Key messages

- GDHR **emphasises** the **benefits** of **delaying sexual activity.** Research shows that **comprehensive RSE often delays first sexual experiences.**
- GDHR provides **information** to **make healthy choices if/when** young people **become sexually active.**
- **55% of WA Year 10-12's** have had **vaginal sex.**
- **Definitions of sexual terms can be different** for each person.
- **Being ready for sex** is about **more than just being 'in love'.**
- A list of **important messages** to tell **young people** considering their first sexual experience is provided.
- A list of **considerations for young people** to decide **sexual readiness** is provided.

Informed decision making

One of the most important personal decisions young people make is if and when to have their first sexual experience. A major aim of school relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions. Growing and Developing Heathy Relationships (GDHR) resources emphasises the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse (sometimes called 'abstaining'), whilst providing young people with the knowledge, skills and values to make informed healthy choices if/when they become sexually active.

WA statistics

In a 2021 study of 443 Western Australian Year 10-12 students[1]:

61.5% had experienced oral sex

55.5% had experienced vaginal sex

13.2 % had experienced anal sex

Definitions

Sexual terms can mean different things to different people. It is really important that teachers are clear about what they mean when they use sexual terminology. It is best to use clear terms to avoid any misunderstandings.

Abstinence - For some, abstinence means choosing not to have sexual intercourse (penis-in-vagina) sex. For some, it means choosing not to have any kind of sexual activity with another person (oral sex, penis-in-anus, touching genitals, etc). It can also mean not have any kind of sexual activity including masturbation.

Virginity - Virginity is a social and cultural concept, it is not a medical term. For some people 'losing your virginity' means having penis-in-vagina sex for the first time but does not include oral or anal sex. It is better to use the term 'first sexual experience' or 'first sexual intercourse'.

First sexual experience - This is preferred over 'losing your virginity' but still require considerations around what 'sex' means to individuals.

Having 'sex' - Sex can be a whole range of things - oral sex, mutual masturbation, masturbation, phone sex, sexting. It is important to be clear about the kinds of sex you are referring to, particularly when teaching young people about risks of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and pregnancy.

Safer sex - The term 'safer sex' is preferred over 'safe sex' as no sex is 100% 'safe'. Safer sex means preventing the body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids) of a sexual partner from entering into your body. It can also mean covering up parts of the body that might be infectious (e.g. herpes sores or warts) when engaging in sexual activity or avoiding sexual activity when sores/warts are present.

Research shows...

- Abstinence is 100% effective preventing STIs and pregnancy if it also includes abstaining from oral, anal and vaginal intercourse
- RSE does not lead young people to become sexually active.
- 'Abstinence only until marriage' programs have been shown not to delay the onset of sexual intercourse.
- Comprehensive sexuality education programs have been shown to delay first sexual experiences.[2]

Benefits of delaying first sexual experiences

Promote the benefits of delaying first sexual experiences, such as:

- taking the time to get to know your partner
- knowing that you can trust and feel safe with your partner
- being able to communicate about where the relationship is going
- sharing feelings and concerns
- knowing what you/they expect out of a sexual experience
- having a chance to consider safer sex options such as condoms and other contraceptives.

Risk reduction strategies

It is important to offer risk reduction strategies for students to consider if they are going to have sex, such as:

- using condoms and dams to reduce risk of STIs and blood-borne viruses (BBVs)
- providing information on lower risk sexual activities (e.g. oral sex = no risk of pregnancy and lower risk of STIs)
- regular STI testing to ensure STIs are treated quickly to avoid any long-term health impacts
- providing information on contraceptive choices to reduce unplanned pregnancy.
- providing information on options if someone has an unplanned pregnancy.

Being 'in love'

The bridge between young people choosing not to engage in sexual intercourse and becoming sexually active, is a complex one. Some of it will relate to the notion of being 'in love' with media often playing into the idea that you should wait until they are 'in love' to have sex. Being 'in love' is very subjective and using this phrase to encourage young people to be ready for sexual activity can be problematic. Discussing qualities of respectful

relationships and what young people need to know to decide if they are ready for sex is a lot more helpful.

What do young people need to know to decide about having sex?

