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# How do young people learn about sex?

How young people recall learning about sex as teenagers, and the impacts that this has had on their attitudes surrounding sex as adults.

Produced by Zero Tolerance

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# Key Terms

**LGBT+** stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (the + encompasses other identities such as non-binary, asexual, and others) and refers to people who identify with one or more of these identities.

**Violence against women and girls (VAWG)** is violence perpetrated against women because we are women. It includes, but is not limited to, domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, stalking, harassment, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honour' crimes. The vast majority of this violence is perpetrated by men. The root cause is gender inequality.

**Intersectionality** is defined as the understanding that people's identities and social positions are uniquely shaped by several factors at the same time, creating unique experiences and perspectives. These factors include, among others race, sexuality, gender, trans-status, disability, age, class, nationality, and faith.

**Gender inequality** is a lack of equality between men and women. It is when men have more power, opportunities, and rights than women, and there are stereotyped roles for men and women. Although women are far more disadvantaged by gender inequality, inequality also harms men.

**Consent** means when someone agrees, gives permission, or says "yes" to sexual activity with other persons. Consent should be freely given and all people in a sexual situation must feel that they are able to say "yes" or "no" or stop the sexual activity at any point. Consent can also be withdrawn at any point and should never be assumed. The law states that a person is not capable of giving consent if they are too drunk, too far under the influence of drugs or are unconscious.

# Introduction

This research originates from a survey produced by Zero Tolerance, aimed at 18–25-year-olds, and disseminated through our social media accounts in October 2020. Our objective was to better understand how this group learnt about sex as teenagers, what methods they relied on for this education, and how this consequently informed their attitudes as adults.

We chose to undertake this project due to Zero Tolerance's interest in social attitudes around issues that impact gender inequality, the root cause of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Sex education relates to gender inequality due to the ways in which learning about consent, pleasure, and desire can become gendered, and often adhere to gendered stereotypes around how we can and cannot interact with sex, depending upon our gender. Gendering sex education in a way that creates attitudes around sex that are not equal is hugely detrimental to both boys and girls, and creates an environment in which gender inequality thrives.

Sex education sits within the broader 'whole school approach' to gender equality, and, for Zero Tolerance, education around sex and attitudes towards sexualisation are a significant part of our 'Under Pressure' training programme. This programme aims to support professionals working with young people to communicate about some of the challenges and pressures young people may face, including risks of grooming and sexual exploitation, engaging in healthy,

consent-based relationships, and dealing with the pressures to conform to idealised models of 'how to be' men and women. Thus, this research aims to support, inform, and shape Zero Tolerance's future resources and strategy for young people.

**When thinking about how they learnt about sex, we asked participants to consider what they learnt about:**

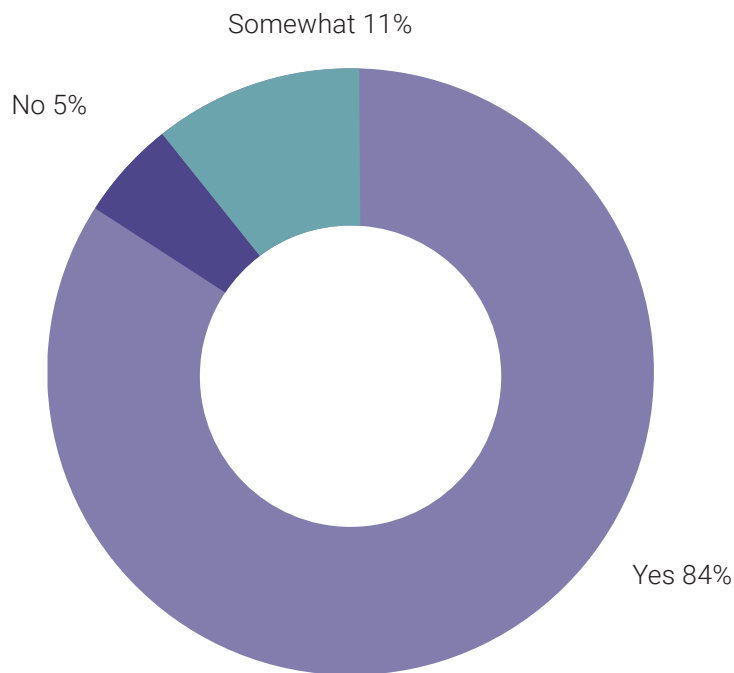
- **Consent**
- **Pleasure**
- **The facts of reproduction**
- **Different sexual practices**
- **What sexual practices and feelings are considered 'normal'**
- **Any other aspects of sex and sexuality that they learnt about while growing up.**

This survey allowed for gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data. We found that 84% of participants felt that there were better ways they could have learnt about sex as teenagers.

Interestingly, however, LGBT+ participants' responses to this question went against the general trend of 'yes'. Among LGBT+ participants, 8% answered that there were not better ways they could have learnt about sex – in comparison to 3% of heterosexual participants, and 5% of participants overall. Though these percentages are all low, it is interesting that it was LGBT+



**Do you think there were better ways you as an individual, could have learnt about sex as a teenager?**



*[Graph above including all participants' responses]*

participants who slightly skewed the overall percentage of there not being better ways they could have learnt about sex. This is especially interesting considering LGBT+ people's responses to how learning about sex in these ways had made them feel. One participant commented that they felt that there were 'somewhat' better ways they could have learnt because:

*"As a queer teenager, I felt very alienated in sex education in school – I tried to educate myself as best I could with the resources I had, which were entirely on social media (YouTube, tumblr etc). Looking back, I know I could have used better sources, but I know I tried as best I could."*

The most commonly cited means of learning about sex as teenagers was through 'peers of the same gender' (27%). Out with this majority of just over a quarter, responses were largely varied across the other methods surveyed.

Some interesting findings included that which participants selected as being presented as 'normal' – for example, 58% of participants responded learning that 'sexual desire' was 'normal for boys', as opposed to 21% who had learnt that this was 'normal for girls'. What's more, almost twice as many respondents learnt about 'male masturbation' (61%) than 'female masturbation' (33%). As such, there was a clear gender bias in the ways these respondents recalled their learning about specific elements of sex as teenagers.

# Methods and Demographics

In order to gain an understanding of how young people learnt about sex as teenagers, we developed a 22-question survey (see Appendix A) aimed at 18–25-year-olds, asking them how they learnt about sex generally, and then specific questions about the central way they learnt about sex as teenagers.

