

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION

## Recommendations

1. Relationship and sexuality education should be taught by highly committed, well-trained teachers who regularly engage with health education professional development in this area of the curriculum. Professional development in relationship and sexuality education should be resourced, accessible to teachers and current.
2. Quality relationship and sexuality education should be guided by *Sexuality Education: A guide for Principals, Boards of Trustees and Teachers* (MOE, 2015). It will include learning in sexual health, reproduction, gender and sexual diversity, identity, relationships, consent, as well as contemporary issues (such as pornography). Quality sexuality education will centralise identities and relationships.
3. All schools should formally timetable relationship and sexuality education from years 1-13 for at least 12-15 hours per year level, per year.
4. School policies and processes should explicitly reflect inclusion of LGBTQI+, Takataapui, Fa'afafine and other sexually and gender diverse students, staff and whānau.

## Introduction

In New Zealand, sexuality education is one of seven key areas of learning for Health and Physical Education in *The New Zealand Curriculum (2007)*. Since 1999, it has been a requirement for sexuality education to be taught in schools from Year 1 up to and including Year 10.

Relationship and sexuality education is learning that helps people gain knowledge and skills, and be clear about their attitudes and values, so they can make informed decisions about their sexuality, relationships, sexual activity and health. Relationship and sexuality education is a partnership and shared responsibility between parents, whānau, teachers, schools and the community.

The Ministry of Education published *Sexuality Education: A Guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers*.<sup>1</sup> in 2015 to support schools to effectively deliver this area of the curriculum. The Guide states: *In sexuality education young people learn about themselves and develop knowledge and skills*

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education (2015) *Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers*. Retrieved from: [file:///C:/Users/amyb/Downloads/Sexuality+Education+Guide+27+July+2016%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/amyb/Downloads/Sexuality+Education+Guide+27+July+2016%20(2).pdf)

*that will help them to interact in positive, respectful, and supportive ways with others. Through learning about sexuality students also come to understand about the social and cultural influences that shape the way society views gender and sexuality.*

Evidence shows that relationship and sexuality education is effective in achieving positive sexual and reproductive health outcomes.<sup>2,3</sup> When young people have access to comprehensive relationship and sexuality education, and health services, they are more likely to delay having sex, have fewer sexual partners and use condoms or contraception.

While there is general consensus around the need for and effectiveness of sexuality education, and strong policy settings to support sexuality education being included in school curriculum, there is evidence that it is not being taught consistently well across all New Zealand schools. Reviews in 2007 and 2018 by the Education Review Office (ERO) found considerable variation in how this area of the curriculum is taught. The 2018 review<sup>4</sup> determined that nearly half (47%) of schools are not teaching relationship and sexuality education to a high standard and that little has changed in the delivery of sexuality education in New Zealand schools since the last review in 2007. This is not surprising given that there were minimal resources dedicated to support the implementation of the sexuality education guidelines by schools and there are very limited resources available for teacher professional development in this area of the curriculum.

There has been little research into young people's perceptions of sexuality education in New Zealand schools. Family Planning thought it would be timely and important to hear more directly from young people in New Zealand about their experiences of sexuality education. Have they had it? Was it useful? What was covered? What do they wish they'd learned that they didn't, and where else would they go for information?

## **Online Survey**

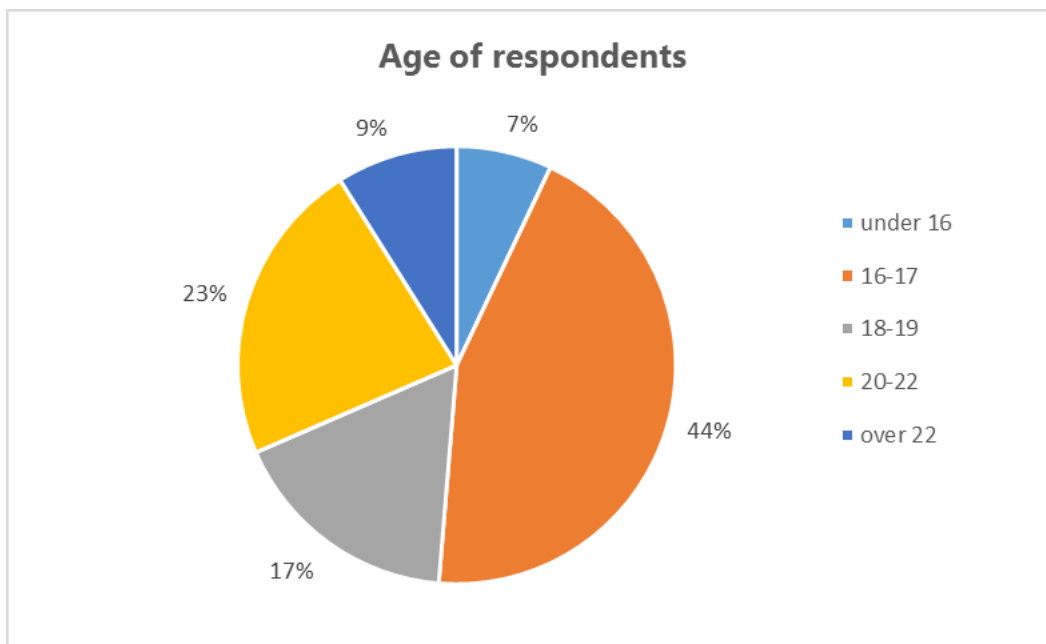
In October 2018, Family Planning conducted an online survey to gather information about young people's experiences of relationship and sexuality education in school. More than 1100 young people responded to the survey. Most of the young people identified as female (83%). Eighty percent of respondents were NZ European and 20% were Māori, with respondents able to choose multiple ethnicities. Over 40% were aged 16 or 17 years.

