



Sources of sexual health information among young people

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Introduction

Young people obtain information about sex and sexual health from numerous sources. These include family, friends and school, as well as media sources (TV, radio, magazines) and the internet. Information may also be sought from the medical practice or family planning clinics. The US National Health Survey of Adolescents (Hoff et al., 2003) identifies the top three sources of sex information among young people as school, friends and parents, closely followed by media sources and the internet. Previous findings have shown young people as being more likely to receive sex information from peers and the media than from parents, with mothers being a more likely source than fathers (Sprecher et al., 2008).

An important facilitator for getting information about sexual health and contraception use is ease of communication with others about sexual matters (Sivaram, 2005). Previous findings have shown discussing sex with parents is related to reduced likelihood of early sexual initiation (Dilorio et al., 1999), decreased risk of unintended pregnancy (Wellings et al., 2001) and increased condom use (Miller et al., 1998). The need to involve parents alongside other sources of sex education and educational strategies has also been identified (Walker, 2004). Research involving parents in Glasgow identified that although many parents provide some level of sexual health and relationship education in the home, provision can be varied and is dependent on the parents' own confidence and skills, their social background, the child's age, and the gender of both the child and the parent concerned (Fullerton & Burtney, 2005). Young people often report feeling more comfortable discussing sexual matters with their friends rather than parents, and the importance of communication with peers must also be considered (Dilorio et al., 1999). With increasing amounts of sexual health information being provided to young people at school, it stands to reason that good communication with teachers is important. However findings suggest that pupils often find it difficult or embarrassing discussing such matters with their teachers, or likewise teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching sex education (Hansard Society, 2010, NHS Health Scotland, 2008).

Understanding the implications of different sources of information on sexual matters may be an important aspect in the promotion of sexual health among young people. This briefing paper supplement aims to examine sources of sexual

health information among young people in Scotland, as well as ease of communication about personal and sexual matters with others. Associations are explored between sources of information and sexual behaviours, as well as between sources of information and relationships with others.

Summary of main findings

- Pupils report school as being their main source of information on sexual matters, although proportions are significantly higher among boys. Almost half of boys and a third of girls report school to be their main source. This has changed since the 1998 and 2002 surveys, where friends were previously reported as the primary source of information on sexual matters.
- Boys who report school as their main source of information are less likely to have had sex than those who report friends or parents. Girls who report school or parents as their main source of information are less likely to have had sex than those who report friends.
- Pupils report friends as being the easiest people to discuss personal and sexual matters with, the proportion of girls doing so being significantly higher than boys.
- Regardless of where young people get their primary information about sexual matters, the majority report friends as being the easiest person to talk to about personal and sexual matters, with few reporting teachers as being the easiest to talk to. Pupils who report parents as their main source of information are more likely to find it easy to discuss sexual matters with their parents than those who get their information from friends or school.

Where do young people in Scotland get their information about sex?

Young people were asked where they get most of their information about sexual matters. Parents, friends and schools are the most commonly reported sources of information for both boys and girls (Currie et al., 2008). Magazines are more popular among girls than boys, whereas the internet is more popular among boys than girls. Only a small proportion of young people report TV/radio, books, GP/doctor or family planning clinics as their main source of information.

Figure 1: Main sources of information on sexual matters among young people by gender (1998–2006)