This survey was disseminated online and shared through our social media pages. The survey recorded 135 responses overall, though when removing incomplete responses, and the single response that did not consent to sharing their data, there were 118 analysable responses. All percentages recorded in this report are rounded to the nearest whole number.

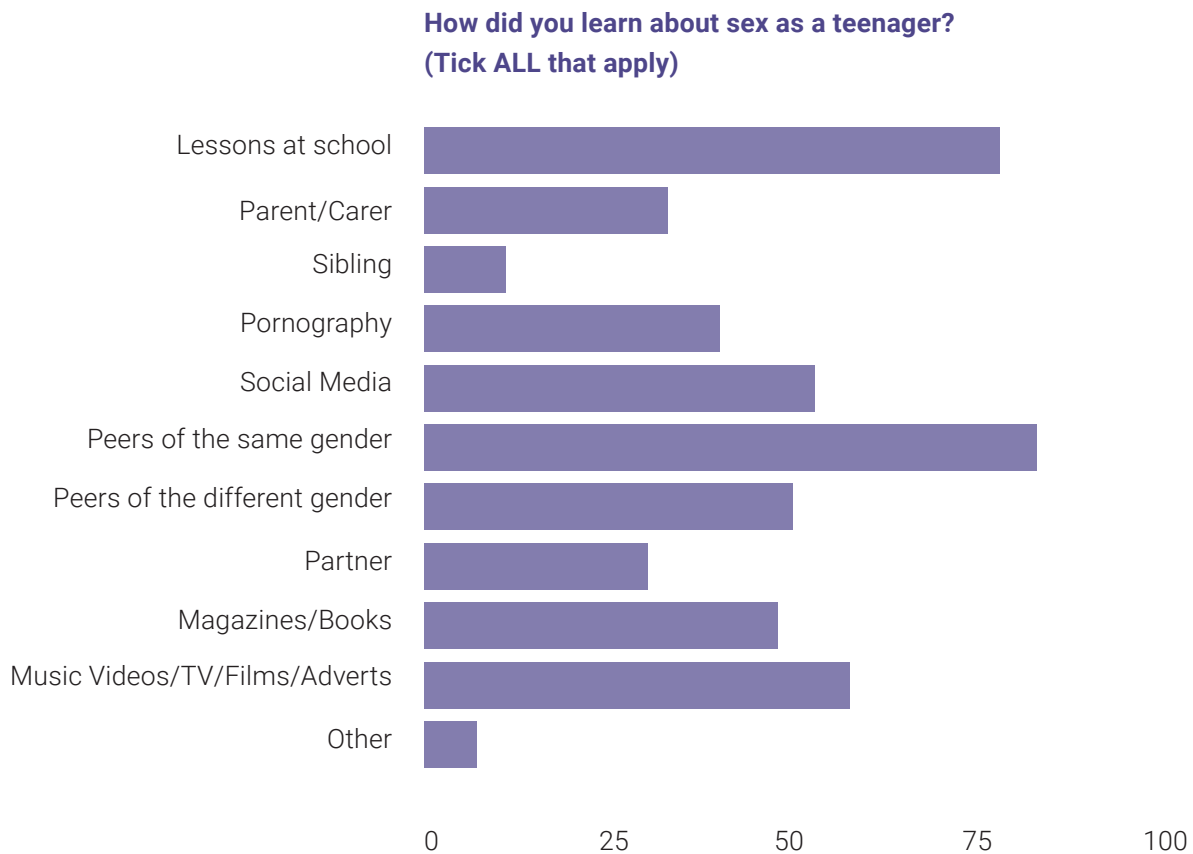
The age range of respondents was fairly balanced between 18- and 25-year-olds, and the decision was made to also include the 26+ year-old respondents (17%) in my findings. However, the genders of respondents were heavily skewed; 86% of respondents were women, 12% were men, and 2% were non-binary. This over-representation of women could be related to the reach of our social media accounts, as a women's organisation. However, it could also suggest that women were more willing to talk to us about, or perhaps more likely to have something to say about, how they learnt about sex as teenagers. In terms of sexuality, 57% described themselves as heterosexual, whilst 42% described themselves as on the LGBT+

spectrum (5% lesbian, 3% gay, 28% bisexual, 4% pansexual, 1% asexual, 2% other: questioning and queer, respectively). Meanwhile, just over 80% of respondents were White British/Scottish/English (see Appendix B), meaning that respondents were representative of a slightly more ethnically diverse population than the Scottish population, which is just below 90% White (<https://www.scotland.com/culture/demographics/>).

It must be acknowledged that the results will have an obvious bias towards both women and those who have feminist values or interests. Though we asked a variety of organisations to disseminate our survey in order to gain wider participant reach, it is likely that those willing to participate in a survey made by a feminist organisation will have views or interests somewhat aligned with our own. What's more, all participants had internet access in order to participate, which excludes those who do not have this access, whether due to poverty, homelessness, or other marginalising factors. Moreover, all participants were able to read English. Thus, the research cannot be fully representative, though we made great efforts to make it as accessible and representative as possible, within the pandemic which limited our capacity, and during which we were thus not able to disseminate the survey in any way that was not an online survey that had to be read and understood in English.



