



## Messed up? Sexual Lifestyles of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland

Dirk Schubotz

### Introduction

The British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) is one of the largest and most comprehensive sexual attitude and lifestyle surveys in the world. The survey takes place approximately every ten years and gives important insights into the sexual health of the British adult population. Very few people now deny that humans are sexual beings from birth and that a healthy sexuality is part of an overall healthy upbringing and lifestyle. With this in mind, studies such as NATSAL provide crucial information not just for health professionals, but for policy makers in general.

Northern Ireland is not included in NATSAL, therefore comprehensive data on if and how the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of people in Northern Ireland differ from the rest of the UK are not available.

However, with funding from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive (OMDFMNI), sexual health questions were incorporated into the 2011 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. This Research Update provides a summary of these findings.

YLT is an annual study of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland, undertaken by ARK. Every 16-year old born in February and March of the survey year who is resident in Northern Ireland and is registered to receive Child Benefit is invited to take part in the postal YLT survey. In 2011, 1,434 respondents completed the survey, a response rate of 37 per cent.

### Sex education

All respondents were asked how easy or difficult they found it to talk about sexual matters to a range of people. As Table 1 shows, close friends and boyfriends or girlfriends are the people that respondents found it easiest to talk to, with nearly two thirds saying this was

easy. Around one quarter of respondents found it easy to talk to their mother or sister, if they had one. Only four percent thought it was easy to talk to their teacher about sexual matters.

Despite this unease of talking to teachers about sexual matters, lessons at school were identified as the most helpful source of information about sexual matters (42% of respondents saying this). Thus more than twice as many respondents rated school lessons as the most helpful source than they did friends (18%), the second most helpful source identified.

Respondents were asked how they would have preferred to get more information

Table 1: How easy or difficult is it for you to talk to the following people\* about sexual matters?

	%			
	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	Don't know
Boyfriend or girlfriend	66	20	6	8
Close friends	65	25	6	5
Mother	28	28	35	9
Sister	26	26	34	15
Brother	16	18	52	15
Father	12	19	57	12
Teacher	4	15	59	23

\*Those saying they don't have this person are excluded.

about sexual matters. The comments confirmed that school is by far the preferred source of sexuality education, with many respondents saying that they would have liked more lessons in school. As the following quote shows, despite the fact that so few respondents felt at ease talking to their teachers about sexual matters, school lessons were often seen as providing the most reliable information.

*'It's good to get sexual information from school because with your friends and the internet and radio there can be rumours and what they are saying isn't factual, whereas the majority of the time school is very factual and it's an important part of life.'*

However, some respondents were also critical about the negativity with which sexuality education is taught in school and about the timing of these classes, for example:

*'Less stuff on the dangers of sex (pregnancies STI's) but more on the time when you should have it (in a loving relationship) and explain what happens physically. Don't lecture it and show it in a negative way, it should be positive.'*

*'More so from school because we only had sex ed in 1st year when I did not need to know about it because I was not sexually active or interested but now I am [and this] is when I need this advice but there is none on offer.'*

Crucially, despite the fact that Relationship and Sexuality Education now forms part of the compulsory post-primary school curriculum, some respondents still reported that they had received none: *'Lessons at school, my year group did not get ANY sexual health education, a disgrace!'*

Whether they had had sex or not, respondents were asked whether they would find it easy to access contraception, if they needed any. Sixty-two percent said they would find this easy. Females and males did not differ significantly in their response to this question

## Sexual experience

Around one quarter of respondents (26%) reported that they had had sex. 46 percent of these were 16 years of age when they did so, 31 percent were 15 years old whilst the remaining 22 percent were younger. Proportionately, females were slightly more likely than males to say that they had had sex (28% and 23% respectively). However, among respondents who had had sex, males were much more likely to say that they had done so before they were 16 years of age (61%) than females (49%). Twelve percent of males and two percent of females who had had sex, said they had sex at least once with a same-sex partner.

Most respondents (81%) who had had sex said they or their partners had used a condom when they first had sex. Nine percent of all respondents who had had sex said they did not use any means of contraception when they first had sex or they could not remember whether they did.

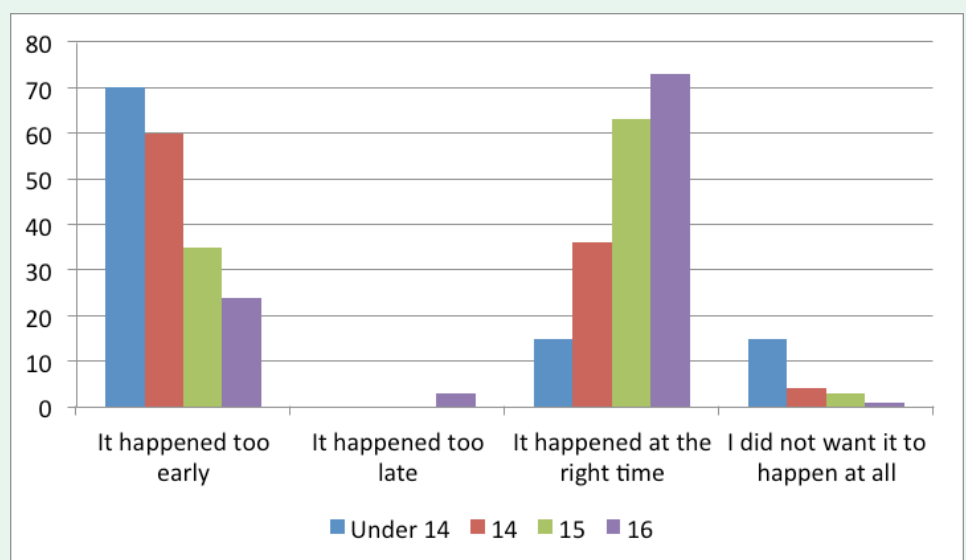
YLT asked respondents to reflect on the timing of the first time they had sex: 30 percent said that this had happened on the spur of the moment, whilst 29% said they had planned this together with their