Some young people will have the skills and the expectation that they will form a connection with someone before they have sex. Those young people are more likely to have happier experiences of sex if and when it does happen. Many others' experiences of first-time sex are characterised by feelings of pressure, disappointment, regret and even necessity.

Important messages about sex for young people

- A lot of ‘messages' suggest that everyone is having sex but this is not true. By the end of Year 12, approximately 50% of students will have had sexual intercourse, approximately 50% have not.
- One reason that people enjoy sexual activity is because it feels nice, good or great. You can feel excited, beautiful and powerful; you can feel close, loved and loving. Sex can also be uncomfortable, disappointing, boring, a chore. At its worst it can make you feel lonely, sad, unloved and unvalued.
- You have a right to choose not to have sex, or to wait until you feel really ready.
- People have sex for a range of reasons, including to become closer, to feel loved, to feel good, to get it over and done with, to fit in or to rebel. Not all of these reasons are ideal.
- There are lots of different ways to enjoy sexual feelings. Some people do nothing. Some masturbate (and have been, off and on, since they were babies). Some people decide to do some sexual behaviours and not others.
- Everyone has the right to decide what sexual behaviours they are happy to engage in, if any. They can also expect their friends and sexual partners to respect those decisions.
- Every young person has a right to information that will help them keep safe and healthy, which includes information about avoiding pregnancy and STIs.
- Everyone, whatever your gender or sexual orientation is, married or not, can choose not to have sex at any time
- Having sex once does not mean you have to do it again.
- Sex can lead to getting or giving an STI, or pregnancy. It's important to protect yourself and your partner/s.
- Oral sex won't cause pregnancy but it can still spread some STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and herpes. Using a condom for oral sex can help prevent giving or passing on STIs.
- Making good sexual decisions can be nearly impossible if a person is drunk or high.

How do you know you are ready for sex?

Young people need to have their own personal list of considerations when they are working out if they are ready to being to have sex. Everyone is different with different values, beliefs and cultural considerations. The following statements offer a starting point for young people to consider if they are ready to begin having sex. This does not aim to be a finite checklist but provides a starting point for conversations with trusted adults and their partner/s. It's crucial they decide for themselves and know that no-one else has the right to decide for them!

- Do I want to have sex? Have I said so?
- Does this feel right?
- Am I sure the other person wants to have sex with me? Have I asked them?
- Am I over 16? Is my partner over 16?
- Have I pressured my partner to 'give in'? Has my partner pressured me?
- Do I feel pressured by anything or anyone else?
- Am I doing it to gain acceptance from my friends?
- Is anyone coercing me? Is anyone forcing me?

- Am I doing it just to keep my partner?
- Am I doing it because everyone else is?
- Do we both want it for ourselves, not just to please the other person?
- Do we care for each other and agree that we want to take this next step?
- Do I respect my partner? Does my partner respect me?
- Do I understand how to get consent? Do I know how to communicate my consent?
- Do I feel comfortable with the person I want to have sex with?
- Do I feel I could say no at any point, and that would be OK?
- Do I have any anxieties or fears?
- How will I feel about this decision tomorrow?
- Do I know how to prevent a pregnancy?
- Do I know how to get contraception, and which one is best for me? Have I discussed contraception with my partner?
- What would I do if my partner and I got pregnant?
- Am I ready to be a parent if my partner and I get pregnant?
- Do I know how to protect myself and my partner from getting an STI? Do I have condoms and know how to use them?
- Do I know how to get an STI test?

Teaching tips

- Avoid preaching abstinence, instead allow and facilitate the opportunity for students to be able to clarify their own values and beliefs.
- Never put a student 'on the spot' to disclose their personal views about sexual activities. Use the 'one-step-removed' strategy to make questions more general (e.g. "Why would young people...", "What might you tell a friend....", "What might a 17 year old .....").

External resources

For teachers

Scripted answers to FAQs GDHR student FAQs

For young people

Sex, Get the Facts

Condoms and contraception, Get the Facts

How to use a condom animation; Get the Facts

For parents

Talk Soon. Talk Often, a WA Department of Health book and website.

Related learning activities

- Ready vs not ready (for sexual activity)
- Safer sex - condoms

References

1. Western Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (2021) | GDHR

2. International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence informed approach (2018)

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