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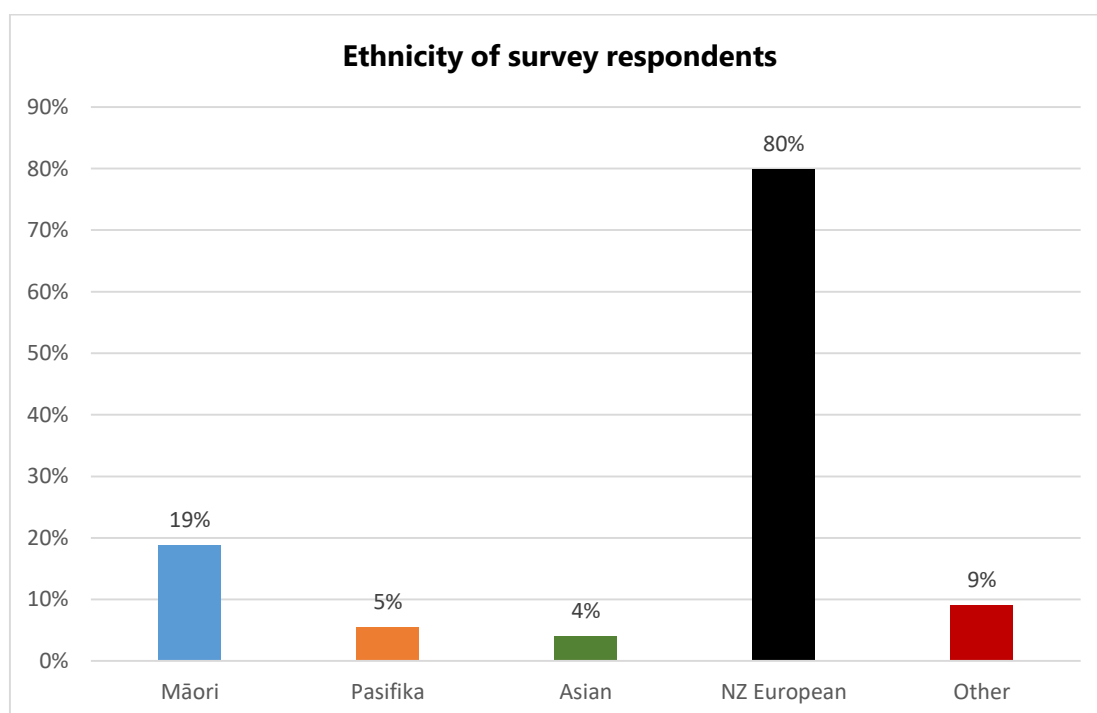
<sup>2</sup> Kirby, D. 2007 *Emerging Answers 2007: Research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases*. Washington DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved from: <https://powertodecide.org/sites/default/files/resources/primary-download/emerging-answers.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Haberland, D. and Rogow, H. (2015). Sexuality Education: Emerging Trends in Evidence and Practice. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 56 (2015) S15-S21. Retrieve from: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(14\)00345-0/pdf](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(14)00345-0/pdf)

<sup>4</sup> ERO (2018) *Promoting wellbeing through sexuality education*. <http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/promoting-wellbeing-through-sexuality-education/>