partners. Males were much more likely than females to say that it just happened on the spur of the moment (40% and 23% respectively) whilst females were more likely than males to say that they had planned this together with their partner beforehand (31% and 25% respectively). Ten percent of females but only one percent of males said that they didn't really want to have sex but felt they should or that they were forced into having sex.

Looking back, 62 percent of respondents felt that the first time they had sex came at the right time; however, 34 percent felt it happened too early. Figure 1 shows that the older respondents were when they first had sex, the more likely they were to say that the timing was right. Seven out of ten respondents who had sex before they were 14 years of age felt that this was too early. In contrast, nearly three quarters (73%) of those who first had sex at 16 years of age felt that this was the right time.

Respondents were asked for the reasons why they first had sex. Multiple responses were possible in this question. Table 2 shows that curiosity and the feeling that sex seemed like a natural follow-on to the relationship were the two main reasons

Figure 1: Looking back on it, which of the following describes best how you feel about the first time you had sex? By age of first sex (%)



why both males and females said they first had sex. The third most common reason overall given by respondents for having sex was that they were in love, however, females were much more likely to say this (43%) than males (29%). In fact, males were more likely to say that they wanted to lose their virginity (32%) than that they were to say that they were in love (29%). Females and males were equally likely to say that they had sex because everyone else seemed to be doing it (28% and 29% respectively). The table also shows that more females than males felt not ready to have sex and that only females said they were forced to have sex against their wishes.

Respondents were asked how long the relationship with their first sexual partner continued and how many sexual partners they have had. Figure 2 shows that about one third (31%) of the respondents who had had sex said that they were still in the relationship with this first partner. On the other hand, one in five respondents said that their relationship had not continued at all after they had sex. Females (35%) were much more likely to say that their relationship was still continuing than males (24%). In contrast, males (24%) were more likely than females (17%) to say that their relationship had not continued at all. The earlier respondents said they had sex, the more likely they were to say that the relationship did not continue at all.

As Figure 3 shows, over half of respondents (54%) said they had had one sexual partner only. Only eight percent of respondents said that they had more than five sexual partners. Females and males did not differ significantly in respect to the number of sexual partners they had.

Just over one in four respondents (26%) who had had sex had used after-sex contraception (or 'emergency contraception'). Sixteen percent had used this once, eight percent two or three times, and two percent more than three times.

Table 2: Which of the following things applied to you at the time you first had sex? By gender (%)

	%		
	Males	Females	All
I was curious about what it would be like	58	51	54
It seemed like a natural follow-on in the relationship	43	48	46
I was in love	29	43	37
Most people in my age group seemed to be doing it	29	28	28
I wanted to lose my virginity	32	16	22
I was a bit drunk at the time	23	19	21
I got carried away by my feelings	19	17	18
I didn't feel ready to have sex, but went along with what the other person wanted	7	12	10
I had taken some drugs at the time	3	1	2
It happened against my wishes	0	2	1
Something else	1	3	2

Figure 2: How long did the relationship with your first sexual partner continue after the first time you had sex? (%)

