ‘real life’ was a recurring phrase in young people’s discussions of this area. Letting young people set the agenda on sex education, and listening to their perspectives, points us towards a number of issues that they see as key. The first is the relentlessly scientific — and therefore irrelevant — nature of school education about sex and sexuality. The second is the awkwardness of parents in talking about sex and, in most cases, their failure to present positive accounts of what sex and relationships should be like. Perhaps the most important contribution of this project is to illustrate that if we are genuinely concerned about young people’s healthy sexual development we should perhaps get over our obsession with their media use, and instead start looking at how schools and parents can best address young people’s needs in this area.

2. Parents and schools fail to provide young people with a comprehensive account of how and why sex might be a healthy part of their lives as adults

The data analysis chapters of this thesis explored in detail the types of messages and information that young people receive from each of their sources — schools,
parents, media, and peers — about the different areas of their sexuality. The key advantage of this thesis is the ability to compare and contrast the information received from these sources to get a more comprehensive picture of how young people are learning about sex and sexuality. When looking at these sources and the information that they present in this comprehensive way, it is evident that the way in which parents and schools present sex to young people is very similar. The discussions from these sources are often characterised by a focus on risk and danger, with very little room left for the possibility that when young people are ready, sex can be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience.

When considering the climbing rate of positive notifications for STIs in young people today — the reason this research was undertaken — it is unsurprising that parents and schools are fearful for the health and well-being of the young people in their care. When parents and schools communicate with young people about sex and sexuality, through both the explicit and implicit messages that are imparted within informal discussions and formal sexuality education, this fear translates into telling young people that sex is bad, dangerous, and to be avoided at all costs. This fear-based approach that frames sex and sexuality as a bad or dangerous thing is problematic for a number of reasons. As shown in previous research (Sorenson and Brown 2007; Halstead and Reiss 2003a; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Hirst 2008), particularly Allen’s (2005a) work, young people disengage from the information when the message that they receive about sex is solely about the dangers associated with it, and it is framed in a ‘scientific’ way:

13.F.6: It’s not — it’s all scientific though, it’s not more...
13.F.2: It’s not in relation to your life. It’s just ...
13.F.6: Education about the disease.
Facilitator: Okay.
And, as has been demonstrated in this thesis, young people tend to think that this information has no implication to their own lives. This section discusses the inherent problems associated with both parental and school discussions about sex and sexuality, and the factors that contribute to this limited discussion.

When it came to the risks associated with unsafe sexual practices, such as pregnancy and STIs, it emerged that schools, in particular, and also many parents, were doing a very good job at communicating to young people the need for safe sex. Every focus group was aware of the risks, and — as seen in the previous quote — knew about STIs, with all groups able to name at least one STI: ‘yeah, in health last year they taught us about all of them [STIs] and what they do and stuff’ (1.F.5). Parents were slightly less likely to communicate with their children about sex; as noted in Chapter 4, over a quarter of the participants indicated that they had not had a discussion about sex with their parents, but many parents did communicate the need for safety when they did discuss it:

I guess the extent of it is we don’t really talk about it but my mum’s like, “oh when you do it just make sure you use a condom because I
don’t want you getting knocked up” and that’s basically as far as it goes. (11.F.4)

‘My parents just say, “don’t have sex, full stop. But if you are going to have sex, use a condom. But just don’t let it get to us.”’ (16.F.3)

An area that was not covered in schools, and was very rarely discussed with parents, was the possibility that sex might be good or pleasurable: ‘well, no, they don’t really teach us that at school’ (3.M.2), ‘definitely not school’ (18.M.3). Indeed, for many of the young people in these focus groups, the idea that parents or schools would deliver this information to them was shocking or laughable:

Facilitator: Do you get told anything about this [good sex] by your parents?

All: No! (laughing)

When it came to parents, the lack of conversation about sex, and minimal conversation about safe sex, meant that this topic ‘would be pretty awkward’ (18.M.4), and this young man’s friend clarified his statement by saying that it would be awkward ‘for the parents’ (18.M.5), meaning that while the young people may find this topic awkward to discuss with parents, it is very clear to them through this lack of discussion that parents would find it even more awkward and embarrassing, and nobody (parents or schools) wants to give these young people this kind of information:

I think, like, the one thing that my parents have like once mentioned, is just like, safe sex like we went over before, and that’s about it. Like, nobody really wants to go into great depth. (18.M.3)

And for schools, the primary focus is on the mechanics and anatomy of sex, and safe sex:

5.F.4 But, you know, they don’t really talk about it in health and things like that. They don’t talk about having good sex or how to make it good or how it feels.
Beyond not telling young people that sex can be pleasurable or good, it emerged in these focus groups that parents and schools often actively try to make sex sound as bad as possible. When young women were asked about the topic, *Having good sex*, a large proportion of the participants who had not had penetrative sex previously spoke about the message that they predominantly get from parents and schools — that the first time will hurt: ‘yeah, apparently the first time it’s sooo painful’ (1.F.1), ‘and, like, Sex Ed, they’ve told you that’ (1.F.5), or it would be unpleasant: ‘my mum was telling me about the first time she had it. She had no idea what she was doing. And she said it was really unpleasant’ (17.F.1). The main message that these young people receive about sex from these two sources was encapsulated by a scene from the film *Mean Girls*, and was quoted often in these focus groups: ‘If you have sex you will get pregnant and you will get chlamydia and you will die. Just don’t have sex.’ (13.F.4)

The fear that schools have in discussing sex — and the possibility that sex could be pleasurable — was particularly evident in the attempt — and subsequent denial — to access young people through Queensland state schools. As mentioned in Chapter 3, within Education Queensland, the Strategic Policy and Research department (with the change in government, this is now called ‘Research Services’) vets all research requests. This department expressed two main issues with the research that will be discussed here. The first of these issues was particularly telling about the way that schools and government departments think about and address sex and sexuality in relation to young people: the need to discuss pleasure within the focus groups. The Senior Research Officer questioned the relevance of the proposed focus group topics that were directly related to pleasure, and suggested that they were outside the
scope of this study and school sexuality education. The relevance and importance of
this topic was explained to the research officer via telephone and the subsequent
email (outlined in Chapter 3).

Subsequently the researchers were given the opportunity to address any issues in
person with seven members of the Strategic Policy and Research department. At this
meeting, the topic, *Giving yourself sexual pleasure*, was again (as it had been in the
telephone and email communications) raised as an issue, and the research officers
and the department director suggested that if this topic were removed, the research
request would be more likely to be granted.

This exchange highlights that the process of applying for research approval from a
government department involves making decisions about what is appropriate sexual
behaviour for young people. The Senior Research Officer and the director of this
department suggested that masturbation and sexual pleasure were ‘outside the
scope’ of the project. Given that the project was interested in what 14–16 year olds
know about sex, it is difficult to see how this argument could be made. This
department may have thought the project was only about what young people learn
in schools about sexuality, in which case their position was that young people would
not be learning anything about these topics at school, and therefore it was not
appropriate to ask about them. This provides a fascinating insight into what
educational bureaucracies assume to be the purpose of sexuality education.

However, it still does not fully explain why even asking young people what they
know about these topics was raised as outside the scope of the project. The question
as to whether the researchers would be willing to remove these topics shows that
governmental power was being exercised in order to define the correct topics young
people can be allowed to talk about in the area of sexuality education. This fear of
discussing anything related to sexual pleasure with young people is even more
interesting in the context of masturbation: it can be argued that masturbation is the
safest of sexual activities — there is no risk of contracting STIs, and no risk of
pregnancy. However, it is clear that even allowing for the possibility that there is a
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sexual activity that can be pleasurable and safe does not gel with the dominant discourse about adolescents: that ‘their sexuality is something dangerous...that they need protection from’ (Allen 2007, 577).

The second core issue that this department of Education Queensland had with this research was related again to the research questions, but this time in relation to the possible public and parental perceptions — or misperceptions — of this research, which this research officer called ‘the “Courier Mail test”’. The Courier-Mail is the daily tabloid Queensland newspaper, owned by News Corp., and this ‘test’ questions whether this department will face a negative reaction in this newspaper if they grant this research request. The fact that a government agency bases decisions on the possible (mis)perceptions of those decisions by a newspaper is a troubling indictment of the fear that surrounds young people’s sexuality, and particularly the fear that schools could be allowing researchers to talk to young people about the possibility of sexual pleasure. This fear is understandable given the current debates about the sexualisation of children, which, at their core, essentially communicate that talking to young people about sex and sexuality will encourage them to start engaging in sexual activity earlier (Faulkner 2010). These are the same fears that are held by many parents and are again understandable given that many parents did not receive adequate sexuality education themselves (Dyson and Smith 2012, 222; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009, 110-111; Pluhar, Jennings and Dilorio 2006, 26; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011, 242; Wilson et al. 2010, 60). The fact that talking about sex does not lead to early onset of sexual activity is clear when looking at the level of parental and school discussion in the Netherlands (Weaver, Smith and Kippax 2005) and was also very clear to young people:

11.F.4: Knowing it earlier isn’t going to encourage you to have sex; it’s just going to help you.

11.F.3: Be safe.
11.F.1: Exactly, like we learn about drinking but it doesn’t influence really people’s drinking decisions, it just makes them aware of like how to handle situations.

This is the advantage of this culture-centred approach to young people’s sexuality education; when looking at the messages that young people receive from these two sources, it becomes clear why they would look to their informal sources of sexuality education — peers and media — to fill the gaps in their knowledge. For parents and schools, the need to protect young people is understandable. However, given the previous research showing that young people disengage from these messages, paired with this research demonstrating that young people are very aware about the dangers and risks, but are still engaging in unsafe sexual practices, the way that parents and schools address sex and sexuality needs to shift.

3. **The media provides young people with positive information and messages in some areas of their sexuality where parents or schools do not**

Traditionally, when looking at the media and its place in young people’s learning about sexuality, the views from many researchers have not been favourable. Indeed, the media has not been viewed as a source of information, but instead it is predominantly framed as something that has an ‘effect’ on young people and their sexuality. Specifically, the chief concern is that the media sexualises young people, and, as seen in Chapter 2, many theorists point to the media and this sexualisation as a possible cause of the prevalence of teen pregnancies and STIs due to the messages it sends about sexual norms and behaviours (Kunkel, Cope and Biely 1999; Steinberg and Monahan 2011, 562-563, 570; Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 162; Collins et al. 2011, 585; Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304; Pinkleton et al. 2008, 462; Ward, Day and Epstein 2006, 56; Ward 2005, 67; Hennessy et al. 2009). Very little research has been undertaken that looks to the media as a possible sexuality educator for young people, and, further, little (or no) research has been undertaken that looks comprehensively at the place of sexualised content in the media, within the context of the wider sexuality education of young people.
When examined in this way (looking at what young people know about sex and establishing where they are getting that information from) it becomes clear that the media has an important and undervalued part to play in the sexuality education of young people. As seen in this thesis, young people are receiving positive messages and information about sex and sexuality from the media in a number of key areas that are counter to the negative messages — or absence of any messages — that they are receiving from their two more formal sources: parents and schools. As noted in the preceding discussion point, pleasure is the first area where young people are receiving or seeking out information and messages, due to the dearth of information received from parents and schools.