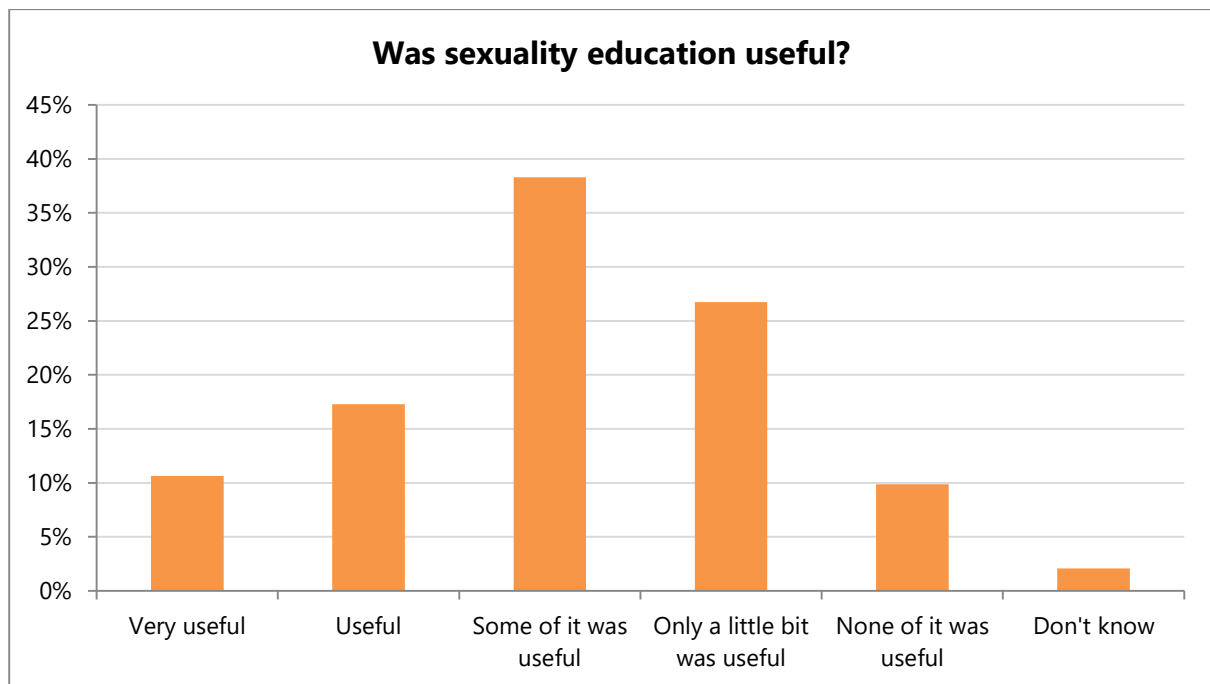
Gender identity	Number	Percentage
Female or wahine	916	83%
Male or tāne	138	13%
Gender diverse or Ira tāngata kōwhiri kore	36	3%
Transgender (male to female or Whakawahine; female to male or Tangata ira tāne)	13	1%
Prefer not to answer	6	1%



Respondents were asked what region they lived in, and the results show that respondents were well distributed across New Zealand with the distribution similar to 2013 Census data. Not all respondents answered each survey question.

### Overall survey responses

- Most young people surveyed (88%) reported that they had received some relationship and sexuality education in school.
- Two-thirds of young people (66%) felt that at least some of their sexuality education was useful, but 10% found none of it useful.



We asked young people what was useful. There was a broad range of answers. Here are some examples:

*"Basics of how everything works and such, otherwise I would've been clueless."*

*"Learnt about different forms of contraception. Probably the most useful bit was just normalising talking about sex and relationships. Talking about what a healthy relationship looks like was also good. Also the whole puberty and pregnancy parts of sex education was useful too."*

*"Learning about consent and what it is and the different types of relationships and what makes a healthy relationship."*

*"I was given enough information about birth control and safe sex that i could make an informed decision about the topics when i needed to."*

*"Taught us about different sexualities and genders, sexually transmitted diseases, reproduction, different contraceptives and healthy relationships. Was incredibly useful and I still use that information now."*

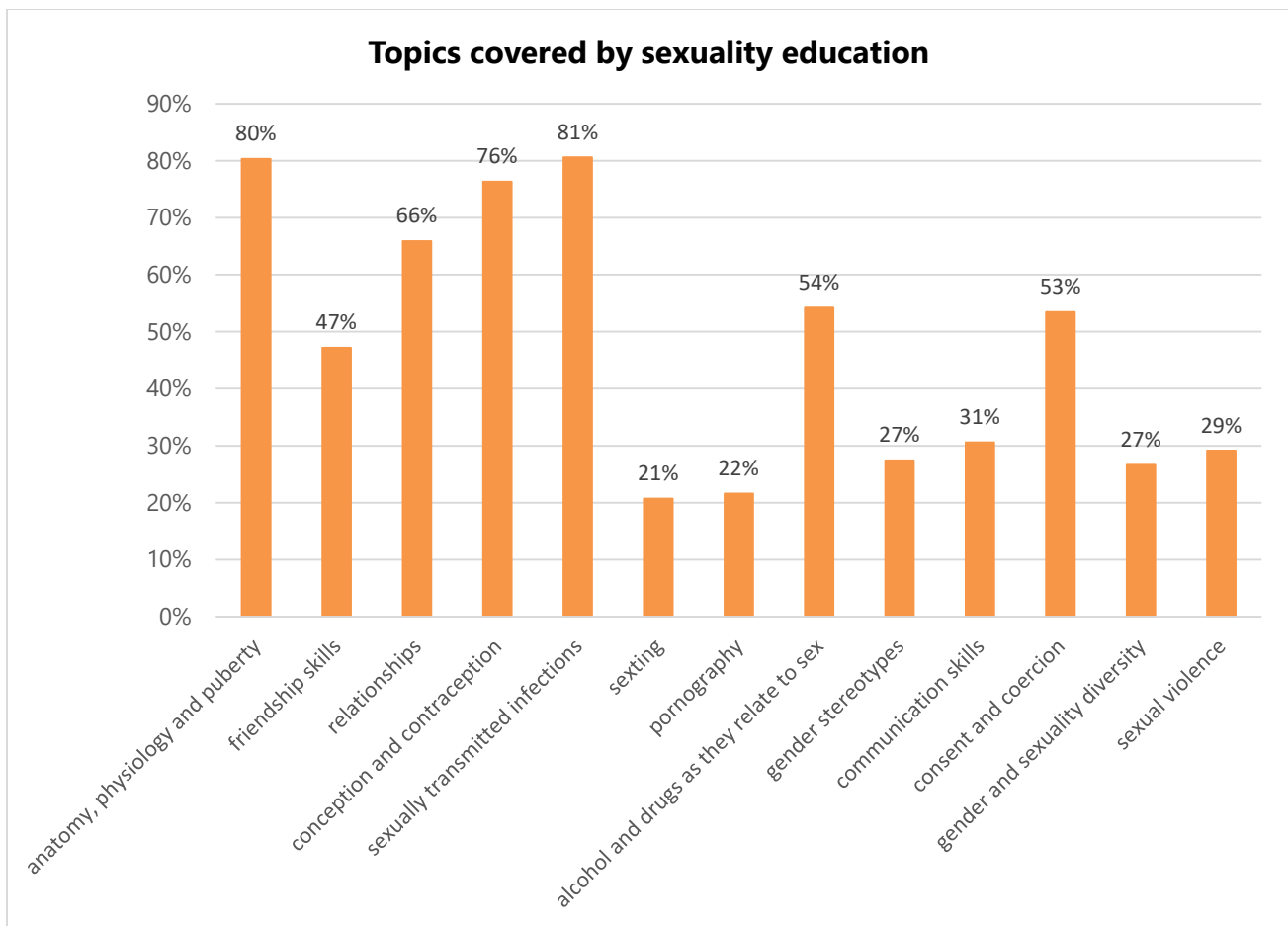
*"It just taught me knowing what was right and what wasn't, we learnt about consent and how substances such as alcohol can have an effect on our sex lives. It just kind of prepared me for being sexually active by knowing right from wrong, normal from abnormal, and how to go about making sure both me and my sexual partner are safe and consenting, that kinda thing"*

