

# Young people's experiences of early sexual initiation in Australia: findings from the 2021 Secondary Schools and Sexual Health Survey

## Authors:

Kauer S<sup>1</sup>, Power J<sup>1</sup>, Fisher C<sup>2</sup>, & Bourne A<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University,<sup>2</sup> Victoria University Online

## Background:

Young people who have sex at an early age may lack the skills and knowledge to negotiate consent and safe sexual practices resulting in negative sexual health outcomes. In this paper, we describe young people's first sexual experiences and examine the demographic characteristics and sexual health outcomes of young people who have sex before 16 years.

## Methods:

Data were from 3097 young people (17-18 years) from the 2021 National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health. Sequence and age of sexual activities is described. Multiple logistic regressions estimated associations of early vaginal, anal and/or oral sexual initiation (before 16 years) with demographic characteristics, and outcomes of condom use, pregnancy, STI diagnoses, experiences of unwanted sex and sexual pleasure.

## Results:

A third of young people reported initiation of sex before 16 years of age, and 25.7% reported early experiences of unwanted sex. On average sexual initiation occurred at 15.5 years for oral sex, 15.7 years for vaginal sex, and 16.2 years for anal sex. Early sexual initiation was more common among non-heterosexual young people, and associated with experiences of unwanted sex, less condom use, pregnancy, STI diagnoses, and unplanned first experiences of sex.

## Conclusion:

Although Australian schools have incorporated relationships and sexuality education in the national curriculum, practical information about the risks associated with sexual practices are necessary during pre- or young adolescence while being inclusive of young people's sexuality. These data show that young lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer/questioning people were more likely to be sexually active before age 16, pointing to the importance of education being inclusive of different sexualities and sexual experiences. Higher rates of STIs and unwanted pregnancy among people who became sexually active early may be associated with lower levels of confidence negotiating safe sex as well as less perceived access to services.

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