As seen in Chapter 5, for young women, the wide range of magazines available to them, and, in particular *Cosmo, Cleo, Girlfriend*, and *Dolly* are key sources of learning about sex and sexuality, pleasure, and the possibility that sex can be good: ‘they really go into depth about everything’ (8.F.3), ‘like Cleo...does good sex bits, but Dolly doesn’t anymore. Well, the one I read didn’t do anything’ (5.F.3), ‘Girlfriend or them [are] about...guys liking you, but Cosmo's basically all about sexuality’ (9.F.3), ‘nd sex techniques’ (9.F.1) because ‘Cosmo's uncensored’ (9.F.4) and these magazines provided information about pleasure and the sexual topics that these young women were interested in, such as ‘sex techniques types of pieces’ (9.F.3). Young women also spoke about seeking out ‘iPhone apps’ (9.F.2) such as ‘Sex Facts, Sex Positions.’ (9.F.4) and ‘Sex Dice Game’ (9.F.5), which they felt were important sources of information for learning about pleasure and good sex. The messages mentioned in relation to the media and good sex all demonstrated that these young people engaged with that information in intelligent ways, and had a high level of media literacy and awareness — and, as mentioned in Chapter 5, many of these young people demonstrated that, counter to the argument about the media having an effect on them, they did not understand — and were therefore often not interested in sexual content that was beyond their comprehension. Young men had fewer sources of mediated information here, but also mentioned ‘apps’: 
I downloaded an iPod Touch app, like one of those sex position ones. For fun. Like just to see what it was...and, you know, they tell you all these different ones [positions] and how they do it. And they rate them like one to ten, whatever. And, you know, you can look through them as well I suppose. (3.M.1)

The media also provided ideas about sex being good for both parties:

It could be good sex as in pleasing your partner. In, um, which case I think in media I’ve seen that the males can never go like far enough because they always climax before the girls and it’s hard for them to keep going. (4.M.5)

The second area where media provided information to young people that they did not receive much of from parents or schools was in navigating relationships. This research showed that, through the media, young people learned about all stages of relationships, from the beginning to the end, including how and when to ask someone out: ‘Girlfriend and Dolly...has asking people out (9.F.2), ‘oh, well, like all the movies you see somebody ask somebody out’ (18.M.3), ‘and stressing about asking people out’ (18.M.4); getting what you want and how to conduct yourself within that relationship: ‘well, they [magazines] say that you should always know what you want in a relationship’ (x.x.x) on your own terms ‘and you shouldn’t let the other person...pressure you into things that you don’t want to do’ (10.F.3), ‘those [magazines] are more like what you do in a relationship’ (9.F.3), ‘like Dolly magazine, they post a lot about dating and all that stuff about it’ (2.F.4), ‘the movies and the teenage drama shows’ (15.F.4) such as ‘Gossip Girl, OC, any of those sort of dramas’ (15.F.5) provided examples of things going wrong in relationships: ‘you see the bad experiences from the dramatic programmes’ (15.F.4); and ending the relationship: ‘teen magazines in general have information on how to break up and that stuff’ (9.F.1), ‘be careful about it. Make sure you’re doing the right thing’ (9.F.1)

But if you’re breaking up with them think about it a lot. Don’t just get a feeling that you want to break up with them and then do it and then regret it later. (9.F.3)
Um, I’ve seen one thing. But then it’s just, ah like one of the comedy shows. Take them to a public place so they don’t like get angry, because they don’t want to look like idiots in front of a lot of people. (4.M.2)

This was information that they did not receive, or was in limited supply from schools: ‘no, they [school] don’t talk about relationships; just sex and genitals and health’ (9.F.5), or parents:

You don’t really talk about that sort of thing with your parents. Like your parents will sit you down and have the sex talk, but they don’t really have a talk about like, going out with people. (2.F.2)

Schools and parents avoided discussing navigating relationships for fear that being in a relationship would lead to sex because ‘touching makes babies’ (7.F.3), which, as noted previously, is something that these parties have an investment in keeping young people from doing: ‘they [school] encourage you to avoid having a boyfriend anytime’ (9.F.3). Some parents make their feelings very clear about how they feel about teen relationships:

My parents, well, my dad in particular is not a fan for teenage relationships. He gets very angry and says lots of things. He told me, with my previous boyfriend, he’s, like, “Well, that’s fine now you can go be a prostitute on the streets or something.” (17.F.1)

Her [17.F.1] dad is like ... he was just getting angry and telling me that... girls who are in relationships at high school are frowned upon by everyone. And how no one likes them. And how they’re destined for bad lives...you're not going to have a nice life. (17.F.3).

This negative or missing information from parents and schools means that young people do need to look to the media to find out about key areas of their sexual development such as how to navigate relationships and what makes for pleasurable sex. However, unfortunately, the negative messages from parents and schools often override or counteract any positive information or messages that young people may receive from the media. Many young people speak about how the media presents
things in an ‘unrealistic’ (11.F.4) way because it portrays the negative information received from parents and schools in a positive way, such as showing young people being in relationships, and actually discussing what they want:

Well, in, like, TV shows, like the OC, like their relationships are really quite intense and they are really open about what they want but it’s just that at that age it doesn’t actually happen so it’s just like always a really unrealistic view. (11.F.4)

4. Young people are still subject to gendered differences in many areas of their lives and particularly in their education about sexuality, and this is true for all sources of information

With young women representing the considerably larger proportion of these focus groups, the data collected from them provides a very rich insight into young women’s views of sex and sexuality, and their sources of information in these areas. Of great interest when talking to these young women — interest that was tinged with disappointment and surprise — was the persisting traditional or stereotypical gender roles and ideals about young women and their sexuality, and the gendered way in which information related to sex and sexuality was communicated to both young women and young men.

Three key areas highlighted this gendered difference particularly evidently, and the first of these was when discussing navigating relationships. As mentioned in the previous point, the media does provide some valuable information here — including (as seen in Chapter 5) encouraging young women to be proactive and ask young men out:

12.F.4: Like, I used to read Girlfriend and they had like that section like the sealed thing, like the love, not the sex bit and it like talked about a lot of issues and sometimes it was about girls asking out guys.

12.F.3: They tell us to ask guys out instead of waiting for them to ask us out.
However, the information received from parents in this area often counteracts the positive messages from media, and instead, as seen in Chapter 4, perpetuates traditional gender norms: ‘my mum is, like, “never be the one to chase the guy”, like, “make the guy chase you”’ (12.F.5), and young women know that this advice is outdated: ‘I guess it’s like old fashioned for especially my mum, like because she’s pretty old she thinks that it’s right for the guy to be the one who takes the initiative and asks the girl out’ (12.F.5), but because this message comes from such a trusted source, this attitude persists: ‘girls wouldn’t be prepared to ask the guys out I guess’ (12.F.5)

Well, personally, I know it’s a bit stereotypical but it’s kind of nice if the boy always asks the girl out because otherwise the girl is chasing after them and stuff. And I know my dad always says that girls can never play too hard to get. Never run after a boy or something. (17.F.3)

As seen in Chapter 6, the majority of young women held to the belief that it was the responsibility of young men to establish relationships: ‘well first of all I think that okay asking people out I think guys should be the one who ask girls out.’ (12.F.6), because: ‘... the guy’s are meant to be doing it.’ (2.F.1) ‘... And it's - I don't know, traditional.’ (9.F.2) ‘Because it's a guy's job. ... Yeah, it's a bit — I don't know. I guess women can ask guys out now but I always still like it the other way around.’ (15.F.6)

It is very clear that there is dissonance here for young women — they know that it is — or should be — culturally acceptable for a young woman to be assertive and ask a young man out, but the message that they receive from all of their sources tells them that it is better for the young man to do the asking. While the media — particularly magazines — does provide some excellent messages here, young women point to media such as television and movies as one of the purveyors of this gendered message: ‘It’s like the guy always proposes to the girls, from like movies and stuff’ (2.F.5)
I don’t know; it’s just how it’s always been in the media. Like, you don’t really see, well, it’s not always the case, but a lot of the time the boy asks the girl out. (2.F.1)

The second area where young people are maintaining gendered ideals and stereotypes is in the use of the word ‘slut’. As noted in Chapter 6, there is a troubling and persistent dichotomy for young women in which they are called ‘frigid’ if they do not engage in sexual acts or ‘slut’ if they do:

Like some guys it’s kind of like they have a reputation and like before I saw him on the weekend one of the guys came up to me and they were like “oh do you realise since you’re going to go see him everyone is either going to say, one, you’re a slut for going with him and you’re frigid if you don’t do anything with him.” So I was kind of like “oh, great options.” (7.F.3)

Clearly, young people receive these messages from all of their sources, but predominantly from parents and peers. Again, parents are invested in keeping their daughters from engaging in relationships, and this translated to some parents communicating to their daughters that any contact with young men made them ‘slutty’ or ‘a slut’:

9.F.3: Mum’s never — my mum hasn’t even seen me — she’s seen me hug a guy but she thought that was slutty, so, whatever.

Facilitator: Did she say that to you?

9.F.3: Yeah, mum said, “it’s really slutty, that,” because I hugged three guys. I was, like, “yeah, I know.”

And as seen in the previous discussion point, the father who told his daughter that if she had a boyfriend, she might as well “go be a prostitute on the streets or something” also said that ‘everyone’s going to see me as a slut’ (17.F.3)

Peers are also a major source of the perpetuation of this message and double standard. Young men are very aware of this disparity, but know that they are viewed
differently, and do not question the double standards, because they are viewed favourably within this scenario, and therefore have an investment in keeping these double standards alive:

4.M.2 Because, like, for girls this probably isn’t the same thing. But, like, with guys, like, if you do something with a girl then you can usually be proud about that.

4.M.3 Yeah, like an achievement.

4.M.2 Go gloat to your friends. Yeah, just like at the dance, if you hook up with, like, five girls, you walk over to your friends: “guess what, I did it.” But, like, if a girl, like, hooked up with five guys she wouldn’t go over to her friends and be like “guess what I did.”

4.M.3 Yeah she’d be a slut.

Young women recognised the double standard and did use the word in a number of ways themselves — including in this negative way. Young women also spoke about a word for young men who were sexually experienced, but were very aware that it did not hold the same connotations, and instead reflected the perceived ‘achievement’ attached to sexual experience for young men:

Facilitator: So if you’ve got a word for it, like, if you’ve got man-whore, do you think...?

14.F.2: But it’s not the same; like, when you say man-whore, it’s sort of, like, like it doesn’t make, I don’t think it’s the same, like, has the same reaction for people like slut.

... 14.F.1: It means you’re really hot; it’s someone who’s really hot, charming.

14.F.2: Usually everyone’s like, oh, but, like, secretly, like, want to be friends with them sort of thing whereas girls are just like...
14.F.1: Like, if you said like, “she’s a slut”, like, you wouldn’t touch her whereas a man-whore is like, “oh, he’s probably really hot and he’s probably really charming; he’s probably really nice” and, like, if you were put in a position with him you’d probably go “oh”.

These young people attributed this disparity to gendered stereotyping, and it was clear that — thinking that for young women to have sexual experience was outside of their ‘nature’ — this was a message that they had synthesised from a number of their sources:

Also it’s expected of guys like, it’s not really that big of a deal to sleep around whereas if it’s with girls it’s kind of like it’s a bit kind of like out of nature. (14.F.4)

The third key area where young people were receiving gendered messages was in the area of consent. As seen in Chapters 3 and 4, parents and schools both communicated about consent in a heavily gendered way, in which young women are placed in a gatekeeping role that means that saying no is their responsibility, and consent is something they alone need to worry about, because young men just want to use them for sex: ‘mum’s always like, “don’t give your body up because they could just, like, be gone in an instant” and stuff…it’s like that’s all they want’ (20.F.1).