When asking young people about what topics were covered as part of sexuality education, we used a check list based on what the 2018 ERO report described as areas covered under a "good sexuality education curriculum."<sup>5</sup>

- Young people reported that the most common topics taught were puberty, physiology and anatomy (80%), sexually transmitted infections (81%), conception and contraception (76%).
- Fewer young people reported learning about other aspects of sexuality education with 66% of young people reporting they'd learned about relationships, 54% about alcohol and drugs as they relate to sex, 53% about consent and coercion, and 29% learned about sexual violence. Less than a third (27%) of young people reported learning about gender and sexuality diversity and gender stereotypes.
- The topics least likely to have been taught as part of relationship and sexuality education related to experiences online. Only 21% of young people learned about sexting and 22% discussed pornography as part of their relationships and sexuality education.

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<sup>5</sup> ERO (2018) *Promoting wellbeing through sexuality education*. <http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/promoting-wellbeing-through-sexuality-education/>



We asked young people what they wish they'd learned. While the comments are diverse and respondents expressed a range of opinions and preferences, comments indicated that young people want more from their relationship and sexuality education. They want more in-depth and wide ranging learning - from the practical aspects of sex like contraception, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), to learning related to emotions, consent, communication and safety in relationships. And they want a more open and inclusive approach to relationship and sexuality education which acknowledges diversity of gender, sexuality and experiences.

*"Not just the basics, everything along the lines of sex and relationships. That it's okay to be different and where to go to for more information. Sex Ed was way too basic."*

*"Sexuality spectrum, what a healthy relationship is, more about contraception like what actually happens when you go off the pill?! How to put on a condom?! Why accepting others sexuality is important! Everything not mentioned up there."*

*"Everything, as we were taught so little."*

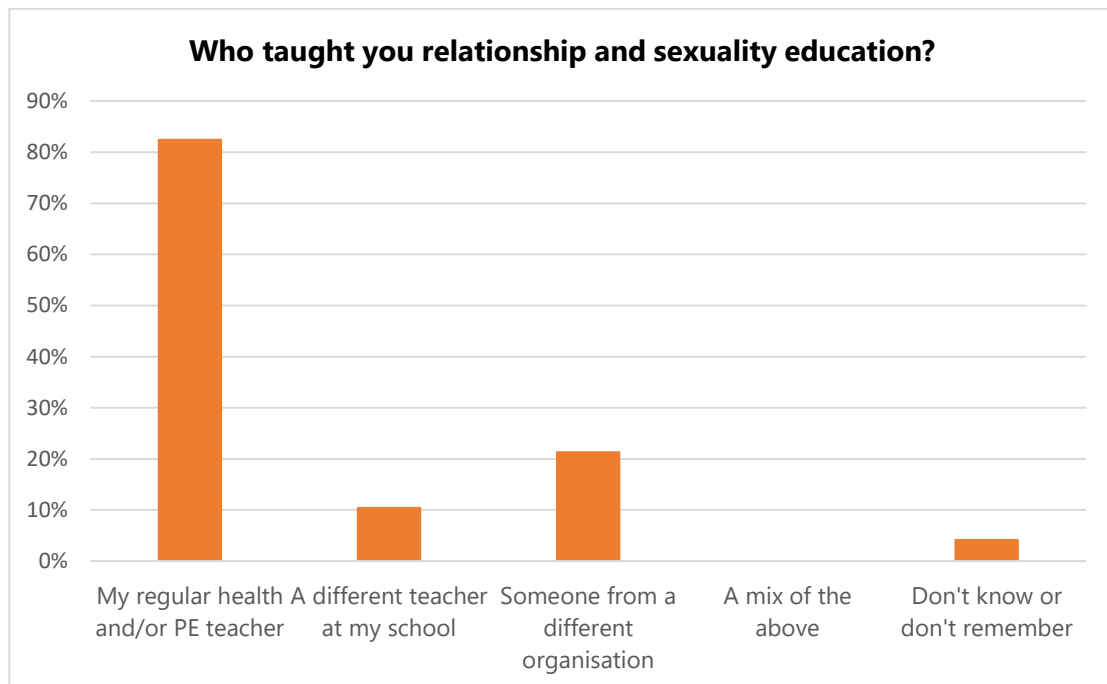
*"Anything about sex. I went to a Christian high school so it was glossed over in a bad way. They hardly touched on consent, positives + negatives etc and never talked about sex and technology, porn, types of sex etc"*