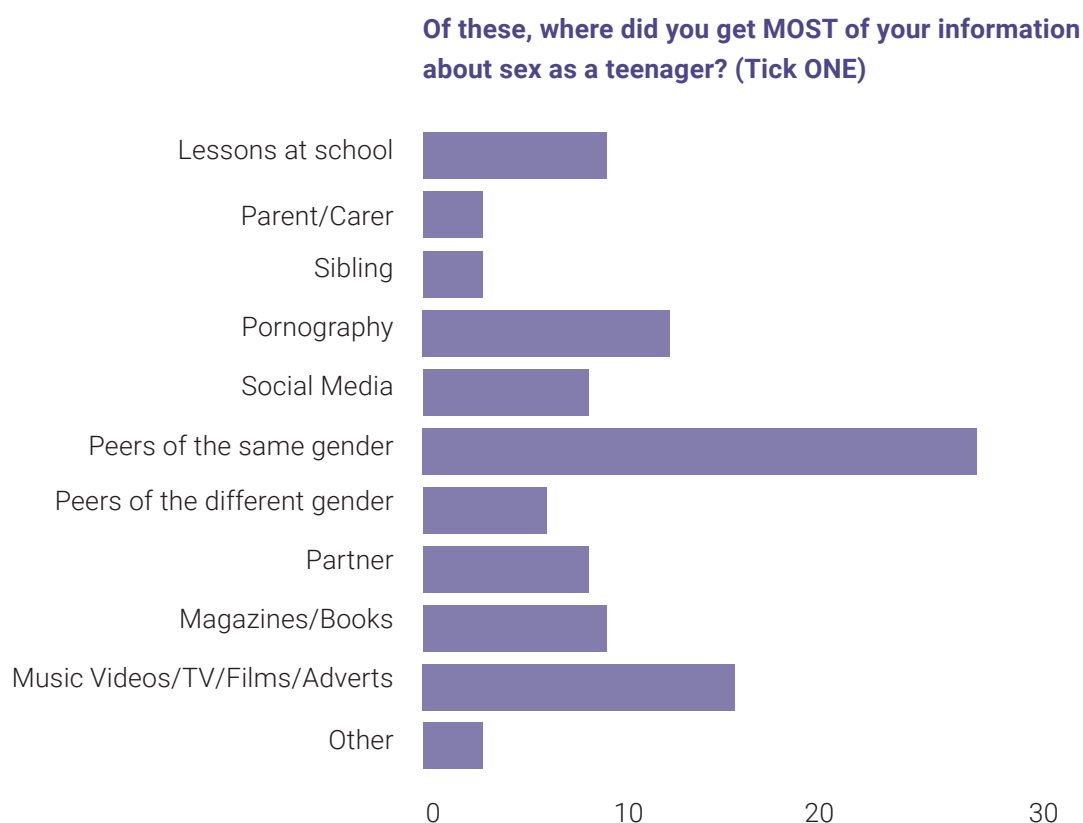
# General Findings



*[Graph above including all participants' responses]*

When asked to tick all of the ways they learnt about sex as a teenager, the most selected option was 'peers of the same gender' (83%), closely followed by 'at school' (78%). Over half of the participants selected 'social media' (53%), 'peers of a different gender' (50%), and 'music

videos/TV/films/adverts' (58%). Meanwhile, over a third learnt from 'magazines/books' (48%), 'pornography' (40%), and 'parent/carer' (33%). Those who selected 'other', detailed methods such as websites, Youtube, and internet forum boards.

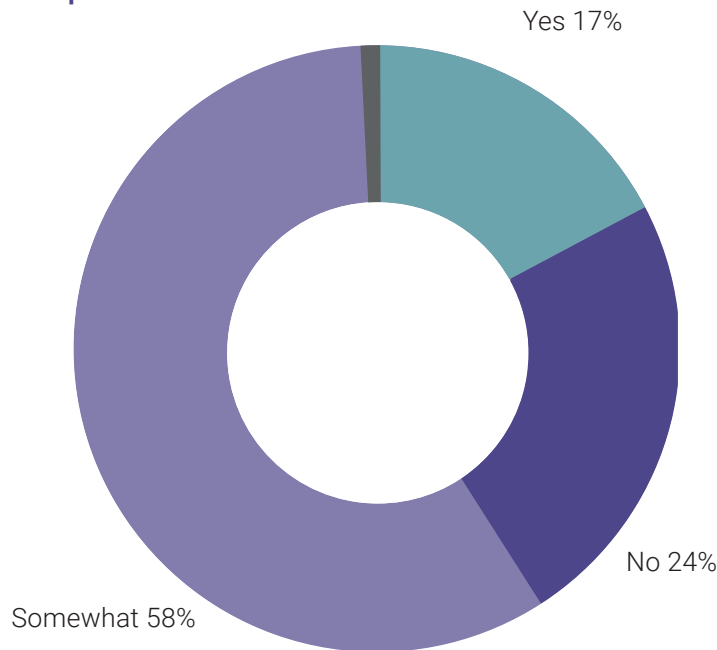


*[Graph above including all participants' responses]*

With regards to the way they learnt about sex most as teenagers, responses were relatively balanced. The most popular response was 'peers of the same gender' (27%). The rest of the responses were evenly distributed: 15% 'music videos/TV/films', 12% 'pornography', 9% 'at school', 9% 'magazines/books', 8% 'partner', 8% 'social media', 4% 'peers of a different gender', 3% 'parent/carer', 3% 'other' (YouTube channel called sex+; the internet; fanfiction). 'Sibling' was the only category which no participants identified as their main source of learning about sex as a teenager.

Participants were asked at what age they started learning about sex in this way. Most answered aged 12-13 years old (37%), closely followed by under 12-years old (35%), with the fewest respondents answering that they started over the age of 18 (1%). What's more, 36% of participants answered that, when learning about sex in this way, they were 'shown without their asking about it', 23% answered that they were 'shown when they asked about it', 20% 'chose to seek it out', and 19% 'came across it accidentally'. Thus, though there were a range of ways that young

