

AUSTRALIAN ADOLESCENT SCHOOL-BASED RELATIONSHIP AND SEX EDUCATION: RESULTS FROM THE 6TH NATIONAL SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY STUDENTS AND ADOLESCENT SEXUAL HEALTH

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Background: Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) can improve adolescent sexual health outcomes, including knowledge and behaviour, but adolescents have found their school-based RSE lacking. This research examines student sexual health knowledge and RSE experiences based on findings from the Sixth National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Adolescent Sexual Health in the context of the release of the Australian Curriculum in Health and Physical Education, which includes guidance on RSE.

Methods: Australian Year 10, 11 and 12 students (N=6,327) from diverse school systems responded to an online mixed methods survey that covered a variety of sexual health and behaviour topics, including RSE. Measures included perceived relevance of sexuality education, context of sexuality education, knowledge of HIV, STIs and HPV, and socio-demographics. ANOVA, t-tests and a standard multiple regression informed quantitative results. An open-ended question about students' RSE experiences were thematically analysed.

Results: Most participants (n=6,232; 83.1%) reported receiving RSE. One third of students (n=1,791; 37.7%) believed their RSE to be extremely or very relevant. HIV, STI and HPV knowledge scores were higher among year 12 students ($p < 0.05$). HIV and STI knowledge scores were higher among students who had received RSE in school ($p < 0.05$) while HPV knowledge scores were equal ($p = 1$). Females scored higher in STI and HPV knowledge while males scored higher in HIV knowledge (all $ps < 0.05$). Thematic analysis of student comments (n=1,861; 30%) revealed additional context on student RSE experiences.

Conclusion: Findings confirm the relationship between receipt of RSE and knowledge. Despite the introduction of national pedagogical guidance, which includes RSE, knowledge scores were moderate to low and perceived relevance of school-based RSE was low. Qualitative comments continue to provide valuable insight for designing and implementing school-based RSE based on students' opinions and needs and in line with new national guidelines.

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