Positioning of young women as gatekeepers was a message that both young women and young men received: ‘yeah because they’re [girls are] the ones that have the say’ (19.M.4) because ‘they’ve got all the worries like pregnancy’ (19.M.2). While young men were sometimes given the message from parents and schools that they could say no if they wanted to: ‘well, I know mum said, “if you don’t want to do it, don’t do it” I think she said that ages ago’ (6.M.1), ‘yeah, he [the teacher] said you have the right to say no’ (4.M.1), ‘yeah, he [the teacher] even, like, made sure that all the guys knew that you could.’ (4.M.2), the predominant message that young people received was that consent was something that only young women needed to worry about: ‘yeah, the schools kind of promote, you know, say no if you don’t want to do it. Except they don’t really promote it for guys, they more promote it for girls’
‘well...well this is just me, but my dad, ah, my dad and my mum talked to my sister about saying no, but they never did to me or my brother.’ (4.M.2)

It is clear when looking at the nature of these gendered messages that they are highly problematic, interrelated, and therefore self-perpetuating. Young women can’t ask young men out because of traditional ideals, and because of the possibility that being assertive may lead to them being viewed as a ‘slut’ or a ‘skank’: ‘boys have it so easy; like, they can ask the girl out, they don’t have to worry to be seen as a skank or something, something like that’ (14.F.3) but they are expected by parents and schools to ‘just say no’ because otherwise they will be viewed as a slut.

Essentially, if a young woman is in any way assertive, or has any agency, she will be a slut. The next key finding will examine the issues surrounding consent and assertiveness in further detail.

5. Young people are overwhelmingly not being supported to develop negotiation, assertiveness, and consent skills

As seen in the previous finding, there are issues with the gendered nature of the information young people — and particularly young women — receive about assertiveness and consent. Beyond the gendering of these issues, it emerged that the messages that young people receive about these areas of their sexuality have much larger problems.

As noted previously, schools, and parents have an investment in keeping young people from having sex; that translates to limited discussion about anything to do with sex or relationships beyond a directive to ‘just say no’ or ‘use condoms’. This ‘say no, but if you have to do it, do it safely’ approach does young people a substantial disservice as it precludes everything in between a ‘no’ and a ‘yes’, and means that young people are left in a position where they do not know how to say ‘no’ — or ‘yes’. There are three interrelated areas that will be discussed here where
young people are lacking in basic skills and knowledge: assertiveness, negotiation, and consent. In particular, two topics discussed within the focus groups highlighted the lack of information and education about these knowledge areas: *Asking for what you want in a relationship*, and *Saying no to sexual advances you don’t want*.

As seen in previous points, due to the gendered nature of the messages that young women in particular receive, they often do not have the assertiveness required to establish a relationship, but, more importantly, when young women — and also many of the young men — were asked about *Asking for what you want in a relationship*, the majority of them did not have the skills or knowledge required to do this. As shown, schools do not include anything about relationships and how to navigate them within the curriculum, and parents convey a number of attitudes about relationships, ranging from no discussion, to a one-off comment or talk, to a small number of parents who engaged in discussions with their child. This lack of information means that young people predominantly approach relationship navigation in a passive way: ‘hmm, never; I don’t really think I’ve heard anyone like asking what they want in a relationship’ (3.M.1), ‘yeah, it just kind of happens on the spot I guess’ (3.M.2) with very few active discussions of what they wanted from a relationship. As seen in Chapter 6, this meant that the way that these young people navigated relationships was to either let things happen, or wait for the other person to be assertive, even if they themselves wanted to take things further: ‘No, I’m really too shy to, like... Like I kind of need them to push me forward into doing stuff or I’m not sure that I want to. Like I can never ask if they’re not wanting to... Like, um, I had a boyfriend [overseas], but like I needed him to do... like, like he needed to ask if I was ready for stuff. I was too shy to ask him if he wanted to do stuff. ... I wanted to, I was just too shy to ask’ (2.F.5). Many young women were afraid to be assertive because they did not want to: ‘...sound controlling...’ (5.F.2) or ‘Demanding.’ (9.F.1) or ‘...bossy.’ (9.F.1) ‘No, I think it would be kind of bossy if you just go, “I want this, this, this and this.” And they’d go, “Go away.”’ (13.F.6). Therefore, the predominant method that young people used to get what they wanted from a partner was to
‘hint’: ‘Yeah. You hint at it.’ (15.F.6), because: ‘Like you don’t want to freak them out. Like you don’t want to say look I want this, I want this and then in a few years we can get married and have sixteen children. ‘ (1.F.6) ‘Like, the way you talk you might, I don’t know, make a joke about it and like, but there would be an element of truth to it. … Yeah, hints.’ (18.M.5). Or, for many young women, who have the least amount of positive information about assertiveness, they will leave it to the young man to ask: ‘Well, in terms of what type of stuff they want sexually, that’s all said. They ask you. …’ (17.F.3).

This lack of discussion can be attributed in part to the messages and information that young people receive from parents and schools in this area: the prevailing message is to ‘just say no’ to sexual advances, a message that has been noted by previous researchers as untenable (Brugman, Caron and Rademakers 2010; Carmody 2009); it does not allow for the possibility that young people might want also to say ‘yes’. Because young men and young women are not taught about negotiation and discussing what they want within relationships, instead of asking, or even hinting, many young men are left to either guess what their partner is willing to do: ‘no. That just happens. You don’t ask.’ (15.F.6), or just go ahead and try something without asking:

3.M.2  My friends just do it; they don’t ask.

3.M.1  Yeah.

3.M.2  They get rejected and that’s the end of that, would never see the person again, so.

3.M.1  Yeah, there’s no like talking about it, they just like dive into it. Just kind of, yeah the only way they know how to do it. And if it’s not okay with the girl then that’s it.

3.M.2  Because it’s always the guy, to tell you the truth.

3.M.1  Yeah.
Facilitator  Who has to...

3.M.2  The girl never does anything, like from what I, from the guys I know...

Having the skills and assertiveness to negotiate what you want is also clearly vital to being able to communicate what you do not want — another key area where young people are lacking skills and information. The fact that young people lack these negotiation skills makes it unsurprising that a large number of young women are engaging in unwanted sex — Smith et al. (2009) found in their 2008 survey that 38% of young women had engaged in unwanted sexual activity, and this was also the case for some of the focus group participants:

9.F.2:  There was one time that I didn't want it but...

9.F.1:  You didn't say no.

9.F.2:  ...I didn't say no because I didn't really have enough confidence and I'd never really done that sort of thing before. But if the chance came where I wanted to say no then I would. But, yeah.

This was despite being told that they can and should be able to ‘just say no’: ‘you should just be able to — you shouldn’t let someone do anything that you don’t want’ (10.F.2), ‘I don’t know if they [parents] really tell you like how to say no but they certainly tell you to say no’ (14.F.2). Aside from not being given any information about how to say no to a partner, there is a troubling tendency for schools and parents to frame sexual assault or unwanted sexual activity as something that is perpetuated by a stranger:

They [school] don’t really tell you about us saying no to like a boyfriend or something but it’s more like they teach us a lot of stuff about like drinking and parties and stuff and like don’t let go. (14.F.2)
This is problematic when considering that, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a, 11), the majority of sexual assaults are perpetuated by someone known to the victim, and this young woman recognised the difficulty in this message:

I think there’s like a big difference though to saying no to like your boyfriend who you really like and like you disappointing him or whatever and like saying no to like some like seedy guy at a party. (14.F.2)

It is very clear that young people need the skills and knowledge that will allow them to be assertive, and negotiate consent — including the possibility of saying yes, instead of focusing on saying no — which will also work toward ‘support[ing] [young] people in constructively achieving their goals in sexual contexts and to lessen the frequency of negative outcomes’ (Carmody 2009, 7).

6. Self-esteem, something that many young people struggle with, is an area in which young people are receiving highly contradictory messages from all of their sources

When looking at young people and self-esteem, the media is often held up as a major source of negative messages and information — particularly in relation to body image — for young women (and to a certain extent, young men) today, with ‘cultural gender images, as communicated through television, movies, and advertisements, appear[ing] to be linked to the way...adolescents evaluated their physical appearances and themselves’ (Polce-Lynch et al. 2001, 239). To a certain extent this holds true; however, when discussing self-esteem — or Feeling good about yourself whatever people say — with young people, it emerged that this was an area where young people received extremely ambivalent, and often highly contradictory, messages from all of their sources of information about sex and sexuality.

The young people in these focus groups spoke at length about the place of the media in the way that they think about themselves and their bodies:
It has a lot to do with like TV and magazines because like they’re all really beautiful skinny women and they always get all the really good looking guys and so you kind of think that you have to look almost exactly the same as them to even have a chance. (14.F.4)

Young men also spoke about the media and it’s portrayal of the ideal: ‘you don’t usually see guys that aren’t perfect on TV because they obviously want their show to look good’ (6.M.2) ‘and in magazines there’s a lot of — even male magazines, all the guys that are in the ads would be the perfect guy’ (6.M.1). Schools invested some time in teaching young people to be media literate in relation to self-esteem and body image: ‘Grade 8 PE is body image; there’s a bit of it.’ (11.F.3) ‘the media image and how the media gives you this idea of a perfect body that very few people can actually achieve it, but everyone tries anyway.’ (7.F.1) and this influence from school was clear when some of these young people spoke about this topic:

I reckon like the media is a massive influence on the way that girls like shape themselves and the way that they think, like it’s really, I don’t know what the word is but like it influences your decisions on things and it impacts you as well and like say for instance like the models in the magazines can be like really, can influence like girls our age especially and which can also lead up to like really serious cases of like anorexia and bulimia and also about the weight issues and the way your body looks to others, like I’m really self conscious personally about things yeah. (12.F.6)

But, as seen in Chapter 5, many young people also spoke about the positive messages they received from the media: ‘it was either Dolly or Girlfriend’ (2.F.5), ‘it said that you should look in the mirror every day and say something good about yourself to your reflection...you feel better’ (2.F.5), and ‘a lot of those magazines as well [say], “Be happy with yourself”’ (13.F.6). However, any positive messages such as: ‘like I’m going to be myself and show my true colours’ (11.F.1) were discounted: ‘but no one really takes it seriously.’ (11.F.1) because ‘it’s really corny and it’s also like attractive people in all the magazines and stuff.’ (11.F.3) Many of these young women felt that any positive messages in the media were ‘cliché’ (13.F.4), ‘yeah, it
[media] can make you feel bad about yourself’ (15.F.4) although ‘it is changing, the media, those girl programmes, they’re good.’ (15.F.5)

Aside from teaching media literacy in relation to body image, as seen in Chapter 3, when schools teach about self-esteem, there is often a focus on bullying and avoiding peer pressure: “‘No bullying. Feel good about yourself. Be happy with your personality and your life’ (13.F.4) and ‘Don't care what other people think about you; just be yourself’” (16.F.4). But these messages could be seen as ‘... kind of bad. They're not really very personalised.’ Or: ‘... It's really clichéd most of it.’ (13.F.6) and somewhat unrealistic because: ‘I think that everyone cares what other people think about them.’ (13.F.4) ‘Deep down they do. They try to think that they don’t but deep down everyone does.’ (13.F.6) Schools also focus on telling young people: ‘you are who you are’ (4.M.3), ‘individuality and stuff like that’ (4.M.2), ‘I guess school tries to tell you the sort of stereotypical message, you know, “don’t listen to what other people say, be yourself”’. That sort of thing’ (18.M.4). These messages can be extremely contradictory when considering that while promoting ‘individuality’ and ‘be[ing] yourself’, schools have an investment in making young people conform, do what they’re told, and refrain from questioning authority figures.