**Do you find this way of learning about sex helpful in real life?**

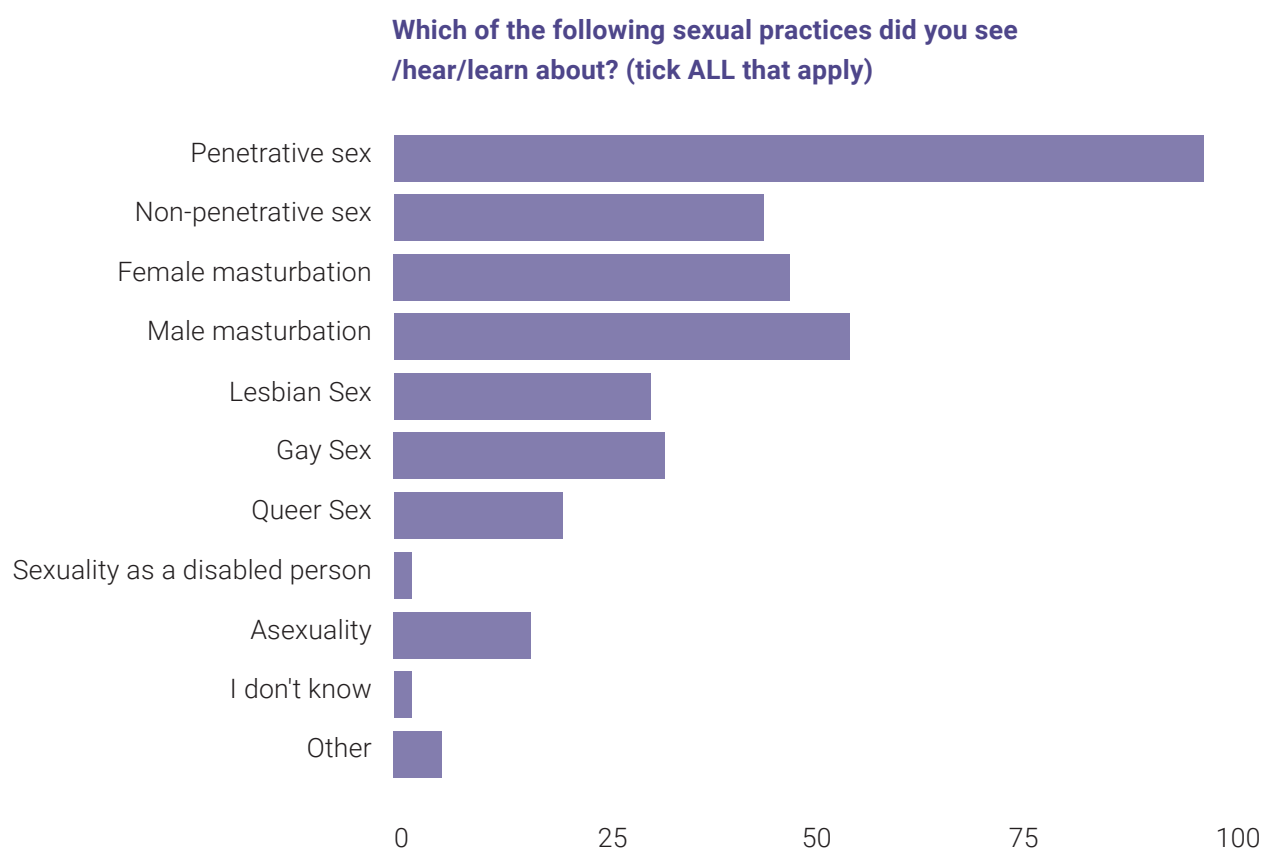


*[Graph above including all participants' responses]*

people identified first encountering learning about sex, it is interesting that the majority of respondents were shown/told about sex 'without asking' about it. This is potentially concerning considering the fact that 72% of participants identified first learning about sex aged 13 and under.

When asked about whether learning about sex in this way was helpful for understanding sex in real life, most answered that it was 'somewhat' helpful (58%), whilst more people answered that it was

not helpful (24%), than answered that it was (17%). Moreover, when asked whether they thought the way they learnt about sex was aimed at people like them, the answers varied, though most participants (31%) answered that it was not aimed at people like them. When asked to comment who they felt it was aimed at, the majority of comments mentioned "heterosexuals" and "men" (see Appendix C).



*[Graph above only including LGBT+ participants' responses]*

In terms of the sexual practices young people learnt about as teenagers, almost all (96%) respondents learnt about 'penetrative sex', just over half learnt about 'non-penetrative sex', under 25% learnt about 'gay' sex, or 'lesbian' sex, and almost twice as many learnt about 'male masturbation', than learnt about 'female masturbation', 61% in comparison to 33%. This shows both a gender bias in the way these participants learnt about self-pleasure, and a heterosexual bias.

Of the 25% of participants who learnt about 'lesbian' sex, 14% identified as 'lesbian', whilst only two thirds of those who identified as a 'lesbian', responded that they had learnt about 'lesbian sex' as teenagers. Strikingly, most of the participants who learnt about 'lesbian sex' had identified their main source of learning about sex to be 'pornography' (35%). However, despite identifying that they had learnt about 'lesbian sex', just over half of this cohort said that they had learnt that it was 'normal for girls to pleasure girls' (52%),

whilst just under half of this cohort said that it was 'normal for girls to feel sexual desire' (45%). Again, this demonstrates a bias against female pleasure and desire, and a heterosexual bias, as learning about 'lesbian sex' whilst not identifying it as 'normal for girls to pleasure girls', suggests that the 'lesbian sex' learnt about here was not representative of lesbian sexuality.

42% of all participants surveyed identified as being LGBT+. These participants' learning about sex was more varied than that of 'heterosexual' participants, in terms of the ways they learnt about sex most as teenagers, the sexual practices they learnt about, and their learning about sexual desire and pleasure. Twice as many LGBT+ participants learnt about 'female masturbation' and 'gay sex' than heterosexual participants (46% in comparison to 22%; 32% in comparison to 15%). 20% of LGBT+ participants learnt about 'queer sex' and 16% about 'asexuality', compared to zero and 1% of heterosexual participants respectively.

Over half of all participants responded that sexual desire was 'normal for boys' (58%) in comparison to 21% who said this was 'normal for girls' (37% said that sexual desire was 'normal for everyone'). An overwhelming 69% learnt that masturbation was 'normal for boys', in comparison to 14% who learnt that this was 'normal for girls' (26% responded that masturbation was 'normal for everyone').

In terms of giving pleasure, these responses were also highly gendered; more than twice the number of participants learnt that it was 'normal for girls to pleasure boys' (69%) than any other formation of this. (Please note that these questions about pleasure and desire required 'tick all' responses).

Of those who learnt that sexual desire was 'normal for girls', the most common response these participants had selected for primarily learning about sex was through 'peers of the same gender' (32%). Out of all the women surveyed, only 21% had learnt that sexual desire was 'normal for girls', whilst 29% of the men surveyed had learnt this. Though a higher percentage of men were identified as having learnt about this, the survey itself had a far smaller sample size of men, so this may not be fully representative. However, though both percentages are far smaller than those who learnt that it was 'normal for boys' to feel sexual desire,

it is worth noting that more men felt that they had learnt that 'sexual desire is normal for girls' than women did.

