

Will building parent/carer sexual literacy support sexual health among school-aged young people? Findings from a national survey

Authors:

Power J¹, Norman, T¹, James, A¹, Moor, L¹, Bourne, A¹

¹ Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University,

Background:

Parents and carers play a key role in helping school-aged children (including teenagers) learn about sex and relationships, which is instrumental in supporting their sexual health. However, many parents find it difficult to raise these topics or have meaningful conversations about them with their children. We were interested in whether parent's sexual literacy – defined here as comfort or confidence to seek information, support, or conversations that support their own sexual health and wellbeing – affects their confidence to speak to their children about these issues.

Methods:

This paper reports on a national survey of parents of young people (5 -18 years). Data were collected via a professional survey panel. The instrument included items on: personal sexual literacy; confidence speaking about sex, relationships and sexual health with children; and perceived barriers to speaking about these issues with children. Logistic and linear regression were used to explore associations between sexual literacy and confidence speaking with children.

Results:

The sample included 1,918 parents living in Australia. Those more likely to feel confident discussing sex and relationships with their children were (i) women, (ii) people with older children (i.e. teenagers), and (iii) people who spoke English as their first language. Greater confidence to seek sexual health information for themselves, and speak about sex and relationships with friends or healthcare providers, was associated with greater parent confidence talking to children about sex and relationships. The most common perceived barriers to speaking with children were (i) parent or child discomfort, (ii) the topics never coming up in conversation, and/or (iii) the parent not knowing what to say.

Conclusion:

Supporting adults to learn about their own sexual health, and seek support with sex and relationships as needed, may enhance their capacity to support their children to learn about sex and relationships to improve sexual health outcomes.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This work was supported by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.