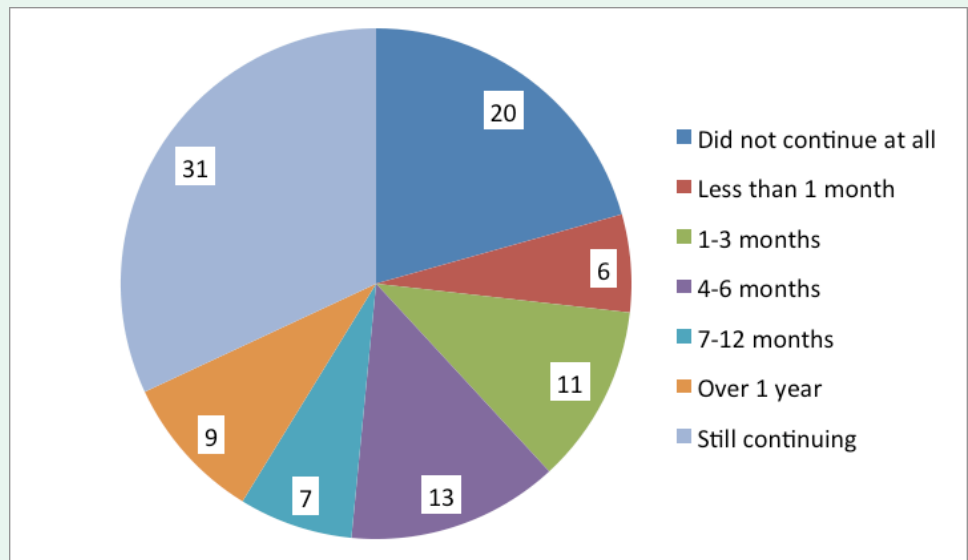
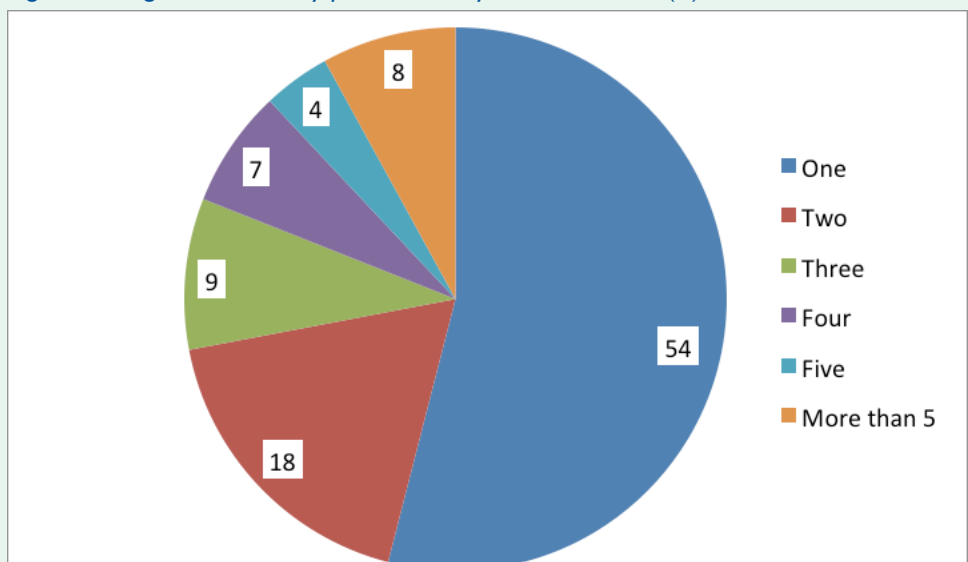


Figure 3: Altogether, how many partners have you had sex with? (%)



## Conclusions

The results of the 2011 YLT survey show that nearly three quarters of 16-year olds had not had sex. Among those who did, almost half said having sex for them was a natural follow-on in the relationship they were in at the time. About one in three had planned their first sexual encounter together with their partner, and three in ten were still in a relationship with their first sexual partner. Looking back, six in ten respondents said that their first sex came at the right time for them. The majority of those who had had sex only had one sexual partner. Eight in ten respondents used a barrier method (condom) when they first had sex which protects them from sexual transmitted infections.

All these findings are myth-busters in the face of those who portray young

people as irresponsible, promiscuous, sexed-up beings who don't think much about the consequences of entering a sexual relationship. However, the findings also show that those teaching sexuality education with a 'no sex before marriage' agenda need to acknowledge that many young people don't make this choice. The YLT data clearly show that school-based sex education is young people's preferred choice as they find this most trustworthy. However, in order not to fail young people, the YLT findings suggest that a more open and positive approach is required for this.

Apart from the standard of sex education, there are some other reasons for concern. The findings clearly show that the later respondents have sex the less they are likely to regret this and the more they are likely to be in a stable relationship with their partner. One third of males also said they had sex because they wanted

to lose their virginity which would be an indication that especially young males may still experience pressure from their peer group to have sex. As one respondent commented:

*'I know a number of 12-14 year olds who are already considering to have sex simply because their friends have said they had.'*

So, is the sexual health of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland just 'messed up' as one 16-year old felt? Whilst there is little reason to be as negative as some of the respondents were themselves, there is no room for complacency and still much more work to be done so that young people feel they can openly discuss sexual matters with adults.

## Key points

- 16-year olds find it easiest to talk to their boyfriends or girlfriends and to their friends about sexual matters.
- 42% of respondents said that school was the most helpful source of sex education. School was respondents' preferred way of receiving sex education.
- 26% of 16-year olds had had sex. 81% of these respondents said that they had used a condom when they first had sex.
- 62% of respondents said that their first sex came at the right time.
- The three main reasons for having sex were: curiosity (54%), seeing sex as a natural follow-on to a relationship (46%) and being in love (37%).
- 54% of those who had had sex only ever had one sexual partner, only 8% said they had more than 5.

---

**Dirk Schubotz** is YLT Director of ARK, based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

---

The **Young Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion of 16 year olds on a wide range of issues. It is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities. This research was funded by OFMDFMNI. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)) or call the YLT Director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

### In collaboration with Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster

Magee campus, University of Ulster  
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA  
Tel: 028 7167 5513 Fax: 028 7167 5510  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3947 Fax: 028 9097 3943  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)