

# **The impact of silence: Young Chinese-Australians' Experience of Navigating Sex and Relationships**

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## **Background:**

Young people's experience of navigating sex and relationships – and learning about these issues – occurs within networks of family, community, peers and schools and is shaped by cultural values and norms within these settings. For young people from migrant families, there can be tension or conflict between the values held by their families and those within their schools or peer groups. This study examines the experiences of young Chinese-Australians, to better understand how language, family dynamics, and cultural values shape their experiences learning about sex and relationships. This study responds to the significant gap in research on sexual health among young people from migrant backgrounds.

## **Methods:**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 42 second-generation Chinese-Australians aged 18 to 25. Participants were asked about family expectations and cultural influences on how they learned about sex and relationships.

## **Results:**

Within families, discussions about sex were often avoided and characterised by silence. In contrast, conversations about relationships were more common but tended to focus on parents conveying expectations around timing, partner choice, and compatibility with family values. The pressures associated with relationship selection, as well as the silence around sex, had significant implications for the ways that young people felt able to express themselves and explore their sexuality. These tensions were amplified by the contrast between school-based sex education and peer norms, which tended to reflect non-Chinese or more liberal perspectives. Despite these constraints, many participants described how silence within their families enabled a level of freedom, with some adopting a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to navigating relationships and sexual experiences.

## **Conclusion:**

Participants undertook significant emotional labour in negotiating conflicting cultural expectations and attempting to reconcile different value systems. These findings highlight the importance of considering cultural context when developing supports for young people that work to support them in exploring their sexuality.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

This research was funded by the Australian Government Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.