*"I wish we had learned more about sex in year 12, we did consent in year 11 and pornography this year but it would've been nice to go over all the contraception methods (which we learnt in year 9 but hadn't been over since then). Also just knowing if you're ready for sex/how to tell if you're ready. And more about what to do when friends are in relationships that clearly aren't healthy, and more about STIs. Learning about the pill or morning after pill would be good to, we aren't really told how to get it, or where to get condoms."*

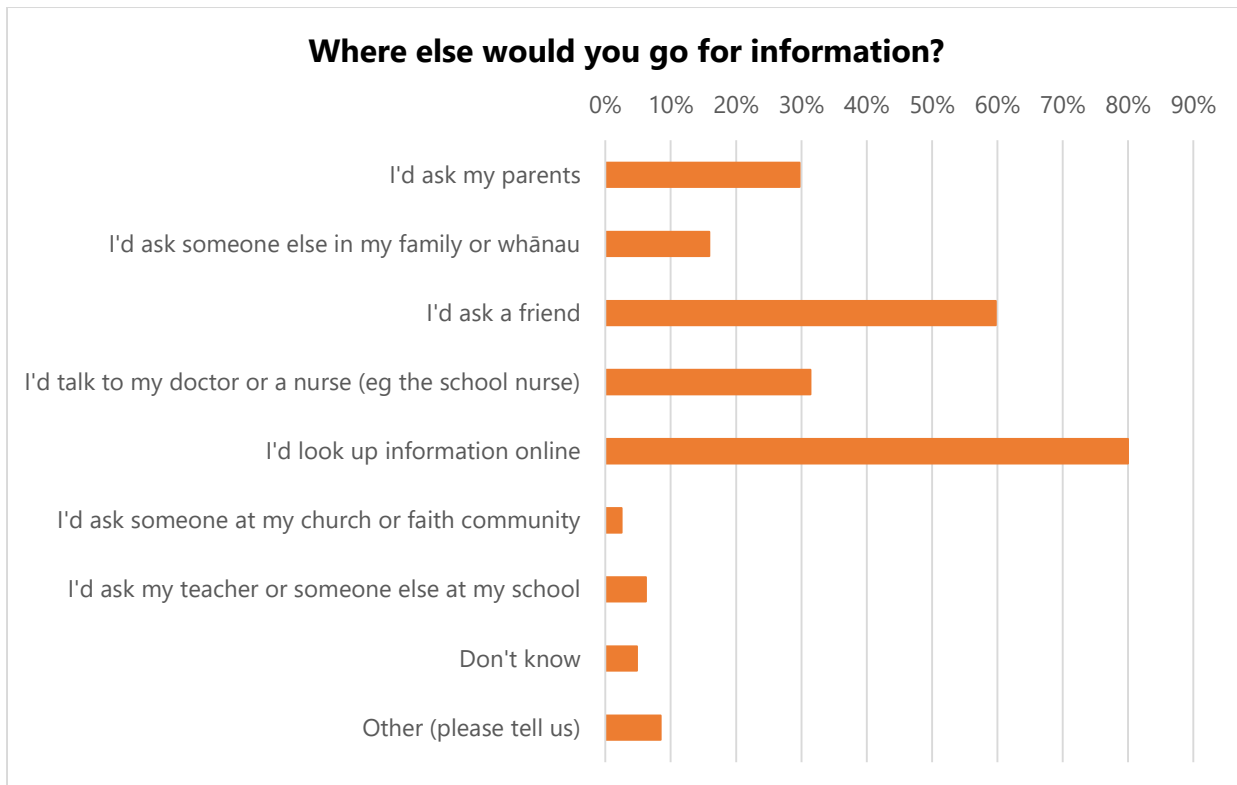
*"I wish it had been a lot more important. It all felt so secretive and there wasn't very much of it. I always felt like we were doing something wrong by learning about it, and always had to act like it was dumb or embarrassing or not cool, because I didn't want to come across as wanting to know more."*

We asked young people who taught them relationship and sexuality education.