Peers were also a source of ambivalence in this area — peers could be young people’s biggest support systems and provide a boost to their self-esteem:

15.F.3: Yeah. Also with friends it’s for self-esteem and stuff, they’re always doing nice little things that make you feel special.

Facilitator: So are your friends important for how you feel about yourself?

15.F.4: Yeah.

15.F.3: Yeah.

15.F.1: Yeah.
15.F.2: Yeah.

15.F.5: Yes. I wouldn't go out if — you know when you just ask your friend’s opinion, “How do I look?” Because you trust them. I trust my friends.

But the way that young women in particular felt about themselves was often negative despite well-meaning friends:

Even like what about people say, even if other people aren’t saying bad things to you about yourself you can feel really down on yourself and it doesn’t really matter what other people are saying, if they’re being nice to you about it, it’s kind of like that’s disregarded because of your own view. (11.F.4)

This could be true for any young women despite their appearance:

Because no matter what, someone is always going to be self conscious, like you can be like the prettiest thing out and you could still be oh I hate my body. … There’s a girl in our grade anyway she’s like a model and my friend she’s really good friends with her and like she always complains about how she hates her like her forehead and stuff and like she’s on the cover of [large department store], like she’s the face of like [large department store], she’s the person like [clothing brand] and I’m like how can you hate yourself?’ (14.F.1)

And again, peers could also be the source of competition:

Being a girl is hard, hard work, it’s very competitive because we’re all at this age where we want to look good and some of us want to impress people so, looks do count I think. (12.F.6)

and could be judgemental:

Even like your closest of friends can be really judgemental and then it’s uncomfortable because you don’t feel comfortable being different from other people, like personally I’ve been brought up to be happy with myself and not care what other people think and so I’m happy to be different and I don’t really care if people judge me
or what not but like it still matters as well, like you still kind of think about it and you’re like yeah. (14.F.3)

A key finding within this area was in the way that parents can communicate with their daughters in particular about body image and self-esteem. In research conducted by Polce-Lynch et al. (2001, 240), they found that family members played an important part in the way that young women evaluated themselves, and suggested that

Adolescents might benefit from being taught how to evaluate themselves in multidimensional ways (rather than on physical appearance alone), learning how to deconstruct media messages both at home and in school.’ (2001, 239)

However, when discussing self-esteem with young women, it was interesting — and somewhat disappointing — to find that parents often provided very negative messages about the way that their daughters looked. Parents did often tell their daughters that they were beautiful, which young women sometimes felt was said out of obligation but still appreciated:

It’s always like the classic like “oh I’m so ugly”, “no you’re not you’re beautiful”, “you have to say that, you’re my mum”, but like they do have to say it but like…’ (14.F.1)

Some parents imparted some good messages:

My dad said one of the most sexiest things a woman can have is confidence, like so feeling good about yourself, you’ve got to do that first before you can listen to other people I think, yeah. (10.F.4).

But overwhelmingly, as seen in Chapter 4, parents provided some very judgemental and hurtful messages to their daughters that they sometimes were able to laugh off, as with this young woman, whose father would often jokingly comment: ‘He calls me fat. ... He’s like “hey fatty what’s up, go play basketball.” He’s like “you’re growing horizontally, I want you to grow vertically.”’ (8.F.5) When asked how this made her feel: ‘Well I can — like deep down I know that — because if he says that I just laugh
at him, that’s like our family system, we deeply know he’s joking but sometimes he’s just like go swim because sometimes he comes home and he sees me eating cheesecake or something, he’s like “really, [name], really, can you just do some sport?” (8.F.5) Often though, these messages were not delivered in a joking way, and were predominantly about their weight (none of the young women quoted here presented as being overweight — or even close to overweight): ‘Yeah like I do a lot of dancing and I just had like photos like last weekend and there are some costumes that are really tight and like my Mum will just make a comment oh maybe you should be doing a few more sits up or work on those tummy muscles.’ (7.F.1) When asked if their parents said anything to them about being fat: ‘yes’ (7.F.3) but, ‘I don’t think it’s meant with the intention to like offend you and put you down. It’s just a voiced observation.’ (7.F.1) ‘They don’t say your fat just like that, they’re not like oh you’re fat, they’re kind of like...’ (7.F.2), instead it was ‘The comments that they make kind of insinuate it and like I guess because we’re already thinking about it from school and everything.’ (7.F.3) This criticism about weight from parents, often from mothers in particular, was framed as a health concern — and involved commenting on their daughters eating habits: ‘It does get frustrating when like your Mum says oh, I don’t know, like oh really, eating a lot today or something like, I don’t know, like do you want to start going back to the gym or something like that, like it does like put yourself down because it’s your mother speaking but she knows best, Mummy knows best.’ (14.F.3) When asked by the facilitator if she took offence to this: ‘I do yeah. I remember one time my Mum told me I was, well hinted to me that I was gaining more weight and I was pissed off, like you know kind of expected for your Mum to be like “oh yeah you’re so beautiful” but yeah it’s a bit of a slap in the face because she’s so like truthful.’ (14.F.3) And for another young woman who had returned from a trip overseas: ‘So it’s like I’ve always and like now it’s like my Mum and stuff it’s like she’s all about being healthy but because I went overseas in the middle of the year and it was like a month of just like eating whenever I wanted, like getting fat, like not even caring. But now Mum’s like, I get back and Mum’s like you need to lose weight because she’s all about being healthy and stuff.’ (11.F.3)
And, like schools, many parents send mixed messages by telling their children to be themselves: ‘Well your parents sort of like tell you that it’s okay, like be whoever you want to be and that sort of thing. Well mine do, so.’ (2.F.2) while also wanting to maintain control over what they do and how they do it: ‘Then there’s always like that, oh you sort of you can’t do things and stuff. Like, you’re not allowed to go out to that party or (laughing). Things like that. But it’s sort of like, control you in that way.’ (2.F.3) ‘Oh my mum, because when I ask things like can I get my hair dyed and stuff, she says it’s not important. And then I kind of say that’s contradicting yourself (laughing) ... Because if she’s saying it’s not important then why is it, why can’t I do it. Yeah, why is it such a big deal.’ (5.F.5)

Self-esteem presents a very difficult struggle for many young people in this period of their lives, but the messages they receive about the way that they should look, and conduct themselves are highly contradictory: ‘Everyone tells you to be yourself, but everyone knows that really, with so many influences from friends, media, family, you, you know, you can’t just be yourself.’ (18.M.4)
Chapter 9. Conclusion

This thesis opened with the concerns of Dania Ng, who posted a comment in response to an article by Walsh (2012b) on news and commentary site, The Conversation, equating educating young people about sex and sexuality with ‘teaching them to shoot firearms and kill’. The article — and subsequent comment — was penned as a response to the controversial (and timely, given the nature of this research project and thesis) public debates surrounding The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) developing a national curriculum, and, more specifically, the final draft of the HPE curriculum under which sexuality education falls.

The controversy associated with the draft of the sexuality curriculum came predominantly from groups with religious affiliations. The Australian Family Association, a right-wing Christian organisation, and the Catholic education sector were focused on ACARA’s initial plan to introduce puberty into the curriculum from Grades 3 and 4:

But Catholic educators have forced the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to back down from its plan to explain puberty to children as young as seven, over concerns the kids might “freak out.” (Bita 2012)

The Australian Family Association spokesman Tempe Harvey said the curriculum already went too far in making sexual health education compulsory. “This amounts to a one-size-fits-all morality education being forced on parents against their will,” Ms. Harvey said. “It should be optional as an extracurricular activity.” (McNeilage 2013)

In this context, the findings from this research project are particularly important. Researchers in this area are already familiar with the fact that comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education is a positive contribution to young people’s healthy sexual development. Despite the worries of Ng and these religious groups, there is no
evidence that young people are scarred, damaged, or sexualised by being given appropriate information about sex and sexuality as they grow up. However, the wider questions of what kinds of information should be supplied, and how that information should reach young people, are more difficult to answer.

The key findings from this research apply directly to the ACARA situation. The most important contribution that this project has made to research on sex education is to show that when we take a culture-centred approach to understanding learning about sex — comparing what young people learn from schools, from parents, from media, and from peers — we get a very different picture from that which is produced if we only look at one source at a time. As mentioned in the literature review, typically, media has been seen as a source of negative effects — such as lowering the age of sexual debut (Collins et al. 2004). By contrast, parents, and schools have been seen as providing a positive corrective to these negative media messages. What this research has shown is that this is not the case in any simple way, and, indeed, on some occasions, the media provide the positive corrective to the failings of schools and parents in providing sex education. Creating a binary whereby the media can only provide negative information, and parents and schools can only provide good information is so simplistic that you would think nobody would use it; however, this ‘straw man’ argument is essentially the way the media is viewed in relation to young people and their sexuality, and there is very little research to support the idea that the media might be able to provide good messages to young people about sex.

The first key point that emerged from this research is that both parents and schools of the young people in our focus group were clearly communicating to young people that sex is bad. The comments from the focus groups made clear that the young people felt that both schools and parents were invested in making sex seem unattractive because they wanted to keep teenagers from having sex. It is worth taking a moment to think here about the messages that are being passed on to future generations. A more positive message might be: “when you are ready for it,
sex can be a wonderful part of your life”, rather than, as the young people currently hear it: ‘if you have sex, you will get pregnant and you will get chlamydia and you will die. Just don't have sex’ (13.F.4). When examining the problems associated with attempting to access Queensland state schools, based solely on the need to discuss masturbation and pleasure with young people in order to get a fuller understanding of the way in which they think about sex and the sources of this information, it is clear that for ACARA this raises a challenge. Is it possible for schools to support young people to develop a healthy attitude towards a pleasurable sexual life? Given the prevalence of such measures as ‘the “Courier Mail test”’ and religious lobby groups, this may not be achievable.

Which, as noted in the second point, leaves the media to provide an important corrective to the negative information young people receive from parents and schools: presenting an image of sex as something enjoyable. The media also provides young people with important information about navigating relationships, which unfortunately often gets discounted by these young people due to the overriding negative messages received from their other sources. It is clear that for ACARA, the already exceptional media literacy skills that young people have could be supplemented with media packages, and ACARA could look to working with the media to deliver this information in a way that young people will be able to engage with.

The third key point is the survival of gendered differences in all the sources of information young people used for sexual learning. It was deeply disappointing when conducting these focus groups to see the perpetuation of pre-feminist stereotypical gender roles among young people. Young women were being taught outdated ideals which position them as submissive and passive participants in their sexual lives: ‘Well, personally, I know it's a bit stereotypical but it's kind of nice if the boy always asks the girl out because otherwise the girl is chasing after them and stuff. And I know my dad always says that girls can never play too hard to get. Never run after a boy or something.’ (17.F.3) This ‘playing hard to get’ paired with ‘just say no’ means
that these young women have no sexual agency, and, if they did dare to have any agency, and take control of their sexual lives, they would be a ‘slut.’ This presents a challenge for ACARA, in which this positioning of young women as gatekeepers, and young men as only wanting sex, needs to be examined and engaged with in a school setting. Young people need to know that they can say no and yes.

