



MEDIA RELEASE

SEX AND ROMANCE IN THE TEEN YEARS

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A national study has found two-thirds of Australian teenagers have been involved in a romantic relationship by the age of 16-17 years.

The study *Growing Up In Australia* Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found while the majority of children reported having had at least one boyfriend or girlfriend by the age of 16-17, only a minority (32 per cent) reported having had sex.

Australian Institute of Family Studies Director, Anne Hollonds said young people are interested in developing romantic relationships but may not become sexually active until their late teenage years.

“The study found one in seven, 14-15 year-olds reported having a boyfriend or girlfriend with most saying they went out together to places like the movies,” she said.

“The majority of 14-15 year-olds said they were attracted to the opposite sex (93 per cent of boys and 85 per cent of girls), around 4 per cent said they were attracted to the same sex or to both boys and girls.

“By the age of 16-17, 67 per cent of boys and 62 per cent of girls reported having had at least one relationship. Among 16-17 year olds who reported being in a relationship the vast majority considered it a committed and exclusive relationship.

“While most teenagers reported not yet having had sex at the age of 16-17 years (68 per cent), 7 per cent of boys and 6 per cent of girls reported having sex for the first time at age 14 years or younger. There were no significant differences in the age that boys and girls had sex for the first time.

“Among teenagers who were sexually active, the majority were taking precautions, including using condoms to prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

“However, the study found a small number of teenagers are not practicing safe sex, with one in four 16-17 year-old girls and nearly one in five 16-17 year-old boys who were sexually active reporting they had not used any contraception during sex.

“This highlights the importance of sex education in schools which covers aspects of safe sex and the need to use contraception to prevent unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.”

Dr Diana Warren said the study also found some teenagers were subject to unwanted sexual behaviours.

“While it is normal for young people to express their sexuality, not all sexual behaviour is welcomed,” she said.

“The study found half of 16-17 year old girls and a third of boys the same age had experienced unwanted sexual behaviours over the last 12 months. This included being sent sexual pictures, overhearing rude remarks, or being touched in a way that embarrassed or upset them.

“At the same time, one in twelve girls and one in eight boys reported that they had engaged in unwanted sexual behaviour towards someone else in the last 12 months. This ranged from telling rude stories and jokes to repeatedly asking someone out on a date or asking them to ‘hook up’ when they had previously said no.

“The study also found significantly more boys than girls had intentionally viewed pornography in the past 12 months. For example, one in ten boys said they watched pornography daily compared to fewer than one in one-hundred girls.

“Reports of engaging in unwanted sexual behaviours were significantly higher among males who had viewed pornography for the first time before the age of 13 and those who viewed it daily at the age of 16-17.”

Dr Warren said the teenage years can be a difficult time as young people experience and explore different feelings and behaviours as they develop their sexual identity.

“It is essential that parents are able to have supportive conversations early on with their children about making informed decisions about their sexual behaviours. However, it is important that these conversations are respectful and parents understand that their child’s sexuality and sexual behaviours may be different from their own,” she said.

“School sexual education programs can also support teenagers to develop respectful relationships and learn to navigate the online environment.”

Access a copy of the AIFS’ *Growing Up in Australia* Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2018 Annual Statistical Report [Teenagers and Sex](#).

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