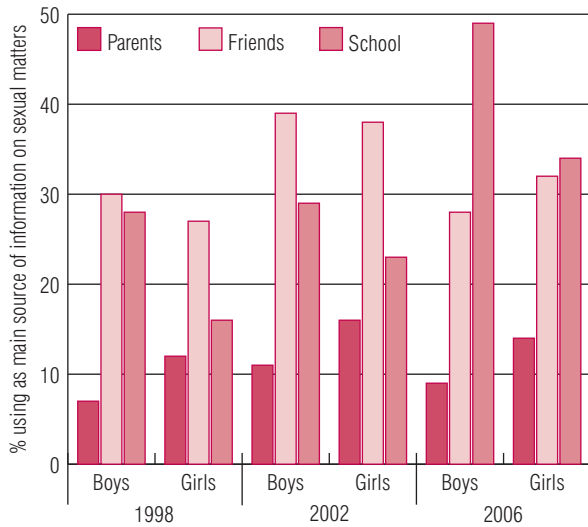


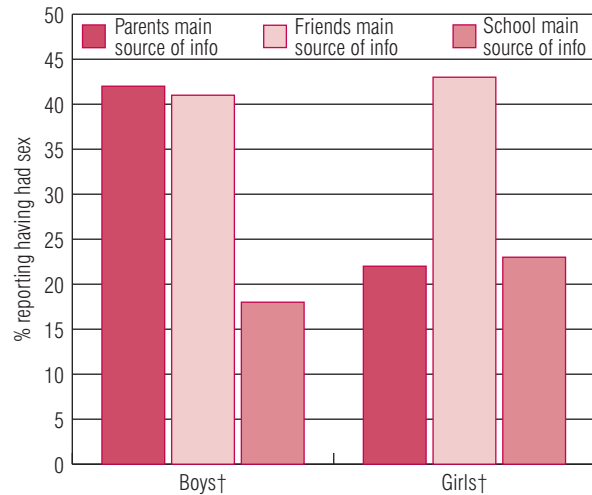
Figure 1 shows time trends in the proportion of boys and girls who report using their parents, friends or school as their main source of information about sexual matters. In 1998 and 2002, friends were the most common source of information for both boys and girls. A change was seen in 2006 with the proportion using friends decreasing, and school becoming the most popular source of information. Almost half of boys (49%) and a third of girls (34%) report school being their main source of information, compared with 29% and 23% respectively in 2002.

Figure 2 shows the association between the main source of information used by young people and sexual experience. Among both boys and girls, those who report school as their main source of information are less likely to have had sex than those who report friends as their main source. Less than a fifth (18%) of boys and a quarter of girls (23%) who report getting their information about school have had sex, compared to two fifths of boys and girls (41% and 43% respectively) who get their information from friends. Among boys, two fifths (42%) of those who get their information from parents have had sex. However, among girls this is only the case for one fifth (22%).

Discussing sexual matters with others

Figure 3 shows with whom young people find it easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters. Young people find it easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters with friends, with significantly more girls (76%) reporting this to be the case than boys (71%). There are no gender differences in young people’s ease of talking to parents, siblings, teachers or others. Only 13% of boys and 12% of girls report their parents being the person with whom they find it easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters. Furthermore, only 3% of boys and 1% of girls report their teacher as being the easiest person.

Figure 2: Association between sources of information on sexual matters and sexual experience among 15-year-olds



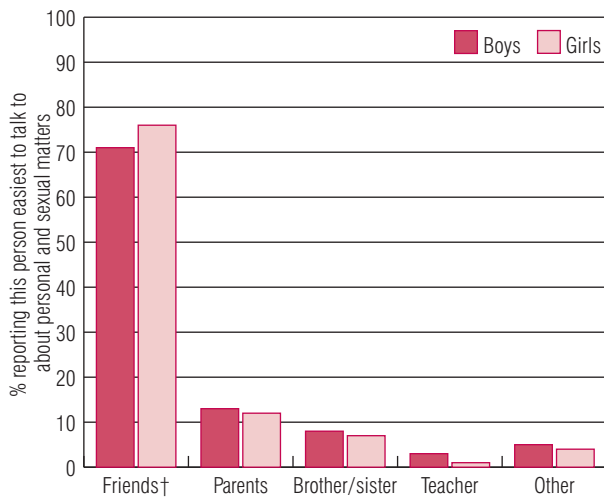
† Significant difference (p<0.05)

Figure 4 shows the association between the main source of information on sexual matters, and ease of discussing personal and sexual matters with others. As shown in Figure 4, young people find it easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters with their friends regardless of what they use as their main source of information. For those pupils who report school as their main source of information, two thirds (65%) report their friends as easiest to talk to, compared with 16% reporting parents and 5% reporting teachers. For those who report their main source of information being from friends, 90% report their friends as being easiest to talk to. Pupils who report their parents as their main source of information are more likely to find it easy to speak to their parents about sexual matters (41%) than those who report getting information from friends or school. However, 46% of pupils who use their parents as their main source of information still find friends easiest to talk to.