This leads to the fourth key point: the lack of support in developing assertiveness skills, including negotiation and consent. Young women are overwhelmingly taught not to be assertive, or ‘demanding’, or ‘bossy’ and instead are trying to ‘hint’ about the things that they want. This lack of assertiveness means that young women are engaging in unwanted sexual activity because they do not have the skills or the agency required to be assertive because often, ‘just say no’ does not work: ‘Well like I heard a story that, um, this girl she was like, they agreed to it and then, like she... her and her boyfriend agreed and like after, um, she... like they were about to, and then she’s like ‘no’ and then he just went ahead and she didn’t stop him or anything. So it was kind of like rape.’ (2.F.3). Clearly, ACARA’s challenge is to provide young people — both young men and young women — with negotiation and consent skills so that they can communicate openly in relationships, and not have to rely on ‘hinting’.

The fifth key point — and one that has received surprisingly little research — is the potentially damaging role of parents and schools in the development of young people’s self-esteem. Schools as institutions are designed to get young people to do what they’re told (what might be called, in other contexts, “peer pressure”). Parents, in our focus groups, were often reported as sources of extremely negative comments on young people’s bodies: ‘...like my mum will just make a comment, “oh maybe you should be doing a few more sits up or work on those tummy muscles”’ (7.F.1), ‘he calls me fat...he’s like, “hey, fatty; what’s up? Go play basketball”’ (8.F.5) and their sexual development, such as the father who said that if she was in a relationship she might as well “go be a prostitute on the streets or something”’, and that ‘everyone’s going to see me as a slut’ (17.F.3). This raises a massive challenge
for ACARA: in an institutional setting designed to breed conformity, how can young people’s self-esteem and assertiveness — including standing up to authority figures — be developed.

Based on these insights from the focus groups, I would like to conclude the thesis with a series of recommendations.

**Recommendations**

**For ACARA HPE curriculum developers**

- Given the importance of media as a source of knowledge for the young people studied in this thesis, curriculum developers should work with entertainment media producers in the process of sexuality education, rather than viewing them as a problem to be inoculated against.

- Align the HPE curriculum with the 15 domains of healthy sexual development discussed in McKee et al. (2010) to ensure that key elements — such as sexual assertiveness — are not missing from the curriculum, as this research demonstrates is currently occurring.

**For schools**

- With the difficulties associated with parental communication about sex and sexuality with their children, it would be ideal if schools were able to publicise resources to facilitate this communication — such as Jenny Walsh’s booklet, *Talk Soon. Talk Often* (Walsh 2012a)

- Further to the previous point, if schools were also able to facilitate this communication by running after-school workshops for parents on how to talk to their kids about sex, drawing on *Talk Soon. Talk Often*

- With the amount of information and learning that young people get from each other about sex and sexuality, it would be ideal if schools were able to facilitate peer-led discussions on all aspects of sexuality.

- Strengthen links with advocacy and education group Youth Empowerment Against HIV/AIDS (YEAH) and Family Planning organisations to both run classes, and provide professional development training for teachers and
students who would like to lead discussions about sex and sexuality with their peers.

For parents

- As mentioned previously, given the difficulties parents have with communicating with their children in this domain, it would be ideal if parents were encouraged to download, read, and follow Jenny Walsh’s booklet, *Talk Soon. Talk Often*.

- Then parents should be encouraged to inform their friends who also have children about *Talk Soon. Talk Often*.

- With the media panics around the sexualisation of children, parents should be educated and encouraged to make clear to friends that sex education stops the sexualisation of children; it is not the same thing as sexualisation of children.

For entertainment media producers addressing young people or including sexual content in their productions

- Given the importance of the information that they provide, entertainment producers should be encouraged to engage with researchers on healthy sexual development, as in the best practice example of *The Girlfriend Guide to Life*.

- Entertainment producers should insist that — contra some public discourses — information about sexuality does not lead to sexualisation of children, nor to the sexual abuse of children.

For young people

- Due to the lack of information currently provided at home and at school, young people should be encouraged to identify a trusted adult with whom to talk openly about sex, and get the information that they require in order to have healthy and pleasurable sexual experiences.

- Young people need to also be their own advocates, by demanding comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education at school.

When I started to work on this project I was fascinated — and hopeful — to see how far things may have come since I was in school. What I have learnt from this work is
that the current state of affairs in sexuality education is not much better than it was for me, with the exception of a much wider range of mediated information than was available when I was in high school. We still have a long way to go.

In particular, this project is one of a very small number of pieces that attempt to take a culture-centred approach to thinking about young people’s sexual learning. As I argue above, I think that the tendency to study sources of information singularly — in this journal article, we talk about parents; in this book, we study schooling, and over here, we think about the effects of the media — has fundamentally undermined the project of understanding young people’s sexual learning. In this thesis, I have barely scratched the surface of the ways in which all of these different sources of information interact in teaching about the wide range of skills and knowledge needed for healthy sexual development. I hope that in coming years, I can read research that compares how, for example, parents and schools compare to the media in their teaching on consent, or how different kinds of media teach negotiation skills. This is without even thinking about the international context — how would this research in Queensland, Australia, compare with other Australian states, or with other western countries or developing countries? And what about specific subgroups? It may be that the experience of queer students, for example, relies even more heavily on the media to overcome negative messages from parents. At the end of the day, I would modestly propose that the key insight from this thesis is the value of comparative work across sources — and it is this that I would most like to see in future research.
References


Bleakley, Amy, Michael Hennessy, Martin Fishbein and Amy Jordan. 2011. "Using the Integrative Model to Explain How Exposure to Sexual Media Content Influences


friends-teen-mom-star-jenelle/story?id=12891932.


Elliott, Sinikka. 2010. "'If I could really say that and get away with it!' Accountability and ambivalence in American parents' sexuality lessons in the age of abstinence." *Sex Education* 10 (3): 239-250.


Incorporating Culture & Policy (135): 106-117.


Ingham, Roger. 2005. "'We didn't cover that at school': education against pleasure or education for pleasure?" *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning* 5 (4): 375-388.


Klein, Nicole Aydt and Susan E. Breck. 2010. ""I Wish I Had Known the Truth Sooner": Middle School Teacher Candidates' Sexuality Education Experiences." RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education 33 (6): 1-10.


Miranda-Diaz, Miriam and Kevin Corcoran. 2012. "'All my friends are doing it:' the impact of the perception of peer sexuality on adolescents' intent to have sex." Journal of evidence-based social work 9 (3): 260-264.


MTV. 2014b. "Teen Mom."  


Parks, L. 2010. "Aussie youth play it safe when it comes to sex info."  


Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.


Weaver, Angela D., E. Sandra Byers, Heather A. Sears, Jacqueline N. Cohen and Hilary E. S. Randall. 2002. "Sexual health education at school and at home: Attitudes and


Appendices

Appendix 1: QUT human ethics approval certificate

Dear Prof Alan McKee,

A UHREC should clearly communicate its decisions about a research proposal to the researcher and the final decision to approve or reject a proposal should be communicated to the researcher in writing. This Approval Certificate serves as your written notice that the proposal has met the requirements of the National Statement on Research Involving Human Participation and has been approved on that basis. You are therefore authorised to commence activities as outlined in your proposal application, subject to any specific and standard conditions detailed in this document.

Within this Approval Certificate are:

* Project Details
* Participant Details
* Conditions of Approval (Specific and Standard)

Researchers should report to the UHREC, via the Research Ethics Coordinator, events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project, including, but not limited to:

(a) serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants; and
(b) proposed significant changes in the conduct, the participant profile or the risks of the proposed research.

Further information regarding your ongoing obligations regarding human based research can be found via the Research Ethics website http://www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/ or by contacting the Research Ethics Coordinator on 07 3138 2091 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au

If any details within this Approval Certificate are incorrect please advise the Research Ethics Unit within 10 days of receipt of this certificate.

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**Project Details**

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<tr>
<td>Project Title:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Investigator:</td>
<td>Prof Alan McKee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Staff/Students:</td>
<td>Miss Anne-Frances Watson</td>
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**Experiment Summary:**

Find out how young people are finding out about sexuality, where they are looking for information and what they are learning. It is part of a larger project aiming to reduce rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Queensland.

**Participant Details**

| Participants:         | Approximately 112       |
| Location/s of the Work: | High-school students across Brisbane |
University Human Research Ethics Committee

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE
NHMRC Registered Committee Number EC00171

Date of Issue: 22/12/10 (supersedes all previously issued certificates)

Conditions of Approval

Specific Conditions of Approval:
No special conditions placed on approval by the UHREC. Standard conditions apply.

Standard Conditions of Approval:
The University’s standard conditions of approval require the research team to:

1. Conduct the project in accordance with University policy, NHMRC / AVCC guidelines and regulations, and the provisions of any relevant State / Territory or Commonwealth regulations or legislation;

2. Respond to the requests and instructions of the University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC);

3. Advise the Research Ethics Coordinator immediately if any complaints are made, or expressions of concern are raised, in relation to the project;

4. Suspend or modify the project if the risks to participants are found to be disproportionate to the benefits, and immediately advise the Research Ethics Coordinator of this action;

5. Stop any involvement of any participant if continuation of the research may be harmful to that person, and immediately advise the Research Ethics Coordinator of this action;

6. Advise the Research Ethics Coordinator of any unforeseen development or events that might affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project;

7. Report on the progress of the approved project at least annually, or at intervals determined by the Committee;

8. (Where the research is publicly or privately funded) publish the results of the project in such a way to permit scrutiny and contribute to public knowledge; and

9. Ensure that the results of the research are made available to the participants.

Modifying your Ethical Clearance:
Requests for variations must be made via submission of a Request for Variation to Existing Clearance Form (http://www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/forms/hum/var/var.jsp) to the Research Ethics Coordinator. Minor changes will be assessed on a case by case basis.

It generally takes 7-14 days to process and notify the Chief Investigator of the outcome of a request for a variation.

Major changes, depending upon the nature of your request, may require submission of a new application.

Audits:
All active ethical clearances are subject to random audit by the UHREC, which will include the review of the signed consent forms for participants, whether any modifications / variations to the project have been approved, and the data storage arrangements.

End of Document
Appendix 2: Focus group discussion schedule

Improved surveillance, treatment and control of chlamydial infections

Discussion schedule

The focus groups will include two sections; the group process (introductory discussion about the project, rules, group members and plan of the discussion) and the focus group cards, which will elicit further discussion on specific topics.

The Group Process

Group moderators will welcome the group with a version of the following introduction. It will not be read out word for word; as a key element of speaking to young people about sensitive matters is not to come across as too formal, but rather to project a human face. Research has shown that young people are reluctant to discuss sexual matters with authority figures like teachers; but are comfortable to do so if researchers seem to be approachable (Halstead and Reiss 2003b, 35).

The moderators will improvise around the following structure:

“And, thanks for participating in this research project. My name is ____ and I am a ____ from QUT (ie. student, researcher).”

