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## **TOWARDS BETTER SEXUAL HEALTH**

### **Main findings of this major new survey of the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland**

#### **Methodology:**

<b>Questionnaire:</b>	Over 1000 14-25 year olds completed the survey
<b>Gender:</b>	41.4% of respondents were male, 58.6% female
<b>Religion:</b>	45% were Protestant, 38.7% Catholic
<b>Focus groups:</b>	71 focus groups took place
<b>One-to-one interviews:</b>	15 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

##### **SEX EDUCATION**

- Four out of five young people rate their friends as their best source of advice on sex. School, books, magazines and TV/radio all came before mothers (fifth place) and fathers (seventh).
- Young men reported receiving less sex education than young women: at school, well over a third received no information about menstruation and 1 in 5 received no classes on pregnancy. At home, less than a quarter of young men felt able to confide in a parent about sex.
- Over half of those asked could name HIV/AIDS as a sexually transmitted infection, but less than a quarter could name any other infection.
- Young people reported that the subjects covered in school sex education were very limited. Importantly, sexual feelings and emotions were rarely discussed, with nearly half of those asked wanting to know more about this.

##### **SEXUAL ATTITUDES**

- Over half of those asked said emotional maturity rather than age should be the deciding factor in age of first sex. Over 40% of those who said age was important chose 16 as the right age for first sex.
- Nearly two-thirds of young people agreed there was nothing wrong with sex before marriage. Only 1 in 10 people thought sex before marriage was always wrong.
- Less than a third of young people disapproved of one-night stands, but two-thirds disapproved of sex outside steady relationships, having more than one sexual partner at a time, anonymous sex or sex with a prostitute.
- Nearly a third of those asked said access to abortion should be made easier.

## **SEXUAL INTERCOURSE**

- Over a third of people had sex before 17, the legal age of consent. Over a quarter had sex before 16.
- Over half said they were happy with the timing of first sex, but over a quarter of young men and nearly a third of young women said they felt they had sex too early.
- Over half had first sex in a steady relationship, but only 15% said it was planned when it occurred. One in 10 young women felt pressurised into first sex.
- One in four men and one in three women said they were drunk at first sex.

## **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

- Over half said that sex between men was always or mostly wrong, and over one-third said that sex between women is always or mostly wrong. Yet 1 in 10 young men and women reported having been attracted to a person of the same sex at least once.
- 11% of sexually active men and nearly 4% of sexually active women said they had had sex with a same sex partner on at least one occasion.

## **USE OF CONTRACEPTION AND SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES**

- Nearly three-quarters of young people used contraception at first sex. Condoms were used by two-thirds of people at first sex.
- Over three-quarters of those who first had sex when they were 16 or older used contraception compared to just over a third of those who first had sex before 16.
- Young people who could talk to their parents about sex were on average nearly twice as likely to use contraception at first sex.
- Nearly half of those questioned who were sexually active had used emergency contraception at least once. Three-quarters had no difficulty accessing it, although 1 in 5 found clinic opening times or the attitudes of staff offputting.
- Condoms are the most common method of contraception used by young people. Nearly two thirds of young men preferred to buy them from a chemist, whereas nearly half of young women were happy to access them free from a family planning clinic.
- Over three quarters said they would find it easy to access contraception, but access became more difficult for those under 17.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Community based sex education programmes for parents should be introduced to enable them to provide positive sex education in the home.
- Schools must take positive action to ensure that homosexuality is addressed in the classroom, to help remove the stigma surrounding sexual lifestyles that are different to heterosexuality.

- The age of heterosexual and homosexual sexual consent should be reduced by one year to 16.
- Schools, including governors and management committees, must actively support teachers in the implementation of the guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education issued by The Northern Ireland Council for The Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.
- Peer sex education programmes should be developed throughout Northern Ireland and receive statutory funding.
- Education strategies must particularly address the needs of young men with regards to personal and sexual relationships.
- Community-based initiatives on personal development through sexual health should be introduced across Northern Ireland.
- Confidential contraception services specifically for teenagers must be developed throughout Northern Ireland.
- Sexual health services for young people should include testing for sexually transmitted infections.
- Policy-makers should take into account research data from Towards Better Sexual Health when developing and implementing future policies including setting funding priorities.
- The Towards Better Sexual Health survey should be repeated and implemented in 2006.
- The Towards Better Sexual Health survey should be repeated to include men and women aged 25-55 years.