

The diverse but common definitions of sex for young people in Australia.

Authors:

Kauer S¹, Power J¹, Fisher C², & Bourne A¹.

¹ Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University,² Victoria University Online

Background:

The ways young people define sex, and what constitutes 'real' sex, is varied. For some, sex is defined only as penetration while other definitions allow for more diverse sexual practices including oral sex. Understanding contemporary young people's perceptions and definitions of sex is relevant for STI prevention and consent education. This study examined young people's definitions of sex.

Methods:

Data were from 4763 14- to 18-year-olds from the 2021 National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health. Multiple logistic regressions estimated associations between demographic characteristics and definitions of sex. Thematic analysis explored open-ended responses for definitions of sex.

Results:

Most participants agreed that penetrative vaginal (99%) and anal (83%) sex counted as sex, while fewer (60%) considered oral sex to be sex. LGBTQ+ young people had a more diverse interpretation of sex than heterosexual young people and were more likely to define anal sex, oral sex, genital rubbing and mutual masturbation as sex. Females were more focused on vaginal sex and less likely to define anal and oral sex as sex compared to males and trans and non-binary young people. Differences were also found for sexual experience, religiosity, age and rurality. Participant's open-ended responses indicated that definitions of sex varied according to sexuality and individuality; many young people suggested a definition of sex that incorporated pleasure.

Conclusion:

While penetrative vaginal and anal sex were included in most young people's definition of sex, young people also included a diverse range of sexual practices that do not consistently align with common definitions used in sex education and sexual health promotion campaigns. These definitions are particularly varied by gender and sexuality suggesting that discussing sex with young people requires care to ensure a common understanding.

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