- The vast majority were taught by their regular teacher or health and physical education teacher (82%). A very small proportion were taught by someone else at their school (10%) and about a fifth (21%) were taught at least some relationship and sexuality education by someone with an external provider. Only about 66 young people (9%) reported being taught relationship and sexuality education solely from an external organisation, highlighting the key role school teachers play delivering sexuality education and the importance of professional development for this area of the curriculum.



- When asked where else they would seek information, 80% of young people reported that they would look up information online. But many young people also reported that they would talk to family, friends and health professionals.
- 60% of young people would ask a friend; 31% would talk to a doctor or nurse about relationships and sexuality; 30% of young people would talk to their parents and 16% would speak to someone else in their family or whānau.



### Survey responses by gender

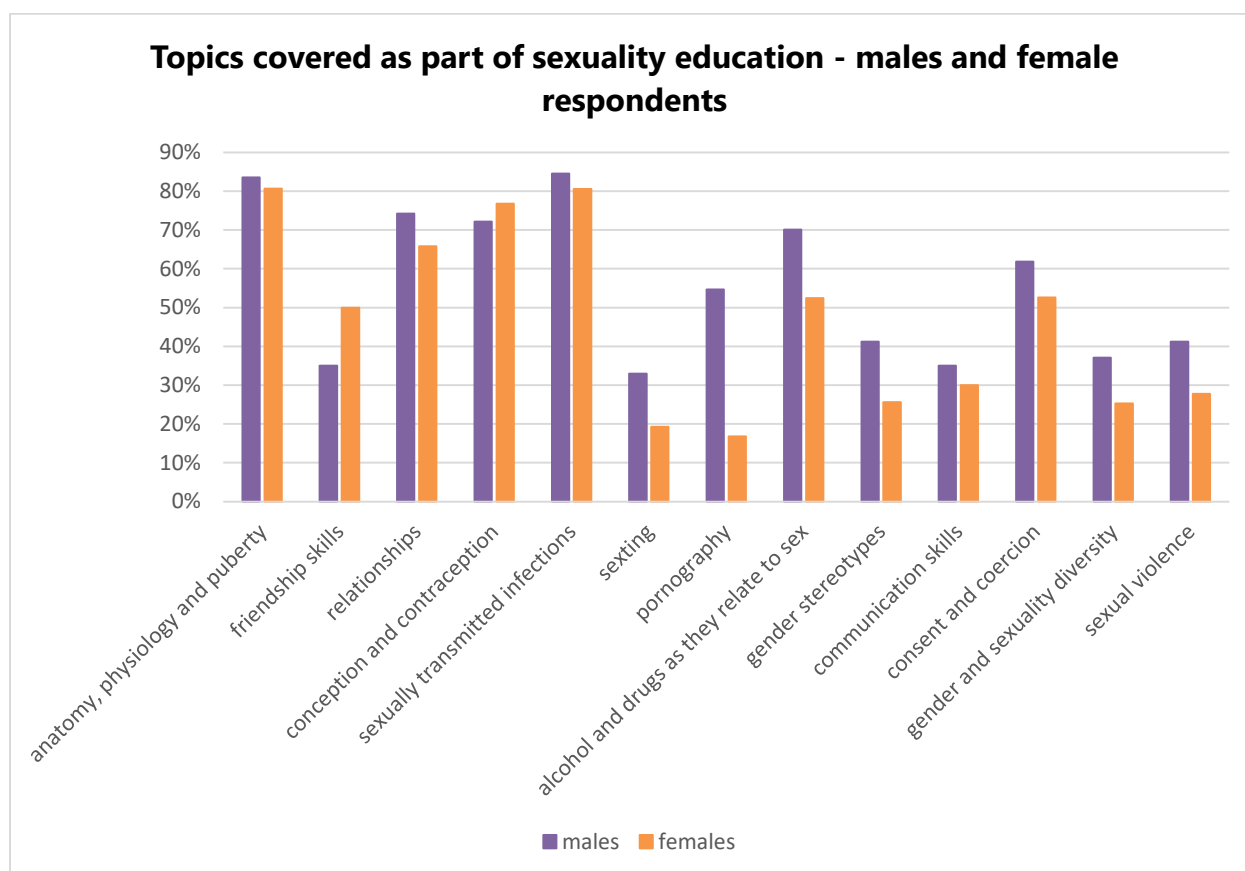
138 survey respondents identified as male; 917 identified as female and 49 as transgender or gender diverse. Data was analysed by comparing responses by males and females, and by gender diverse and not gender diverse participants. Because of the small number of gender diverse and transgender respondents, we combined respondents who identified as transgender and gender diverse into one larger group called gender diverse respondents. We acknowledge that this term is not ideal and may not reflect the way respondents would identify themselves, however it helped to create a slightly larger group of respondents. It is important to note that a large proportion of males were recruited through Family Planning health promoters working in schools in specific regions so the responses of males in this survey may not reflect the experiences of males generally. A greater percentage of male respondents were Māori, age 16 or 17 and from Gisborne as compared to female respondents.

