

Young people's experiences of school-based relationships and sexuality education: findings from the 2021 Secondary Schools and Sexual Health Survey

Kauer S¹, Power J¹, Fisher C², Fraser S¹, Bourne A¹

¹Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Victoria, ²Victoria University, Melbourne

Background:

In Australia, what constitutes relationship and sexuality education (RSE) is inconsistent and not clearly defined. Most Australian students receive some RSE and research shows young people value and trust RSE received at school. However, young people report RSE is often inadequate or lacking relevance. In this paper, we report findings from a recent national survey that looked at student experiences and perceptions of RSE.

Methods:

A national survey of 6,841 14-18-year-olds living in Australia was conducted in 2021, of which 4,828 (71%) attended school in years 9-12. For this analysis, we included measures on RSE received, perceived relevance and topics covered. Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to compare differences between school type, gender, and sexual orientation.

Results:

Participants attended government (56%), Catholic (21%) and other Independent (23%) schools. Over 90% of students reported receiving RSE. Students attending government schools were more likely to report receiving RSE than students at other schools ($p < .001$). Fewer than 27% of students reported that RSE was very/extremely relevant to their needs. Students at government schools were more likely to perceive RSE as relevant than those at other schools ($p < .05$). Male or female students were more likely to report RSE was relevant than non-binary students ($p < .05$). Heterosexual students were more likely than LGBTQ students to report RSE was relevant ($p < .001$). Most frequently covered topics were puberty (70%), anatomy (67%) and the female reproduction system (63%). Least covered topics included sex with disabilities (3%), anal sex (6%) and sex between women (9%). Over 50% reported missing out on RSE due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion:

While most students receive RSE, concerns about relevance and effectiveness remains particularly with respect to gender and sexual diversity and disability. There is an ongoing need to review and improve RSE.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This study was funded by the Government Department of Health.