The moderator will then tell the group three short sentences about themselves, i.e.; hobbies, what they’re studying, what they did on the weekend.

“I’m working on a research project called ‘Designing better messages for young people in relationships’. I’m here today to find out what you know about sex, and where you found out what you know.”

“Before we start, let’s work out the rules for the group...”

Open discussion about group etiquette, i.e;

- One person speaks at a time,
- Listen to others when they speak,
- Don’t be nasty – even if you don’t agree,
- Everyone is free to speak about whatever they like as it applies to them and their experiences,
- No questions about researcher’s experiences, and
- No questions about other’s experiences unless they are comfortable speaking about them,
- You are free to swear and use slang words as much as you like.

“It is important that you know that this is not a test, or a competition. We want to find out what you really know – don’t say what you think your teachers or parents would like to hear, nothing you say in this room will be told to anyone other than the research team, and we will not be identifying anyone by name in our research. We would also like to ask that you don’t try to impress us. We are not interested in whether you have or have not had sex yourself – we just want to find out what you know about it. Again, this is not a test or a competition, and we are not your teachers. We want you to be completely honest about what you do and don’t know about sex so we can understand what’s going on with you.”
“We hope to make this a fun and friendly discussion. If at some stage during the focus group, you realise that there's something that you feel uncomfortable about, then we want you to feel free to let us know. We'll also be available to talk with people after the group, if you have any concerns or any extra things about the topic that you'd like to tell us about.”

“We will be videoing this group so that we can remember what was said, nobody will ever see the tape except the research team. And your name will never be used outside of this room.”

“To get things rolling, let's have a brainstorming session. I want you all to tell me some words you associate with sex. I want you all to think of at least five words each, and shout them out (but don’t shout over other people.”) Then we’ll see what other words can be used for the words you’ve given me.”

**Focus Group Cards**

The moderator will then place a series of eight cards in front of the students, one at a time. Each card will have written on it one topic to do with sexual development, which previous research has identified as important for young people.

For each card, the young people will be asked where they got most information about this topic – parents, friends, teachers, or the media (including the Internet and pornography). They will be asked to discuss as a group which pile each card should go into.

The cards are designed to function as discussion starters. Moderators will be very explicitly briefed that they must not, at any time, introduce new information into the conversation. Their role will be facilitation only. As students discuss each topic and where it should be placed, the moderator will draw on follow up questions from the following list, or others as appropriate in the context:

- So what do you know about that topic?
- Where did you find that out?
- Do your friends say anything about that? How do they know?
- How did they say that?
- Did you seek it out, or did you find out by accident?
- Do you think most people your age know the same kind of stuff?
- Does everybody watch that show/read that magazine/look at that website?
- Does anyone’s parents talk about this kind of stuff?

Follow-up questions probing the specificity of sources; for example, if they say;

- ‘parents’ – follow-up with ‘your mum?’ ‘your dad?’
- ‘media’ – follow-up with ‘television?’, ‘internet’, ‘magazines?’, ‘pornography?’

Every focus group will end with the facilitator asking, and exploring through discussion, the following two questions:

- What do wish that you had more information about?
- How would you like to get it?
The cards will include the following topics:

1. “Asking people out and how to break up with them”
2. “Asking for what you want in a relationship”
3. “Giving yourself sexual pleasure” [masturbation]
4. “Having good sex”
5. “Having safer sex” [avoiding pregnancy, information about STIs, etc]
6. “Understanding the changes in your body” [puberty, etc]
7. “Saying no to sexual advances you don’t want”
8. “Feeling good about yourself whatever people say” [self esteem and peer pressure]

Reference:

Appendix 3: Application for conducting research in Qld state schools

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

**Validate & Save Form | Print Form**

**Application for conducting research in Queensland state education sites**

All mandatory fields are identified with an *.

Please read the Research Guidelines before beginning the application process.

Within the guidelines the term ‘researcher’ is used to describe persons seeking to undertake research within departmental sites, including research involving departmental personnel, data and/or records. The phrase ‘departmental sites’ is used to describe any education-related facility for which DET is responsible. This definition includes but is not limited to state schools, environmental education centres, facility service centres, early childhood education sites, central office education related units and regional offices.

The research guidelines seek to:
- Inform research applicants of the requirements to undertake research in DET sites;
- Describe the research application, appraisal and assessment process.

☑️ I have read and will comply with the Research Guidelines *

For any questions regarding the Research Guidelines please contact:
Email: research.Stratpol@det.qld.gov.au

**Section 1 Applicant information**

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<th>Principal Researcher**</th>
<th>Supervisor (if applicable)</th>
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Tomorrow’s Queensland: strong, green, smart, healthy and fair

**Toward Q | Queensland Government**

Research Application v2 (25 January 2011)
** - It is mandatory for all applicants to provide details of a supervisor, particularly in the case of student researchers or research assistants. Supervisors are required to authorise the submission of an application to conduct research at Section 7: Principal Researcher’s Declaration of the application form. This application will not be processed without a supervisor’s verification.

** Previous Research

Have you conducted research in Queensland State schools or other departmental sites previously?**

- Yes
- No

Validate and Continue

---

** Section 2 Proposed Research Study **

** What’s Required? **

** Title of Research (max 25 words)* **

Improved surveillance, control and treatment of chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships)

** Identify the research problem (max 125 words)* **

What is the research problem the study is addressing?

Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) - including Chlamydia - are climbing in young people in Queensland and around Australia. Research shows that young people have high levels of knowledge about STIs, however, researchers have identified a ‘knowledge/practice gap’. It is hypothesised that the reason young people do not always put safe sex knowledge into practice is because the way the information is presented to them makes it hard for them to see its relevance to their own lives. In order to develop effective sexuality education, it is necessary to understand how young people make sense of this information, and how it could be made relevant to their everyday lives.

** Aim/purpose of proposed study (max 100 words)* **

How will this study address the research problem?

This research project aims to find out what knowledge and skills Queensland high school students have about sexuality and relationships; where they have gathered this knowledge and skills; what knowledge and skills they wish they had; and how they would like to access it. This research will be particularly useful in terms of designing messages and programs aimed at improving the surveillance, treatment and control of sexually transmitted diseases, most particularly chlamydial infections.
Description of proposed study (max 200 words)*
Please briefly explain your research in simple terms - do not describe the detailed methodology here as it will be addressed later in the application.

Groups of six to eight Year 10 students aged between 14-16 will be selected. Groups will be divided into separate male and female groups from a range of schools; including urban and regional schools and schools from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. A minimum of 12 groups will be selected. In order to increase comfort levels and allow for a more free discussion, participants will be actively encouraged to take part in the focus groups within their peer groups.

The focus groups will be held at the schools, and will take approximately one and a half hours. In these groups, participants will talk about what they know about sexuality, and how they found that information. In these groups they will not be given any new information about sexuality. We are only interested in what young people already know.

Using the information collected from these focus groups, it will be possible for us to map out the sources from which young people are finding information about sexuality.

Benefits of proposed study (max 200 words)*
For example, expected benefits to participants, DET, schools, community, etc.

This research will provide information that will be useful in forming the sexuality education curriculum for Phase 3 of the Australian Curriculum. This also aligns with the Department’s research priority of ‘Laying strong educational foundations’ in the priority curriculum area of universal social and emotional learning programs.

The benefit to the wider community will be apparent within the health sector, with this research leading to intervention strategies for improvement in the surveillance, treatment and control of sexually transmitted diseases, most particularly chlamydial infections within young Queenslanders.

The benefit to participants include a chance to be heard; and given an opportunity to contribute to helping influence new interventions and programs to help young people avoid unsafe sexual experimentation.

Additionally, the research team is offering participants a $20 iTunes gift voucher at the completion of their focus group to say thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

What sites will be approached for the Research Study?*

- Schools
- Education Centres / Other Centres / Organisational Units
- Schools AND Education Centres / Other Centres / Organisational Units

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See the **Schools Directory** for a comprehensive list of Queensland state schools and Regional Offices.

Has this research received any significant (more than $1,000) funding support?**
- [ ] Yes
- [X] No

Please indicate the source of funding?**

Queensland Government National and International Research Alliances Program (NIRAP) grant: “Improved detection, treatment and control of chlamydial infections”, Research Program 4 - Education, Developing Improved Sexual Health Education Strategies

Has this research been funded or partially funded by DET?**
- [ ] Yes
- [X] No

Has this research received any non-financial support?*
- [ ] Yes
- [X] No

Please list the organisation / agency and kind of support provided*

*Family Planning Queensland, Bravehearts, Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, and Queensland Health. Representatives from these organisations form an advisory group who offer advice to the research team for this project.*

Estimated Start Date: 24/01/2011

Estimated Finish Date: 31/12/2013 Please note: the department will expect to receive a summary of findings shortly after this date

**Please note: All applications regardless of anticipated timelines will expire after three years from the approval date and a new application will need to be submitted.

**Section 3  Research Method

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Research Application v2 (25 January 2011)
Data collection, analysis and reporting:

How will the data be collected and analysed, and how will the study findings be reported and disseminated?

Groups of six to eight Year 10 students aged between 14-16 will be selected. Groups will be divided into separate male and female groups. A male researcher will facilitate the male groups, and a female researcher will facilitate the female groups. A minimum of 12 groups will be selected from a range of urban and regional schools and schools from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to increase comfort levels and allow for a more free discussion, participants will be actively encouraged to take part in the focus groups within their peer groups. The focus groups will be held at the schools, and will take approximately one and a half hours. Dependent upon the level of interest shown by students at each school approached, it is anticipated that the research team would conduct the focus groups over a maximum of 2 days per school.

In these groups, participants will talk about what they know about sexuality, and how they found that information. Group discussion will be facilitated with the use of prompt cards. Each card will include a non-explicit description of a topic related to sexuality – for example ‘Ask for what you want in a relationship’. The members of the group will be asked what they know about this topic, and where they have found that information — friends, parents, school, the media, and so on. In these groups they will not be given any new information about sexuality. We are only interested in what young people already know. A copy of the discussion schedule outlining the focus group process and topics is attached in the measurement instrument section.

The focus groups will be video and audio recorded. These recordings will only be accessible by the research team, and will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed. In the transcribed data, each student will be identified solely by age, gender, and a unique number.

Focus groups represent a familiar qualitative method. Discussions continue around the measurement of reliability and validity in such qualitative methods of data gathering. In terms of reliability; two key factors are; the use of a consistent template for discussions, and the use of experienced facilitators who can manage to allow the voices of young people to be heard while ensuring that the overall structure for the discussion is followed. In terms of validity the key factor is, once again, the use of experienced facilitators who are sensitive to the ways in which discussion should be managed in order to avoid leading group participants in a particular direction. Ultimately it must be acknowledged that qualitative forms of research aim to produce deep, rich data which seeks the widest range of voices, rather than to be representative in a statistical sense.

The findings of this study will be reported and disseminated through: 1. A PhD thesis written by researcher Anne-Frances Watson. 2. A series of papers at national and international conferences on sexuality education, written and delivered by Anne-Frances Watson and Alan McKee. 3. A formal report to be made available to members of the advisory board, to be written by Alan McKee and Anne-Frances Watson. 4. Three journal articles for national and international journals of sexuality education, written by Anne-Frances Watson and Alan McKee.

Participants and sample sizes:

Please list all categories of participants and anticipated numbers within each category (e.g. Principals x 3, Teachers x 6, Parents x 60, Students x 60 and Curriculum Branch Staff x 5).