### Respondents who identify as male and female

- Males were nearly equally likely (83%) to report receiving sexuality education as compared to females (89%).
- Males were more likely to report the sexuality education was at least somewhat useful (82%) as compared to females (64%). Females were more likely to report that none of the sexuality education was useful (10%), as compared to males (1%).
- There were some notable differences in the relationship and sexuality education content that males and females reported they received. Males were less likely to report receiving content about friendship skills (35%) as compared to female respondents (50%). Males were more likely to report receiving education about pornography (55%) than females (17%).
- There were differences in where males and females would go to get information about relationships and sexuality outside of school. Females were more likely to report talking to friends (64%) as compared to males (42%); females were more likely to speak to a doctor or

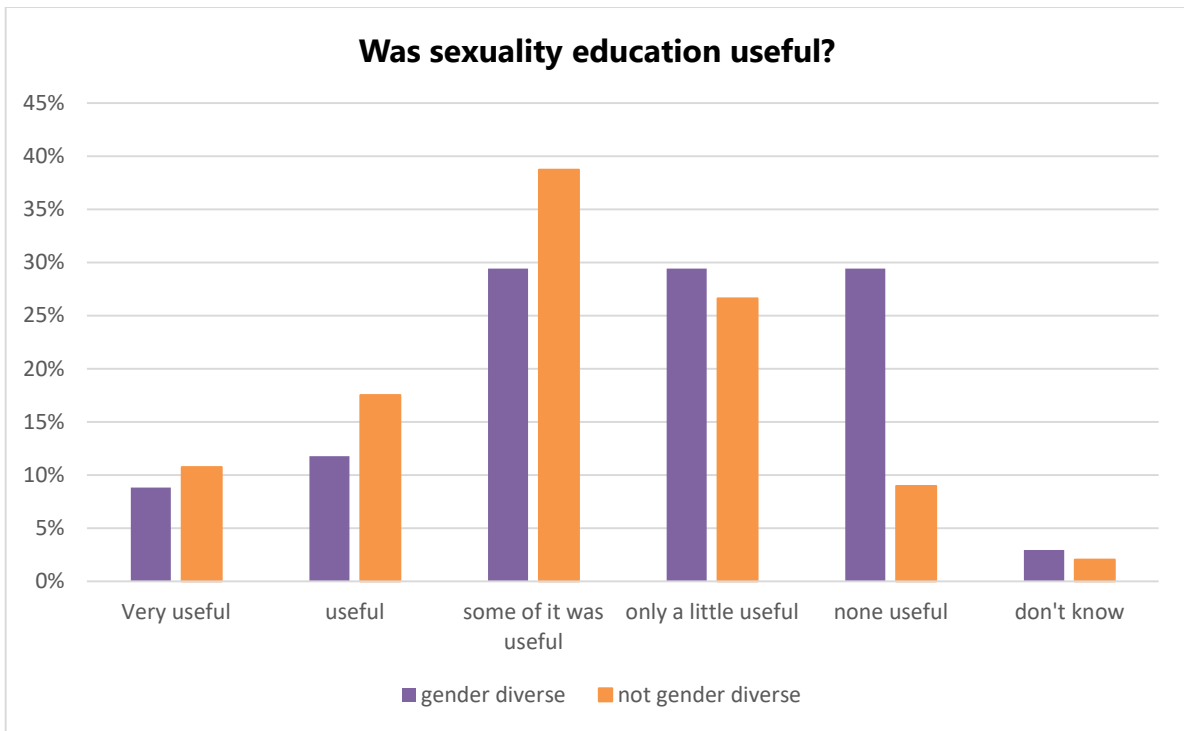


nurse (35%) as compared to males (19%); females also reported being more likely to look up information online (83%) as compared to males (65%).



### Gender diverse respondents

- A similar percentage of gender diverse respondents reported receiving sexuality education (80%) as compared to not gender diverse respondents (88%).
- The percentage of gender diverse respondents who found none of relationship and sexuality education useful (29%) was much higher than respondents who are not gender diverse (9%).
- Overall, gender diverse respondents reported receiving similar sexuality education content as compared to respondents who are not gender diverse, except that gender diverse respondents were less likely to report receiving content on relationships (48%) as compared to respondents who are not gender diverse (67%).
- Gender diverse respondents were less likely to speak to a doctor or nurse about sex and sexuality (16%) as compared to respondents who are not gender diverse (32%). Gender diverse participants were more likely to seek information from other sources (21%) (including LGBTQI specific organisations and groups) as compared to respondents who are not gender diverse (8%).



## Discussion

This survey provided an opportunity to hear directly from young people about their experiences of relationship and sexuality education. It offers a useful snapshot of young people’s perspectives across New Zealand and the responses align with other recent reports about relationship and sexuality education from New Zealand and Australia.<sup>6</sup> There are a number of positives to take away from this survey. Most young people in New Zealand are receiving some sexuality education. Most find at least some of it useful. And most young people appear to want more in-depth and wide-ranging relationship and sexuality education at school, showing an interest and desire to further engage in these critical areas of learning.

However, while most young people reported receiving sexuality education (88%), it is surprising that 12% report they did not, given that relationship and sexuality education is a required component of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Two-thirds of young people (66%) who answered felt that at least some, or more, of their sexuality education was useful. But 10% found none of it useful and 27% found only a little bit of it was useful.

