

RESEARCH BASED TEMPLATE

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Sexual health education and service access young people with disability or chronic conditions or who are neurodiverse

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Background:

Limited representation in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), alongside structural barriers to accessible sexual healthcare, contributes to inequities in knowledge, wellbeing, and service use among young people with disability, chronic conditions, or neurodivergence. This study examines disparities in RSE experiences and sexual health service access among young people in Australia.

Methods:

Data were drawn from the 2024–25 Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (SSASH 8), a large cross-sectional survey of students aged 14–18 years (n=4,119 completed disability-related items). Measures included disability or chronic condition type, school support requirements, receipt and perceived relevance of RSE, and sexual health service access and use. Analyses comprised descriptive statistics and logistic regression models.

Results:

One-third of students (33%; n=1,374) reported a disability or chronic condition, most commonly neurodivergence/autism (22%) and/or mental health diagnoses (22%), followed by physical (10%) or intellectual disability (4%). Over half (61%) reported receiving school-based supports (e.g. individualised learning plans). While students with disability/chronic condition were as likely as their peers to report receiving RSE, they were less likely to perceive it as relevant (40% vs 47%; OR=0.75, p<.001). Only 8% reported learning about disability-specific needs in RSE; exposure to this content was associated with greater perceived relevance (OR=1.75, p=.016). Students with disability/chronic condition had higher odds of unmet needs for STI screening or treatment (OR=1.57, p=.014). They were more likely to report being sexually active, but less likely to report enjoyment (OR=0.76, p=.029).

Conclusions:

Findings highlight persistent gaps in the inclusivity and relevance of RSE, as well as inequities in sexual healthcare access. Strengthening disability-inclusive curricula and improving access to youth-friendly, accessible services are important for advancing sexual health equity for young people with disability.

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Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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