Discussion

This briefing paper has demonstrated the increasing prevalence of information provided about sexual matters to young people at school. Whereas friends were predominantly reported as the main source of information on sexual matters for young people in the 1998 and 2002 surveys, a shift is evident in 2006. This perhaps reflects the government drive to increase the amount of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) provided within the school context (Scottish Executive, 2005). The fact that the majority of pupils in 2006 report school being their main source of information on personal and sexual matters highlights the importance and potential for influence that SRE in schools can have. Importantly, those who report school as their main source of information are less likely to have had sex than those who use their friends as the main source.

Figure 3: Person it is easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters with among 15-year-olds by gender



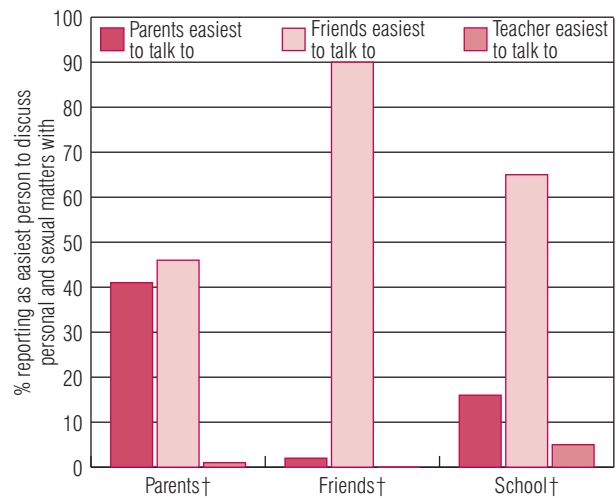
† Significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

This possible effect of sex education in schools is encouraging; however, it is also important to note that such findings could indicate that young people considering or already engaging in sexual intercourse may seek information about sexual matters from those closest to them, such as friends.

Among girls, an association is shown between using parents as the main source of information on sexual matters and sexual experience, although this is not seen among boys. The differences between mother and father communication are not explored within this briefing paper. However, previous research has shown that higher levels of mother-daughter sexual risk communication have been associated with fewer episodes of sexual intercourse and unprotected intercourse (Hutchinson et al., 2003).

Previous research has acknowledged the place of carefully designed peer education programmes, for improving sexual health among young people (Evans and Tripp, 2006). A key finding of this briefing paper is that young people find it easiest to speak with their friends about sexual health matters, no matter what they use as their main source of information on sexual matters. This further suggests that incorporating peer-led sex education may be beneficial in teaching young people about sexual matters in school. Young people who get their information about sex at school are less likely to report having had sex than those who get their information primarily from friends. Despite this, teachers are not represented as being the easiest people to talk to about sexual matters. The low proportion of young people reporting teachers as being easiest to talk to about sexual matters makes it difficult for comparisons to be made with sexual health outcomes. However, emphasis on improving teacher – pupil communication about personal and sexual matters may

Figure 4: Association between main source of information on sexual matters and ease of discussing personal and sexual matters with others among 15-year-olds



† Significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

therefore further increase the benefits associated with Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools. It is important to note that as well as teachers, there are also many other individuals involved in providing SRE inputs within schools. Ease of communication between pupils and those delivering SRE should therefore be considered within each school.

It should be acknowledged that sexual experience among young people is likely to be influenced by a wide range of factors, including family structure or socioeconomic status, and that the subjective nature of young people’s reporting of their sexual experience must be considered. Furthermore, analyses are based on 15 year olds only, and schools taking part in the HBSC survey. However, this paper provides an analysis of where young people get their information about sexual matters, and how this is related to behaviour. Such findings should be taken into consideration in future sexual health programmes targeted at young people.

Additional Measures used in this briefing paper

Source of information about sexual matters

Where do you get most of your information about sexual matters? (Parents / Friends / School / Magazines / TV or Radio / Books / GP or Doctor / Brook Advisory or Family Planning or other such clinics or centres / The internet or web/ Other)

Person with whom sexual matters are discussed

It is easiest to discuss personal and sexual matters with my... (Parents / Brother or sister / Friends / Teacher / Other)

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