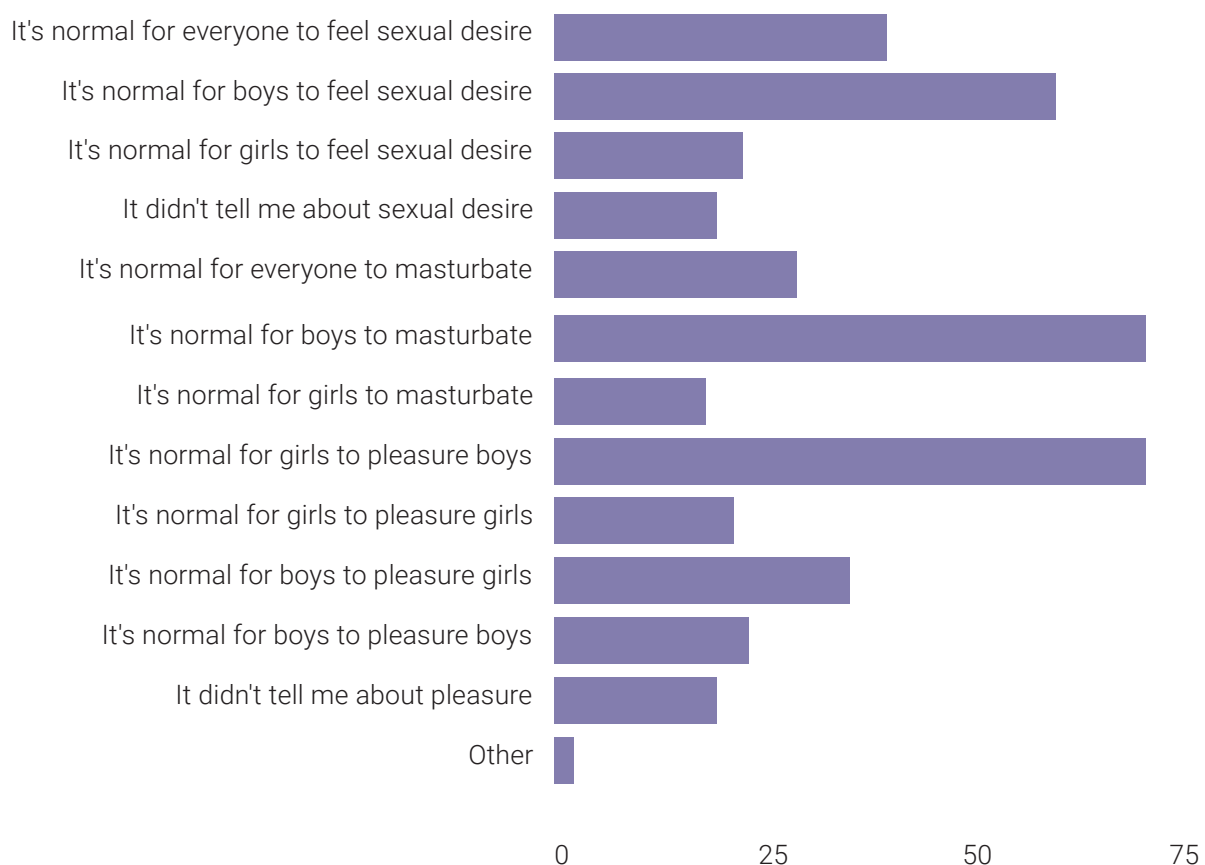
Many participants made additional comments about the need for inclusion of information around female desire and pleasure within sex education:

*"More focus on female desire and pleasure, more focus on the power dynamics inherent in sex and how to navigate them, more focus on kinks/ experimentation and how normal it is (when done safely and consensually), more focus on female masturbation, more focus on non-heterosexual sex - basically more focus on anything beyond exclusively heterosexual boy's/young men's experience of sex."*

*"sex education could have been less focused on the biological act of sex and more on the emotional side, more about consent, more about the different types of sex and who with. More about female pleasure, which should be encouraged."*

*"Probably could have done with more on pleasure generally, and female pleasure specifically, from both parents and at school."*

**What did this way of learning about sex tell you about pleasure? (tick ALL that apply)**



*[Graph above including all participants' responses]*



## What impact has this had on adult attitudes?

In terms of how learning about sex in different ways made participants feel, the responses were varied. Over half felt 'curious' (58%), just under half 'embarrassed' (48%) and 'confused' (43%). Meanwhile, over a fifth felt 'anxious' (31%), 'aroused' (28%), and 'guilty' (24%). Other emotions commented by respondents were "strained", "under pressure", and "inadequate".

One participant who had learned principally through 'pornography' remarked that they felt:

*"conflicted, because I was learning about sex through straight porn while also working out my own sexuality, like trying to read a book you've read before but in a language you don't understand."*

Another participant said:

*"It made me feel clueless and terrified until I gained experience."*

One respondent who had learnt through 'youtube' (specifically a channel called 'sex+') commented that learning in this way made them feel "informed",

but also that *"it made me angry others didn't get the same messaging"*.

These comments demonstrate the disconnection many participants felt between the ways they were presented with sex, and the ways they consequently experienced sex, and their own sexualities, for themselves.

When responding on how learning about sex made participants feel about their bodies, most responded 'uncomfortable' (45%) and 'dissatisfied' (40%). Meanwhile, around a quarter responded 'ashamed' (25%) and 'it didn't make me think about my own body' (22%). Other responses included "fetishised", "unsure", and "my body was for male pleasure only".

Two participants who had learnt principally through 'pornography' remarked that *"it gave me an unrealistic idea of what vulvas should look like",* and *"it made me hypersexualise my own body long before I was ready to, leading to dissatisfaction with my body in my late teenage years and early twenties as I truly became a woman and no longer*

*felt I looked like the woman I had been when I began being sexual”.*

In terms of how LGBT+ participants responded to questions about how learning about sex in these ways made them feel, almost four times as many LGBT+ people responded that it made them feel ‘guilty’, 40% in comparison to 12% of heterosexual participants. What’s more, 54% of LGBT+ participants said that learning about sex had made them feel ‘confused’, in comparison to 36% of heterosexual participants.

In terms of how it made participants feel about their bodies, 52% of LGBT+ participants answered that it made them feel ‘uncomfortable’, in comparison to 40% of heterosexual participants.

Some overall comments on learning about sex from LGBT+ participants included:

*“Part of the reason I was so uncomfortable with sex education at school was because it was so strongly heteronormative.”*

*“We learned about LGBT issues in PSE classes, but it was very much separate from sex education. It was as if they just assumed all of us to be straight: they needed to teach us about tolerance and gay people, but no practical information in case any of us were actually gay.”*

*“As a teenage lesbian, I felt like I had to learn about sex through social media and the internet as there was no mention of LGBT issues in sex education in school.”*

*“So much of what was discussed in class just didn’t apply to me, and I felt very alienated. I do not remember being taught about consent or pleasure in school – I learned these from online sex educators.”*

*“At school I didn’t learn much about being gay which is why I didn’t know about it until experiencing it with a partner for the first time. I also went to a catholic school where it wasn’t openly discussed or spoken about.”*

*"I felt, as a man, that I had to have sex with women to feel fulfilled as a real man, which brought me lots of anxiety as I was neither sexual or a man."*

Throughout the study, multiple participants left additional comments about the legacy learning about sex in these ways left them with as adults.