Students x 96 (minimum) - This number may be greater depending on the level of interest expressed by students.

Materials and instruments:

Please describe the type of measurement instruments to be used (e.g. 25 item questionnaire, interviews with open ended questions, focus group discussion) and identify steps taken to ensure reliability and validity of these.

Focus group discussion based around 8 topic cards (see attached measurement instrument.)

Attach a copy of all measurement instruments
(include all data collection instruments and/or proposed questions/ themes)
Does your research require access by participants to an internet site?*

- Yes
- No

Is research to be conducted in more than one (1) stage?*

- Yes
- No

Research Stages: (max 50 words)*
Please describe the nature and duration of each stage and anticipated timeline. You should also indicate whether additional measurement instruments are anticipated for later stages of the research.

The research team intends to conduct follow-up interviews with students in 2013 to evaluate whether they noticed any changes in the media in relation to sexuality education.

Section 4 Research of a sensitive nature and risk management

Does the proposed research cover the following in any way?*

- Y ☐ N Criminal or anti-social behaviour?
- Y ☐ N Depression and/or anxiety?
- Y ☐ N Bullying?
- Y ☐ N Grief, trauma and/or death?
- Y ☐ N Sexuality?
- Y ☐ N Drug or alcohol usage?
- Y ☐ N Eating disorders and/or body image material?
- Y ☐ N Race or ethnic relations?

Does the proposed research include any of the following methods?*

- Y ☐ N Reporting of comparative data which compares individuals, state vs non-state systems or jurisdictions?
- Y ☐ N Possible identification of participants, classes or schools in reports?
- Y ☐ N Deception?
- Y ☐ N Use of procedures, activities or equipment, other than those in everyday use, which may involve physical risk or emotional distress?
- Y ☐ N Passive rather than active consent?
- Y ☐ N Visual recording (photographs and video recording)?
- Y ☐ N Interaction with children individually or outside the classroom environment?
Section 6 Key Attachments

Blue Card

If your research project involves contact with children, please attach certified evidence of having undergone a Working With Children Check ("Blue Card") through the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (CCYP CG) or evidence that this is not required (e.g. teacher registration).

Will the research involve contact with children?*
Please note: it is the applicant’s responsibility to contact the commission and confirm whether a Blue Card will be necessary in the specific circumstances.

- Yes - you must supply evidence of either having a Blue Card or that you are in the process of obtaining a Blue Card or that you possess a qualification that excludes the need for a Blue Card.
- No - this indicates that you will not be undertaking research that involves children.
Are any of the following groups the focus or used as an analytical category by the research?

- Y N People of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?
- Y N Students with social, emotional or physical difficulties?
- Y N Students with other difficulties (e.g. visual, hearing, intellectual or multiple disabilities)?
- Y N Minority cultural or ethnic groups?
- Y N Children whose parents/guardians are unable to give informed consent because of language or other difficulties in understanding information?

Describe the specific risk mitigation strategies which will be employed to address each of the risks you have identified in Section 4.*

Potential risks include:
1. Exposure to new information by peers,
2. Emotional response to the sensitive nature of discussion,
3. Statements by participants that others may object to,
4. Ridicule by other participants,
5. Parental concerns regarding the topic of sexuality education being discussed with their children.

Managing the potential risks:
1. Exposure to new information: the research instrument will be specifically designed to ensure that no new information is provided by the researchers to the young people. The only risk will be participants learning from their peers in the course of the discussion. Research has shown that young people commonly talk about matters of sexuality with their peers (Brugman, Canon and Rademakers, 2010: 39). Given that this is the case, it is not likely that the discussion in the focus groups will introduce information which is not already being shared in informal contexts.
2. Emotional response to the sensitive nature of discussion: focus group leaders will be trained in facilitation skills. It will be made clear to all participants that they can withdraw from the discussion at any time. They will be supported in this decision. Counselling services will be made available to all participants at the start of the focus groups; Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800), Beyondblue (1300 22 4636), Lifeline (13 11 14), and Open Doors (07) 3257 7660. School counsellors will also be utilised if available at participating schools.
3. Statements that others may object to: Participants will be reminded that all input is personal opinion, and while some healthy discussion is acceptable, arguing will not be encouraged.
4. Ridicule by other participants: Participants will be reminded as part of the group rules that bullying or ridicule will not be tolerated and participants may be asked to leave if they do not obey this rule, if any bullying occurs within focus groups, appropriate action will be taken, including the availability of contacts for any participants affected. The research team additionally hopes to reduce this risk by attempting to recruit participants from within peer groups.
5. Parental concerns: parental consent will be sought prior to participants joining the research project. Researchers are contactable by parents if they have further questions or require further information during the project.

Section 5 Information statement and informed consent forms

All applications seeking approval to conduct research in state schools must include an information statement and informed consent form for Principals regardless of participant category. Similarly, when seeking approval to approach non school-based DET staff, applications must include information sheets and consent forms for their line manager. The letter should detail the nature of the research, outline what is required from various categories of participant and seek permission to invite staff/students/parents to participate in the research.

Click here for examples of information sheets and consent forms for each participant category.

Please indicate each category of participant you intend to include in your research and attach an information statement and informed consent form appropriate to each participant category.*
Blue Card (please attach a copy of the card)

Attach a copy of the Blue Card  File attached: None.

OR

Seeking Blue Card (please attach evidence)

Attach evidence  File attached: Alan_McKee_Blue Card App.pdf

OR

I possess a qualification that excludes the need for a Blue Card (please attach evidence of qualification)

Attach evidence of qualification  File attached: None.

OR

Evidence of exemption from CCYCG

Attach statement  File attached: None.

Ethics Clearance

Research conducted on Department sites must comply with the National Health and Medical Research Council: National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans.

We expect that the university/organisation you represent requires you to obtain ethical clearance for the research.

Please attach evidence of either having obtained or to be seeking this ethical clearance*

Attach evidence  File attached: QUT APPROVAL CERT 1000001288.pdf

If you cannot provide such evidence please attach a statement outlining your ethical approach to your research project: (max 500 words)*

How will you address the issues of informed and voluntary consent; confidentiality and privacy; management, storage and disposal of data; risks and benefits; publication, reports and/or dissemination of results?

Section 7  Principal Researcher’s Declaration

What’s Required?

Conditions applicable to all research:* 

- I will obtain consent to approach participants from the school Principal and/or Manager/Director/other Departmental staff.
- I will obtain parental/caregiver consent for all participating students in a form approved by the Department.
- I will obtain consent from all participating teachers/staff in a form approved by the Department.

Research Application v2 (25 January 2011)
I will treat all data as confidential and preserve the anonymity of participants.
I will provide an executive summary of the research findings to the participating schools and approval authority.
I have read and understood the Queensland Information Privacy Act 2009 and I understand its requirements for the responsible management of personal information including its collection, storage, use and disclosure.
I agree that visual images of children will only be used for the project with parental consent, and all visual images will be de-identified without exception.
I will gain parental consent for use of any student work samples is and I recognise that Intellectual Property from student work samples remains with the child.
I certify that to the best of my knowledge all details on, and information provided with, this application are true, correct and complete and that no information is false and misleading.
I have read and understood the department’s Research Guidelines.
I have checked and complied with all sections of the Application Checklist.
I understand that if I or any of my research team/associates are going to come into contact with children as part of the research then I must provide evidence of registration with the Queensland College of Teachers or a Suitability for Working with Children Card (‘Blue Card’) for each individual or demonstrate why the relevant individual is exempt from providing such information.
I will immediately advise the Department if the nature of any Teacher Registration, Suitability for Working with Children, or relevant exemption changes during the period of research indicated above.

In submitting this application I give approval for all information provided as part of the Research Application to be used by the Department for the purpose of assessing and progressing the Research Application and for my name, title of the research, a research summary, schools to be approached, start/finish dates to be included in the Register of Approved Research that will be made publicly available via the internet.

I understand that it is an offence under the Criminal Code Act 1995 to provide false or misleading information.
I understand that if the conduct of my research is found to differ significantly from the research described in this application, approval to conduct the research may be withdrawn.

* I, Alan McKee accept all the terms and conditions above for conducting research on Department of Education and Training sites including state schools.
05/02/2012

Signature of Principal Researcher: __________________________
(for hard-copy submission)
Signature of Supervisor: __________________________
(please see Section 1 to determine whether this is required)

Section 8 Submission of your application

Prior to submitting your application to the appropriate approval authority, please attach a completed Application Checklist to ensure that you have complied with all sections of this application form and have attached all necessary documentation.

Attach completed Application Checklist here:*  

Attach Application Checklist  
File attached: EQ_application_checklist.doc

If the proposed research is of a sensitive nature (i.e. one or more risks identified in Section 4 ‘Research of a Sensitive Nature and Risk Management’), the application will need to be processed by central office.
For Central Office submissions please mail applications to:
Principal Research Officer
Strategic Policy and Research
Department of Education, Training and the Arts
PO Box 15033
CITYEAST QLD 4002

For School/Regional Office submissions please mail applications to:
the relevant school/regional address as outlined in the
Education Queensland Schools Directory

Applicants should note that when Central Office or Regional Office approval for research has been given, school Principals will still have the right to decline voluntary participation of their schools in the research when approached on a one-by-one basis. To make a decision about voluntary participation, Principals will need to sight:

1. The information statement for Principals which describes the research, identifies who will be involved (e.g. students, teachers, parents) and explains what will be required of these participants;
2. The informed consent form for principal which they sign to indicate their agreement that school personnel, students and/or parents can be invited to participate in the research;
3. A copy of the approval letter from Central Office or Regional Office (where applicable).

IMPORTANT!
A hard-copy of your application, with original signatures at Sections 7 and a hard copy of all attachments should also be mailed to the appropriate approval authority.

Save & Validate Form
Appendix 4: Response (1) to application for conducting research

Dear Anne

Thank you for spending some time with me over the phone discussing your research application.

For your convenience, please find below a summary of the issues raised with you during the phone call. We’d appreciate you giving consideration to the points below and responding in an email (or by attachment).

- Relationship to school – the rationale behind the study needing to be conducted within a school setting
- Peer group sampling minimises risks (of a student facing new information and/or being subjected to later taunting) – the validity of that assumption, and concerns that these risks may be realised
- Scope: sexual pleasure and performance (on prompt cards) – relevance to stated study topic and to school sexuality education content
- Student upset during focus group – strategies immediately and follow-up
   (Note: in an emerging situation, the strategy should not be to rely on the presence nearby of a teacher or guidance officer.)
- Parental perceptions/misperceptions – the “Courier Mail test”...

Thank you, Anne, for considering these matters and providing the further/edited documents.

Regards

_____ Senior Research Officer  Strategic Policy and Research

Dept of Education and Training

Ph (07) 3237 0338  Fax (07) 3237 1175

PO Box 15033, City East Brisbane, Qld 4002
Appendix 5: Response (2) to application for conducting research

25 May 2011

Professor Alan McKee
Level 5, Building Z6
Creative Industries Precinct
Queensland University of Technology
KELVIN GROVE - QLD - 4059

Dear Professor McKee,

Thank you for your application seeking approval to conduct research titled "Improved surveillance, control and treatment of chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships)" in Queensland State schools. The department receives a large number of applications to conduct research in State schools each year. Therefore, in choosing whether to participate in external research projects, several criteria are considered including the likely impact of participation on students and on school operations.