These results mirror the findings of other New Zealand surveys<sup>7,8</sup> where a large proportion of young people have expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship and sexuality education they received at school. For example, the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) pornography survey also

<sup>6</sup> Paulina Ezer, Lucille Kerr, Christopher M. Fisher, Wendy Heywood & Jayne Lucke (2019): Australian students’ experiences of sexuality education at school, *Sex Education* Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2019.1566896>

<sup>7</sup> Office of Film and Literature Classification. (2018). *NZ Youth and Porn: Research findings of a survey on how and why young New Zealanders view online pornography*. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Retrieved from: <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/assets/PDFs/NZYouthPorn-OFLC-December2018-PrintVersion.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Thursdays in Black (2017) *In our own words: student experiences of sexual violence prior to and during tertiary education*. Retrieved from: <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=5557>

found that 65% of young people surveyed thought information about sex received at school was very or quite useful and about a third did not find it useful.

It is concerning that about one-third of gender diverse young people found relationship and sexuality education not at all useful. Given the barriers to access to health services for this population, and the bullying and discrimination faced by gender diverse and transgender young people, it is especially important that sexuality and relationship education is inclusive and relevant for this population and also explores gender stereotypes, respect and diversity among all young people.

It was primarily girls and young women who completed the survey. While this may simply reflect the demographics of Family Planning clients, it could also be indicative of the level of responsibility girls and young women feel around these issues as compared to boys and young men. This may be an area for research and further consideration.

It is useful to know that the vast majority of young people are taught relationship and sexuality education by their regular teacher. This highlights the importance of ensuring professional development focused on relationship and sexuality education is readily available, accessible and current. While one out of five young people are receiving some sexuality education from an organisation external to their school, only 66 (9%) young people reported receiving relationship and sexuality education solely from an external provider. Teachers working in schools are by far the major provider of sexuality education to our young people and resourcing to improve and expand relationship and sexuality education in schools should be targeted to this group.

This survey, like the 2018 ERO report, showed that most young people are learning about anatomy, biology, contraception and safer sexual practices at least to some extent. They are less frequently learning about issues like relationships and consent, gender stereotypes and gender and sexuality diversity, and rarely learning about online issues related to sex and relationships like sexting and pornography. Young people are positive about their learning about biology, anatomy, contraception and safer sexual practices and want more around consent and healthy relationships. Learning around online issues fits within and alongside these broader topic areas. This survey suggests that we need to build on and expand comprehensive relationship and sexuality education in schools, not replace it with programmes which have a singular or limited focus. Young people expressed their support for more in-depth and wide-ranging learning generally.

This survey provided information about where else young people would seek information about relationships and sexuality. Only about one-third of young people would seek information from their parents. Most research indicates that having positive, open discussions with parents about relationships and sexuality benefits young people. However, as a sexual and reproductive health care provider, we also know that a proportion of young people would not feel comfortable discussing their sexual and reproductive health with their parents. Still, the finding that only 30% of young people would seek information from their parents is surprising. The research by OFLC also found that just over 30% of young people had spoken to their parents about pornography. It would be useful to further explore how to better support parents to be able to have open, non-judgemental, age-

appropriate conversations with their children about relationships and sexuality from an early age through adolescence.

It is encouraging that most young people report that they would seek information from a range of sources including online, from friends and from doctors and nurses. With 80% of young people reporting that they would seek information online, it is important that young people can easily identify trusted, accurate sources of online information about relationships and sexuality and acquire digital literacy and critical consumer skills.

Particularly in the era of the #metoo movement, and new discourses around gender, sex and human rights, we can and must do better with our relationship and sexuality education in schools. We need to provide relationship and sexuality education that is useful and relevant to all young people. We need to start conversations at home and at school when children are in primary school in order to provide a critical foundation for conversations in secondary school and at home during adolescence.

Relationship and sexuality education is a critical area of learning for young people and supports positive development. The Ministry of Health writes:<sup>9</sup> "Giving youth access to comprehensive sexuality education and to sexual and reproductive health services is a vital component of positive development."

While there are a number of good resources available to schools and teachers in New Zealand which support effective provision of relationship and sexuality education, there are challenges to effective implementation of comprehensive programmes including lack of access to and availability of professional development. There is also a lack of formal time dedicated to covering a complete range of health education topics throughout the school years, including relationship and sexuality education.

If New Zealand is going to improve relationship and sexuality education for the next generation, it is important that we listen and respond to what young people are telling us today.

## Recommendations

1. Relationship and sexuality education should be taught by highly committed, well-trained teachers who regularly engage with health education professional development in this area of the curriculum. Professional development in relationship and sexuality education should be resourced, accessible to teachers and current.
2. Quality relationship and sexuality education should be guided by *Sexuality Education: A guide for Principals, Boards of Trustees and Teachers* (MOE, 2015). It will include learning in sexual health, reproduction, gender and sexual diversity, identity, relationships, consent, as well as contemporary issues (such as pornography). Quality sexuality education will centralise identities and relationships.

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Health (2018) *Health and Independence Report 2017*. The Director-General of Health's Annual Report on the State of Public Health. Wellington: Ministry of Health  
<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/health-and-independence-report-2017-v2.pdf>

3. All schools should formally timetable relationship and sexuality education from years 1-13 for at least 12-15 hours per year level, per year.
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