

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL HEALTH: WHAT PARENTS NEED

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Background:

School-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE) plays a key part in supporting young people's sexual health and wellbeing. However, the role of parents is also crucial. There is limited research on parent's perspectives on how they should approach conversations about sex, relationships or sexual health with their children and young people or the supports they need for this.

Methods:

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 35 parents of school-aged children in Australia. Participants were asked about their comfort discussing sex and relationship matters within their own lives and with their children. They were also asked what they want their children to learn and whether they feel confident to talk about sex, relationships, bodies or sexual health matters with them. Reflexive thematic analysis techniques were used to analyse the data.

Results:

While not all participants expressed confidence talking about sex and relationships with their children, most agreed that parents play an important role in ensuring their children are equipped to engage safely in sexual relationships and understand their bodies. Parents were concerned about what young people were learning online and wanted to be able to correct misinformation. Parents worried about the age appropriateness of information or messages which became a barrier to some conversations. Several parents expressed dissatisfaction with the communication they had with their own parents about sex and relationships and wanted to do better with their own children despite lacking role models for this.

Conclusion:

It is often uncritically assumed that parents have the capacity to support children and young people's sexual health education. However, many parents lack confidence to engage in the intimate and frank conversations that are part of this. Many are actively seeking resources and support to communicate more effectively with their children about sex, relationships and sexual health.

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