Your application has been reviewed and it has been decided that the department is not willing to volunteer to participate in your research at this time due to the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter in your proposal. I recognise and understand your disappointment at this decision.

Should you wish to discuss the matter further, you may wish to contact me on telephone (07) 3235 4275.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

John F. Dungan
Director
Strategic Research
Strategic Policy and Research
Ref: 11/128834

Cc: Ms Anne-Frances Watson
PhD student, Creative Arts Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
Appendix 6: Application (1) to conduct research in Brisbane catholic schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal researchers contact details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name:</strong> Professor Alan McKee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name:</strong> Anne-Frances Watson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Address:</strong> Z6-520, Z6 The Hub, Creative Industries Precinct Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, 4059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Telephone:</strong> 07 3138 8198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Email:</strong> <a href="mailto:ac.watson@qut.edu.au">ac.watson@qut.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Current employees of Brisbane Catholic Education:** No

**Title of research project:**
Improved surveillance, control and treatment of chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships)

**Brief overview of research project:**
This research project aims to find out what knowledge and skills Queensland high school students have about sexuality and relationships; where they have gathered this knowledge and skills; what knowledge and skills they wish they had; and how they would like to access it.

Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) - including Chlamydia - are climbing in young people in Queensland and around Australia. Research shows that young people have high levels of knowledge about STIs, but are not putting it into practice. It is hypothesised that the reason young people do not always put safe sex knowledge into practice is because the way the information is presented to them makes it hard for them to see its relevance to their own lives. In order to develop effective sexuality education, it is necessary to understand how young people make sense of this information, and how it could be made relevant to their everyday lives.

**Brief description outlining benefits of the research to the participants:**
The benefit to participants include a chance to be heard; and given an opportunity to contribute to helping influence new interventions and programs to help young people avoid unsafe sexual experimentation.

Additionally, the research team is offering participants a $20 iTunes gift voucher at the completion of their focus group to say thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

**Brief description of research design:**
Groups of six to eight Year 10 students aged between 14-16 will be selected. Groups will be divided into separate male and female groups from a range of schools, including urban and
regional schools and schools from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. A minimum of 12 groups will be selected. In order to increase comfort levels and allow for a more free discussion, participants will be actively encouraged to take part in the focus groups within their peer groups.

The focus groups will be held at the schools, and will take approximately one to one and a half hours. In these groups, participants will talk about what they know about sexuality, and how they found that information. In these groups they will not be given any new information about sexuality. We are only interested in what young people already know.

Using the information collected from these focus groups, it will be possible for us to map out the sources from which young people are finding information about sexuality.

Attached is a copy of the discussion schedule used in the focus groups.

Information and consent forms for the School Principal and the Parents / Students are attached.

Confidentiality and information management: All data collected for the research is kept on password-protected computers. Only the three members of the research team have access to this data. This has been outlined and approved as part of the University Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

A professional transcription service is used to transcribe all focus groups, and they are required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Schools we wish to approach:

All Hallows School – Brisbane City  
St James College – Brisbane City  
St Laurence’s College – South Brisbane  
St Joseph’s Nudgee College - Boondall  
St John Fisher College – Bracken Ridge  
St Rita’s College – Clayfield  
Mount Alvernia College – Kedron  
Padua College – Kedron  
Mary MacKillop College – Nundah  
St Patrick’s College Shorncliffe – Shorncliffe  
Our Lady’s College – Annerley  
St Thomas More College – Sunnybank  
Clairvaux-Mackillop College – Upper Mount Gravatt  
Loreto College – Coorparoo  
Villanova College – Coorparoo  
Lourdes Hill College – Hawthorne  
Marist College Ashgrove – Ashgrove  
Mount St Michael’s College – Ashgrove  
Stuartholme School – Toowong  
St Edmund’s College – Ipswich  
St Mary’s College – Ipswich  
St Peter Claver College – Riverview  
St Augustine’s College – Springfield  
Cornubia Catholic College – Cornubia  
St Columban’s College – Caboolture  
Holy Spirit College – Mount Pleasant

Research period:

The research is already underway, and a mutually agreeable time during semester will be negotiated with participating schools.
Appendix 7: Response (1) to application for conducting research in catholic schools

28 September 2011

Professor Alan McKee
Z6-520, Z6 The Hub,
Creative Industries Precinct
Queensland University of Technology
Kelvin Grove Q 4059

Dear Professor McKee

Thank you for your letter regarding permission to approach Brisbane Catholic Education schools for your research project 'Improve surveillance, control and treatment of Chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships)'.

The research committee met on 26 September 2011. Your application to approach Brisbane Catholic Education schools is not approved for the following reasons:

- Amendment of the list of BCEO schools as there are a number of Religious Institute schools listed in your application.
- Consideration given as to how the Researcher intends to handle Student Protection issues particularly should disclosure occur during the open discussions or are at risk?
- Consideration given as to how the Researcher intends to deal with the focus group if the topic/students get out of hand?
- Considerations given as to what follow up procedures are in place to assist students if they become emotionally disturbed?
- It was observed in your documents that there is no potential for school supervision.

Resubmission is invited if you are able to address the above issues.

Consequently, with the resubmission of your application it will be reconsidered by the Research Committee at a further meeting.

If you have any further queries, please contact me on (07) 3033 7427

Judith A. Seery
Research Coordinator
Catholic Education
Archdiocese of Brisbane

Copy Anne-Frances Watson

Teaching Challenging Transforming
Appendix 8: Application (1) to conduct research in Brisbane catholic schools

APPLICATION
TO CONDUCT RESEARCH
IN
BRISBANE CATHOLIC EDUCATION SCHOOLS
ARCHDIOCESE OF BRISBANE

Principal researchers contact details

Name: Professor Alan McKee
Name: Anne-Frances Watson

Address: Z6-520, Z6 The Hub, Creative Industries Precinct
Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, 4059

Telephone: 07 3138 8198
Email: ac.watson@qut.edu.au

Current employees of Brisbane Catholic Education: No

Title of research project:

Improved surveillance, control and treatment of chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships) or

Developing Improved Sexual Health Education Strategies

Brief overview of research project:

This research project aims to find out what knowledge and skills Queensland high school students have about sexuality and relationships; where they have gathered this knowledge and skills; what knowledge and skills they wish they had; and how they would like to access it.

Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) - including Chlamydia - are climbing in young people in Queensland and around Australia. Research shows that young people have high levels of knowledge about STIs, however, researchers have identified a ‘knowledge/practice gap’. It is hypothesised that the reason young people do not always put safe sex knowledge into practice is because the way the information is presented to them makes it hard for them to see its relevance to their own lives. In order to develop effective sexuality education, it is necessary to understand how young people make sense of this information, and how it could be made relevant to their everyday lives.

Brief description outlining benefits of the research to the participants:
The benefit to participants include a chance to be heard; and given an opportunity to contribute to helping influence new interventions and programs to help young people avoid unsafe sexual experimentation.

Additionally, the research team is offering participants a $20 iTunes gift voucher at the completion of their focus group to say thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

**Brief description of research design:**

Groups of six to eight Year 10 students aged between 14-16 will be selected. Groups will be divided into separate male and female groups from a range of schools; including urban and regional schools and schools from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. A minimum of 12 groups will be selected. In order to increase comfort levels and allow for a more free discussion, participants will be actively encouraged to take part in the focus groups within their peer groups.

The focus groups will be held at the schools, and will take approximately one to one and a half hours. In these groups, participants will talk about what they know about sexuality, and how they found that information. In these groups they will not be given any new information about sexuality. We are only interested in what young people already know.

Using the information collected from these focus groups, it will be possible for us to map out the sources from which young people are finding information about sexuality.

**Attached is a copy of the discussion schedule used in the focus groups.**

**Information and consent forms for the School Principal and the Parents / Students are attached.**

**Confidentiality and information management:**

All data collected for the research is kept on password-protected computers. Only the three members of the research team have access to this data. This has been outlined and approved as part of the University Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

A professional transcription service is used to transcribe all focus groups, and they are required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

**Schools we wish to approach:**

- St John Fisher College – Bracken Ridge
- Our Lady’s College – Annerley
- St Thomas More College – Sunnybank
- Clairvaux-Mackillop College – Upper Mount Gravatt
- St Mary’s College – Ipswich
- St Peter Claver College – Riverview
- St Augustine’s College – Springfield
- Cornubia Catholic College – Cornubia
St Columban’s College – Caboolture
Holy Spirit College – Mount Pleasant

Research period:

The research is already underway, and a mutually agreeable time during semester will be negotiated with participating schools.

Issues raised by the Research Committee:

We thank the committee for their feedback. We include the relevant sections of the amended ethics application that has previously been approved by the QUT University Human Research Ethics Committee that address a number of the concerns raised. Approval Number is: 1000001288.

Student Protection Issues – particularly in the case of disclosure during focus groups:

The committee is correct to point out the importance of keeping students safe during this process. Should anything potentially harmful be disclosed during the focus groups we would immediately report to the principal if anything of this nature was to arise, and we provide every school and student with contact details for suitable support services.

How we intend to deal with focus groups if the topics or students get out of hand:

If students get out of hand, the group will immediately be stopped and referred to the principal. Any students who may have been negatively affected will be offered counselling as outlined below.

Follow-up procedures to assist students in the case that they become emotionally disturbed:

It will be made clear to the participants that they can withdraw at anytime from the discussion, and they will be supported in this decision. Prior to the focus group, the participants will be informed that if they do need to talk to anyone, they have the option to speak to the trained counsellors at QUT, who are available free of charge to any participants in QUT research. They will also be provided with the numbers for counselling services such as; Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800), Beyondblue (1300 22 4636), Lifeline (13 11 14), and Open Doors (07) 3257 7660, or encouraged to speak to their own school counsellor.

Potential for school supervision:

We commit that we will not provide students with any new information in these focus groups. We seek only to ask students what they already know. We encourage students to speak honestly about these topics, and not as they think their parents or teachers would like them to. This context makes the groups unsuitable for school supervision.
Appendix 9: Response (2) to application for conducting research in catholic schools

A11.096 MK cf ref 174.1
01 February 2012

Professor Alan McKee
26-520, 26 The Hub
Creative Industries Precinct
Queensland University of Technology
KELVIN GROVE QLD 4059

Dear Professor McKee

The Brisbane Catholic Education Research Committee reconsidered your proposal Improved surveillance, control and treatment of chlamydial infections (Designing better messages for young people in relationships), at its meeting on 23 January 2012.

Thank you for endeavouring to address the concerns raised by the research committee to your earlier application to conduct research in Brisbane Catholic Education schools.

Whilst the committee sees the value of the proposed research your application to approach Brisbane Catholic Education schools is not approved for the following reasons.

- The research committee’s chief concern remains the focus group discussion data collection instrument considering the sensitivity of the issues and the potential concerns this may have for parents of participating students and participating students themselves. In their discussions, the committee wondered if you had considered an alternative means of data collection e.g. short questionnaire which could be provided to parents for approval.

- The committee also questioned the age appropriateness of the target group and wondered if you had considered gathering retrospective information from older students.

If you have any further queries, please contact me on (07) 3033 7427.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Knox
Research Co-Ordinator
Catholic Education Archdiocese of Brisbane

Copy to: Anne-Frances Watson

Teaching Challenging Transforming