Comments on learning about consent included

*"Just seemed like they were both keen all the time"* (respondent learning about sex through 'Music Videos/Film/TV') and *"it taught me lots of unhealthy attitudes towards consent and my 'responsibility' as a girlfriend that took years of unlearning and destroyed my ability to enjoy sex for a long time."* (respondent learning about sex through 'pornography').

Many of the general comments left at the end of the survey surrounded the consequences of lack of discussions around the emotional sides of sex and reiterations of pleasure taboos during sex education negatively leaking into adulthood, largely among women participants.

*"The lack of openness and appreciation of girls having their own desires, wishes etc made me feel guilty about feeling sexual desire. It made me feel clueless and open to coercion from boys."*

*"If sex education had gone beyond a purely biological attitude to what sex is and gone into the psychological aspect of sex, as in my view these things are interwoven, then I think that not only would I have had a stronger ability to say no as a child but the men I encountered would not have put me in that position. The concept of no being implicit in a person's behaviour is a fairly new concept that I wish had been introduced to us at a much earlier stage."*

*"As a boy, I think it's important that we teach people not to be scared of their own emotions as well as other people's and learn how these desires can make yourself and others feel as a whole."*

*"I didn't learn about equal, consensual, pleasurable sex. Media taught me how to 'show my pleasure' as a woman, and to fake it. I've had to unlearn*

*these things. Consent was not taught in real terms, other than the obvious 'no' - it's important to teach teenagers the signs and become more comfortable with check-ins with a sexual partner if unsure."*

*"My overarching feeling is that I came out of 'sex education' with an understanding of how not to get pregnant, but not with an understanding of how to actually make sex feel good for me."*

*"It would have been good to think about sex as something personal to me, that I could control and explore over time. Instead, it felt like something that was going to happen to me soon, that boys wanted and expected and I had to get ready for it if I wanted to have a normal relationship."*

*"If there was less shame surrounding sex and conversations about it, I would have felt more comfortable in sex education lessons at school, or even discussing things with my peers. I think the internet can be a very valuable resource when it comes to education, but there's also*

*a lot of misinformation, and the majority of online pornography is geared towards straight men who are interested in a very specific body type"*

*"I was never ever told about female pleasure and consent in a professional setting, I grew up believing pleasuring myself was wrong and I am still dealing with the consequences of this."*

*"All the male partners I have had seem to expect more from sex with me than I am allowed to expect from them, so it feels like that's the end result in them from the same type of sexual education that I got as a teenager."*

*"It made me shy, and very anxious while being displeased about my body. I felt that boys would use me for their own pleasure so didn't partake until I was in my 20s which now makes me feel uncomfortable. I wish I was taught about my own pleasures and how to be more open during sex and maybe it wouldn't feel this way now I am older."*

# How could learning about sex be improved?

When asked how their learning experiences as teenagers could have been better, many participants responded about the need for education surrounding what is 'normal', inclusion of LGBT+ sexualities, asexuality, female pleasure, emotions surrounding sex, and the realities regarding pornography's representations of 'sex'.

Comments around sex education at school included the need for learning about *"female masturbation and LGBT+ sex"; "sex for all genders, pleasure as well as biological information and CONSENT"; "Actual better education at school. About all types of sex not just straight sex. About how to experience pleasure and that sex isn't just an act we do in order to reproduce."; "how sex isn't the same for everybody"; "more discussions around healthy sexual relationships, how to understand your body and that everything you see in porn isn't necessarily real"; "tackling the pressure to solely focus on pleasuring male partners".*

Comments on sex education in schools also included:

*"The only thing we learned about that was specific to women was about periods and ovulation."*

*"I think school made no effort to teach appropriate behaviour, consent and safeguarding."*

*"Sex was mostly treated as a means of procreation; the idea that people have sex for other reasons, including pleasure, intimacy, etc. never came up."*

*"Sexual education in school only focused on contraception and how not to get pregnant."*

*"School lessons were based on heteronormative penetrative sex and reproduction. It revolves around how with no discussion to why and what it meant for us as people."*

*"There was hardly any mention of sex for anyone that isn't heterosexual in sex education. Sex was described as something boys crave and girls should refrain from."*

A handful of participants noted positive ways of learning about sex. These largely surrounded means of learning by which information could be consumed independently, in the way that works best for them, whether this be through something targeted at them personally, or something more general that they could passively think about in their own time. Means of learning about sex that were positive and helpful included:

*"TV was influential and helpful as it represented different kinds of relationships and issues (although mostly straight) and allowed me to watch passively. TV shows allowed me to reflect on how I felt about what I seen without the pressure of having to respond to a teacher, a parent or a friend with an opinion right away."*

*"I now follow feminist, body positive, LGBT friendly sex educators on social media (mostly Instagram and YouTube). I think access to this content during my teenage years would have given me the vocabulary to articulate, and the confidence to address, the often overwhelming anxieties I had surrounding sex."*

*"Magazines for teenage girls actually had some really good information about female pleasure (clitoris, etc.) consent, not feeling pressured and about everything being normal."*

Most of the comments on learning about sex through pornography were negative, including *"pornography often presents an unhealthy version of sex, and a very male focused version. It does not provide any consideration of consent"* and *"I don't think porn is aimed at anyone for learning purposes"*. Despite this, 40% of participants responded having learnt from 'pornography', with 12% responding that this was the principal way they learnt about sex as teenagers.

One participant noted that the most common method of learning about sex, through peers, had both positives - *"Sharing of knowledge between friends is great as you are in a comfortable environment to ask things you normally wouldn't"* – and drawbacks, such as the fact that this meant learning from people who were also teenagers, usually *"straight couples"*. As such, *"I was only getting a very limited insight, and even then they*

*probably were in the earlier phases of figuring themselves out.”* This demonstrates the need for clear, ‘real’ and diverse education about sex outside of conversations among peer groups, in which there is no adult with ‘real’ knowledge.

When discussing how they could have better learnt about sex as teenagers, comments largely included this desire for a diverse and ‘real’ education:

*“Through appropriate and diverse material which I could read/watch on my own. I didn’t like finding things out around others and I always felt inadequate from the stuff I learned about ‘normal’ teenagers and ‘normal’ sex.”*

*“More around the idea of consent, as well as what is normal vs illegal.”*

*“I would have liked to have asexuality presented to me when I was younger.”*

*“more in depth explanation about what actually happens so I wouldn’t have to pick it up from the people around me/go look myself. Also discussion about periods, about things like vaginismus and erectile dysfunction and the complications of the porn industry.”*

*“It should be an equal learning experience. Should involve discussing around pleasure, consent and why porn isn’t real life.”*

*“Most boys think porn is how they should treat a girl, but if they learned from a young age it might be better pleasurable experience for all taking part in sex.”*

*“The only thing I would say is that I feel like some sex education doesn’t come early enough. Children learning about sex in some forms earlier on, I believe, can be very important sexual abuse protection for children as if they understood*



*what was happening to them then they would understand why it was wrong (knowing this from personal experience)."*

*"There should definitely be more detailed information taught at school about all aspects of sex and sexuality, children shouldn't have to search things on the internet which could potentially bring up images/websites that are inappropriate for them."*

There was only one additional comment that went against the general theme of a need for active education. This response was from a heterosexual man over the age of 26:

*"Natural instinct. Worked for thousands of years. Sexual hygiene and health should be the focus before opening up on the biological function of reproduction. Sexual desires, tastes, turn ons etc. should be explored by adults only. Teens have*

*enough on their minds without trying orientate their sexuality. Get kids to focus on academics and life direction."*

This is hugely contrasted across the board in terms of the idea of a 'natural instinct' with regards to sex, which no other respondent had identified. One comment that directly contradicts this response stated:

*"Parents (and others) who refuse to discuss sex and sexuality because they think the topic will just go away almost always drive children to find out about sex in ways that are not designed to be representative or informative, ie porn."*

# Conclusion

These responses indicate that there is support for sex education at school to be more diverse, informative, and open. It must be noted that, as all participants in this survey were 18 years-old and over, their access to sex education at school will be slightly outdated, thus there is a need for further research with young people of school age. However, it was necessary to survey exclusively adults looking at their teenage learning about sex retrospectively, due to the potentially sensitive information disclosed within the survey. A clear advantage to surveying slightly older young people, though, was that they were able to look at their learning about sex retrospectively, and thus with an understanding of how this learning impacted them as adults, and thus the consequences it has had on their attitudes towards sex, and towards their own bodies. This reflection was clear in many of the comments previously highlighted.

In 2013, Zero Tolerance conducted a similar body of research entitled 'He's the stud, she's the slut', (<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Hes-the-stud-and-shes-the-slut.pdf>) surveying school age young people, which had a focus group dedicated to LGBT+ young people. When looking at the results of this study comparatively, it is interesting that very little general change is

recorded. In the 2013 research, it was noted that "Significant numbers of participants thought that the information available to them on sex and relationships is inadequate", with the most popular area in which there was support for more information being "sexual pleasure". The 2021 study found that sexual pleasure and desire were areas where learning was both heavily gendered, and unsatisfactory.

It is worth noting that in this 2021 study, only 9% of participants responded 'at school' as their primary means of learning about sex. This means that more than 9 out of 10 young people are learning about sex primarily outside of school, thus not everyone is getting the same access to information. Sex education in schools is a crucial part of the 'whole school approach' to gender equality, as is ensuring all young people have an equal and sound understanding of healthy relationships and consent. Therefore, we must address the fact that young people, both in the 2013 study and the 2020 study, are left unsatisfied by their sex education.

Considering that the vast majority (72%) of

participants identified first learning about sex aged 13 and under, it is important to consider the ways sex is presented to young people within wider society, as the majority of learning about sex within an education setting does not come until after this age. As the largest proportion of respondents identified learning about sex primarily through their peers (31%), it is important to question where those peers, also underage, are getting the information about sex that they are then sharing. The increasing prevalence of the internet in our lives means that more young people are getting information online (53% selected 'social media' as one of their means of learning about sex as a teenager, whilst 8% learnt most from 'social media' and 3% learnt most from other online platforms e.g. 'YouTube' and 'Fanfiction'). It is important to focus on ensuring that the information they are getting is as sensitive, accurate, and feminist as possible, to ensure that when this information is then, inevitably, shared among peer groups, it does not perpetuate harmful attitudes surrounding sex.

Some sites have so-called 'porn blocks', which aim to prevent pornographic content on platforms that young people can 'come across accidentally', but these can often lead to censorship of useful learning tools. Multiple respondents said that the internet was a valuable

tool in getting sex education that was positive, varied, and representative:

*"Social media accounts talking about inclusive queer intersectional sex, sexual health and healthy relationships are amazing and I think the school system and media moguls have a huge amount to learn from these thought leaders."*

However, it is important to ensure young people are receiving adequate sex education elsewhere that is representative, informative, and unthreatening, so that they do not become dependent upon internet chambers for this information.

The overarching findings from this survey are the demonstrable gender imbalance in young people's learning about sex when it comes to gendered desire and pleasure, and the differences in young LGBT+ people's learning about sex in terms of the way it made them feel – largely confused and excluded. Young people very clearly desire intersectional and representative sex education that is centred on reality and equal pleasure. It is essential that we provide it for them.

# Appendices

## Appendix A:

1. Do you consent to your data being used anonymously to produce a publicly available report?

- Yes
- No

2. Were you educated in Scotland between the ages of 11 and 18 years-old?

- Yes
- No
- Partly
- Prefer not to say

3. How old are you?

- 18-19 years-old
- 20-21 years-old
- 22-23 years-old
- 24-25 years-old
- 26+ years-old

4. How would you describe your gender?

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to say

5. Do you consider yourself to be Trans or to have a Trans history?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

6. What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to say

7. Would you describe yourself as a disabled person?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

8. How would you describe your ethnic origin, or cultural/national identity?

Comment box

**9. How did you learn about sex as a teenager?  
(tick all that apply)**

- From lessons at school - a
- From a parent/carer - b
- From a sibling - c
- From pornography - d
- From social media - e
- From peers of the same gender - f
- From peers of a different gender - g
- From a partner - h
- From magazines/books - i
- From music videos/TV/films/adverts - j
- Other (please specify)

**10. Of these, where did you get most of your  
information about sex as a teenager? (tick one)**

- From lessons at school - a
- From a parent/carer - b
- From a sibling - c
- From pornography - d
- From social media - e
- From peers of the same gender - f
- From peers of a different gender - g
- From a partner - h
- From magazines/books - i
- From music videos/TV/films/adverts - j
- Other (please specify)

Please answer the following questions with your answer to the above question (where you got most of your information about sex as a teenager) in mind.

**11. At what age did you start learning about sex in this way?**

- Under 12-years-old
- 12-13 years-old
- 14-15 years-old
- 16-17 years-old
- 18+ years-old

12. How did you start learning about sex in this way?

- I chose to seek it out voluntarily
- It was shown/told to me when I asked about it
- It was shown/told to me without my asking about it
- I came across it accidentally
- Other (please specify)

13. Did you find this way of learning about sex helpful in real life?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Prefer not to say

14. Which of the following sexual practices did you see/hear/learn about? (tick all that apply)

- Penetrative sex - a
- Non-penetrative sex - b
- Female masturbation - c
- Male masturbation - d
- Lesbian sex - e
- Gay sex - f
- Queer sex - g
- Sexuality as a disabled person - h
- Asexuality - i
- I don't know - j
- Prefer not to say - k
- Other (please state) - l

15. Did you think this way of learning about sex was aimed at people like you?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- I don't know
- Prefer not to say

If you would like to say who you think it was aimed towards, please state here



**16. What understanding about consent did it provide?  
(tick all that apply)**

- If someone says 'no' to sex with you, you shouldn't have sex with them - a
- If you don't want to have sex, you should say 'no' - b
- If someone doesn't seem enthusiastic about having sex with you, you shouldn't have sex with them (even if they don't say 'no') - c
- If someone is upset, you shouldn't have sex with them (even if they don't say 'no') - d
- You shouldn't have sex with someone unless they say 'yes' to having sex with you - e
- It's always okay to have sex with someone you are in a relationship with, even if you aren't in the mood - f
- It's always okay to have sex with someone you are in a relationship with, even if they aren't in the mood - g
- If you are having sex with someone and the condom gets in the way, it's okay to just take it off, even if the other person does not know you have taken it off - h
- It didn't tell me about consent - i
- Other (please specify) -
- Prefer not to say - j

**17. What did this way of learning about sex tell you  
about pleasure? (tick all that apply)**

- It's normal for everyone to feel sexual desire - a
- It's normal for boys to feel sexual desire - b
- It's normal for girls to feel sexual desire - c
- It didn't tell me about sexual desire - d
- It's normal for everyone to masturbate - e
- It's normal for boys to masturbate - f
- It's normal for girls to masturbate - g
- It's normal for girls to pleasure boys - h
- It's normal for boys to pleasure girls - i
- It's normal for boys to pleasure boys - j
- It's normal for girls to pleasure girls - k
- It didn't tell me about pleasure - l
- Other
- Prefer not to say - m

If you answered other, please state

**18. What did this way of learning about sex tell you about 'rough sex'? (tick all that apply)**

\*by 'rough sex', we mean sex which involves elements of physical roughness as a part of sexual arousal, such as choking or slapping

- 'Rough sex' is enjoyable for most people - a
- 'Rough sex' is enjoyable for most men - b
- 'Rough sex' is enjoyable for most women - c
- 'Rough sex' is always violence and cannot be enjoyed - d
- 'Rough sex' is legal - e
- 'Rough sex' is illegal - f
- It didn't tell me about 'rough sex' - g
- I don't know - h
- Prefer not to say - i
- Other (please specify)

**19. How did learning about sex in this way make you feel? (tick all that apply)**

- Aroused - a
- Guilty - b
- Embarrassed - c
- Upset - d
- Excited - e
- Confused - f
- Curious - g
- Angry - h
- Anxious - i
- Other (please specify) -
- I don't know - j
- It didn't make me feel anything - k
- Prefer not to say - l

**20. How did it make you feel about your body? (tick all that apply)**

- It made me feel like my body was normal - a
- It made me feel good about my body - b
- It made me feel ashamed of my body - c
- It made me feel uncomfortable with my body - d
- It made me feel dissatisfied with my body - e
- It didn't make me think about my own body - f
- Other (please specify) -
- Prefer not to say - g

21. Do you think there were better ways you, as an individual, could have learnt about sex as a teenager?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Prefer not to say

If you would like to develop on why you feel this way, please state here

22. If there is anything further that you would like to add about the way you learnt about sex as a teenager, or how learning about sex in this way made you feel, please state here:

## **Appendix B:**

Ethnicity Q. – 85.6% White (including British, Scottish, English, Irish); 3.4% Mixed (including mixed British/Middle Eastern and mixed Arab/White); 3.4% Caucasian (including Caucasian Scottish and Caucasian British); 0.85% British/French; 0.85% French/European; 0.85% Sri Lankan, Chinese and Scottish; 0.85% White and Anglo Indian; 0.85% White Danish and British; 0.85% Dutch; 0.85% British Asian; 0.85% Eastern European; 0.85% Caribbean.

## Appendix C:

Who was this method of learning about sex aimed at:

- “boys and heterosexuals”
- “men”
- “female pleasure was always treated as taboo”
- “more heterosexual cis men”
- “for the most part geared toward heterosexual boys and their pleasure”
- “straight men”
- “straight cis abled people”
- “cishet people”
- “aimed to prevent STIs and pregnancy only”
- “specifically heterosexual girls – very sexist though”
- “I did find Teen Vogue to be very helpful though and more targeted at teenagers rather than adults”
- “heterosexual individuals”
- “women in their 20s/30s rather than teenage girls”
- “heterosexual males”
- “aimed at straight people, yes, but not necessarily towards women. There was nothing about female masturbation or pleasure. Nothing about foreplay or any other types of non-penetrative sex”
- “male and female”
- “it’s aimed towards bog standard heterosexual couples, I was never taught about masturbation or LGBTQ+ sex”
- “cisgender male and female conforming who have some element of heterosexuality”
- “for boys pleasure more than girls but also so girls know how it ‘should’ work”
- “sexually mature adults”
- “young men”
- “heteronormative couples”
- “men”
- “both the information my parents gave me and the information at school, was very focused on the biology and there was no focus at all on female pleasure”
- “I don’t think porn is aimed at anyone for learning purposes”
- “the majority of porn was and still is aimed at straight men”
- “straight men”



[www.zerotolerance.org.uk](http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk)