

Young People's Perspectives on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Online Survey Report

Executive Summary

September 2025

Introduction

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a critical component to achieve sexual and reproductive health and rights. The topics typically included in RSE address physical and mental health and provide critical skills to enhance the safety of children and teens, both within and outside of the school setting. International human rights specify that governments are required to provide evidence-based RSE education in both primary and secondary school.

The implementation of RSE in schools has long been an area of debate among policymakers, educators, parents and young people in countries around the world. In the past few years, this debate has been particularly active among politicians in New Zealand; the content included in the 2020 RSE Guidelines has been a particular focus. The 2020 Guidelines were designed to direct the delivery of RSE curriculum in schools; they were created in response to parents and teachers who felt it was critical to expand RSE to include issues of bullying, racism, consent, and navigating online spaces and potential harm therein. In April 2025, the 2020 RSE Guidelines were removed, and the replacement will be included in the refreshed Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa felt it was important to capture young people's perspectives on RSE, particularly given the many changes we are experiencing across domains of technology, politics and education. Much of the media coverage has highlighted the voices of policymakers, teachers and occasionally parents, but few pieces have included what young people think and feel about this aspect of their education. We wanted to hear what young people had to say. This document presents some highlights from the data and direct quotes from young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methodology

To elicit young people's perspectives on RSE, we conducted an online survey in late 2024. Participants were recruited through Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa's social media channels, newsletters and with the help of partner organisations who shared the link through their networks of young people and teachers. Sex Education Forum (UK) agreed to our use of their survey tool asking young people to share their perspectives on RSE. The survey included several quantitative questions as well as several opportunities for open-ended responses.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, young people had to be aged 16-20 years old, had to have attended secondary school in Aotearoa New Zealand, and had to have recalled receiving some RSE while in secondary school. We sought this age range to capture both those still in secondary school as well as those who have recently completed this education. We felt this spread of ages was important to hear from those currently in secondary school and those who have recently left school.

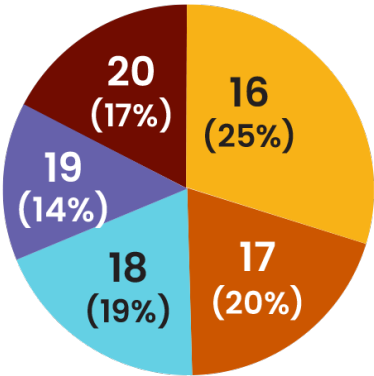
All participants had to consent to participate in the survey, after reading a form which included purpose and procedure of the survey, potential risk and discomfort, anonymity and confidentiality.



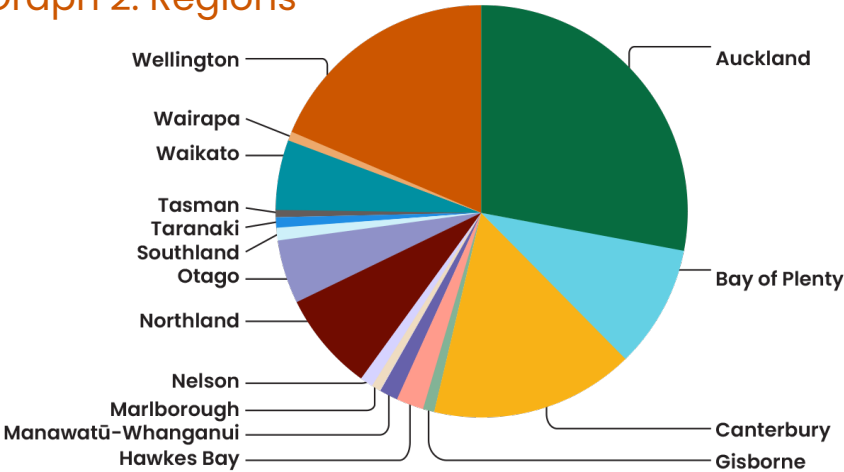
Demographic Information

Respondents were evenly spread across ages (see **Graph 1**) and fairly representative of population in terms of ethnicities (see **Graph 3**) and regions of New Zealand (**Graph 2**). The sample was predominantly female (**Graph 4**) and contained a diverse range of sexual orientations (**Graph 5**).

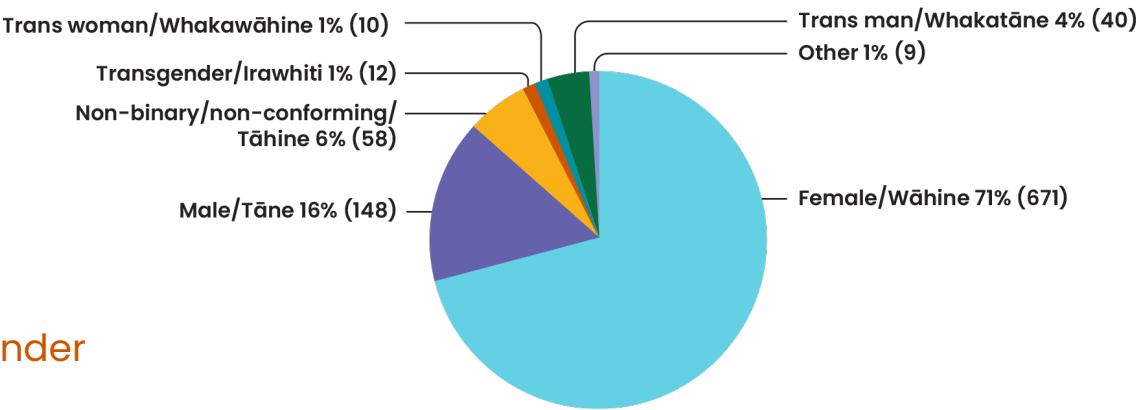
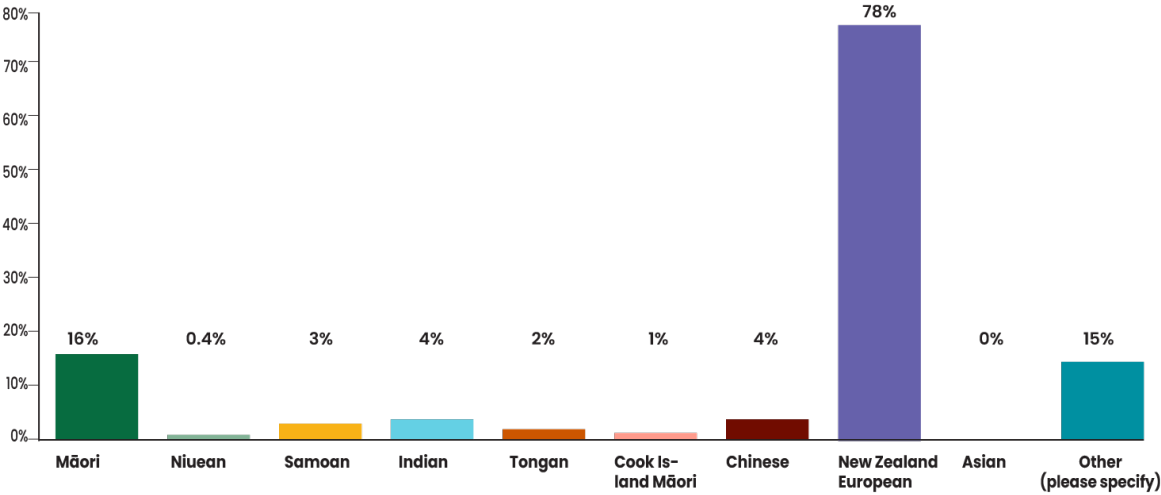
Graph 1: Ages



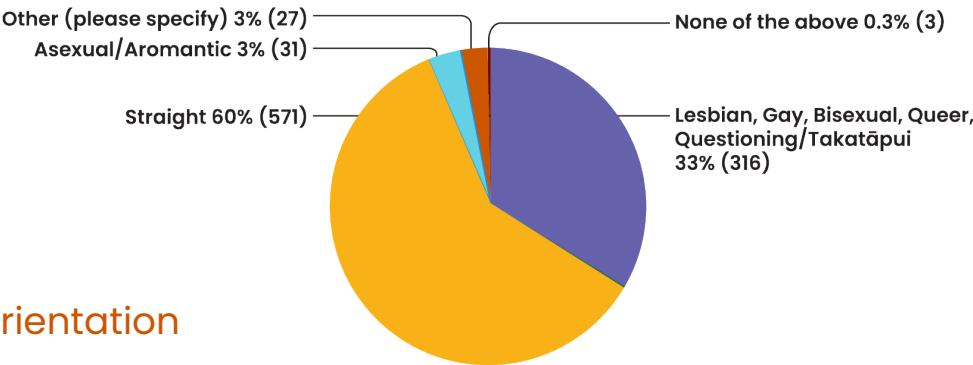
Graph 2: Regions



Graph 3: Ethnicity



Graph 4: Gender

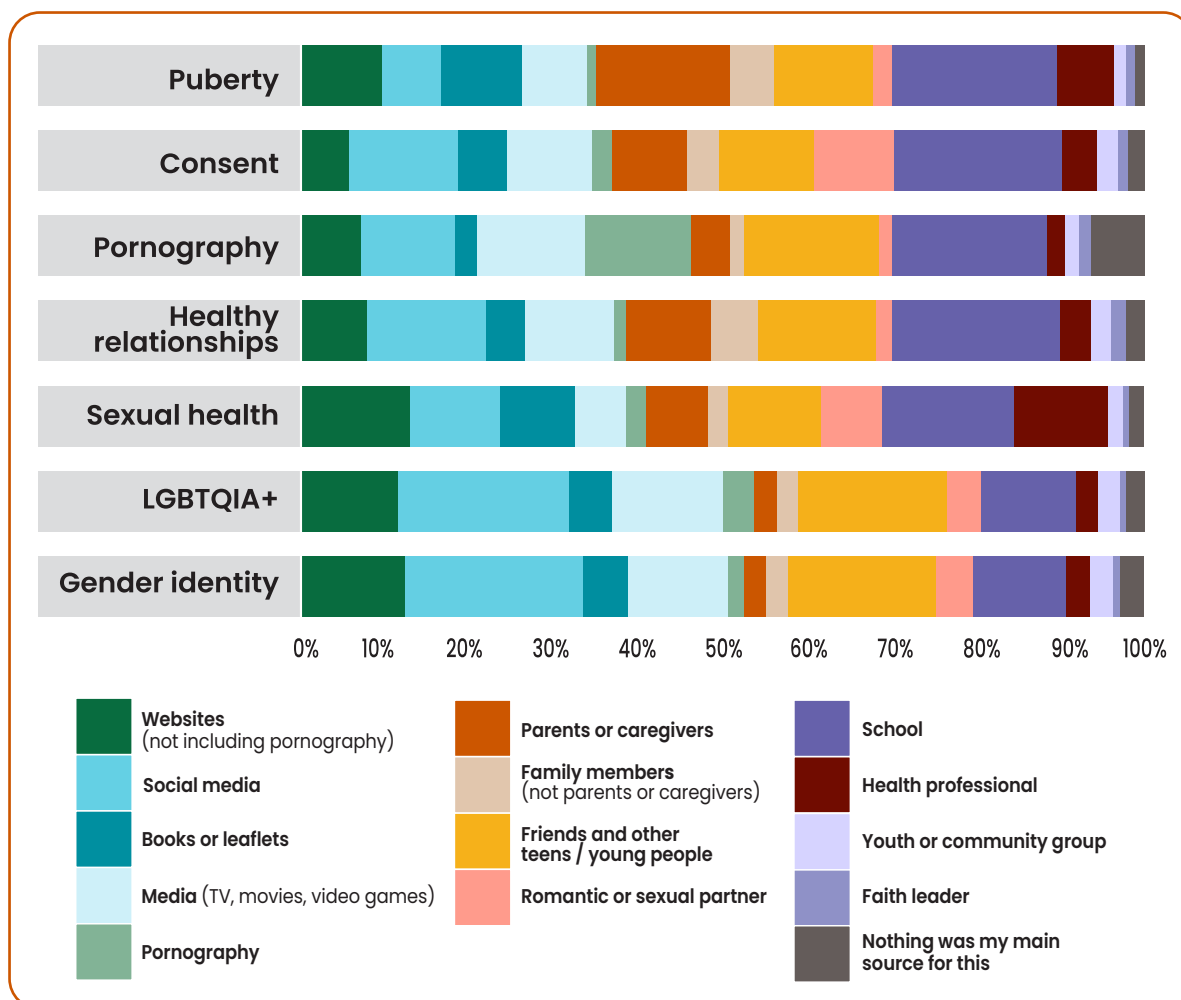


Graph 5: Sexual Orientation

Summary of Survey Results

Sources of information on RSE topics

It is well understood that young people get information related to the topics covered in RSE from a variety of sources. We asked them to identify their primary source of information for seven key topics including puberty, consent, pornography, sexual health, healthy relationships, LGBTQIA+ and gender identity. The results indicate that social media, media (television shows, movies and video games), friends and peers, and school are the dominant sources across these seven topics. School is dominant for puberty and consent but other sources, particularly social media, were identified as the primary reference for other topics.



Quotes from respondents:

“I don’t want another generation of kids relying on social media for information about sexual health and wellbeing.”

“There is currently not enough RSE in schools. Unfortunately the majority of a lot of young people’s RSE comes from pornography which does not depict healthy relationships or consent.”

Five key themes

Across all the data gathered in the survey, **five key messages** were strongly conveyed by the respondents. The following section provides data and direct quotes from open-ended responses provided by young people who took the survey.

1. Importance of Timing – give information before it is “too late”

Respondents were clear that they felt that RSE could be better timed to correspond to their needs around sexual activity and relationships. They expressed that it should start earlier and continue after year 10. When asked why they felt RSE lessons beyond year 10 would be beneficial, respondents gave recommendations and insight into their experiences. They highlighted that often the information comes “too late,” such that they have already started their period or puberty before learning about it. The same was true for sexual activity and relationships. Many highlighted the issue of safety; they spoke to the importance of skills learned as part of RSE to identify and understand sexual harassment, assault, and abuse. Many responses noted how improved and extended education could prevent harm and increase their understanding of how to manage complex situations.

- 78% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “RSE lessons beyond year 10 would be beneficial to my personal development and well-being”
- 59% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “My RSE would have been better if it had started earlier in my life”

Quotes from respondents:

“I think it’s important to start introducing sexual health topics early, starting out with basic biology and puberty information before changes start occurring in the body. If you start the conversation early on it is easier to have open conversations about more serious topics in the future”

“School taught about puberty a lot but hardly anything about healthy relationships, sexual health, sexual pleasure and what to expect from sex and relationships in general so the majority of my knowledge was sourced from external sources. It would have been much better to have been taught the basics clearly from the start to prevent any confusion or stress in the future when these topics became relevant.”

“By the time we started RSE, I already had my period, I was already having sex, and I’d already had poor relationships with partners. Most of what we learnt in high school would have been very useful in year 4 or 5 when I started my period, and year 6 or 7, as my first time was year 8.”

2. Inclusivity – include information to represent all young people

Respondents sent a strong message about the importance of inclusivity in RSE content. Their responses stressed the value of learning about diversity in its many forms: gender identity, sexual orientation/LGBTQIA+, disabilities, and body differences. Many criticised separating genders for RSE lessons and advocated for the importance of everyone to learn the same content.

- 53% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “RSE lessons felt relevant to me”
- 39% reported that they did not learn about gender identity, and information relevant for those who are trans and non-binary at all in school; 28% reported that they learned some but not enough
- 31% reported that they did not learn about sexual orientation including information relevant for those who are LGBTQIA+ at all in school; 35% reported that they learned some but not enough

Quotes from respondents:

“Please make it compulsory that there is more of it, and make it more inclusive! Sex education should feel inclusive and applicable to everyone receiving it- including those of different cultural backgrounds, religions, gender identities and sexual orientation. Sex education applicable to those with disabilities where sex and development looks different should also be included.”

“It is crucial that everyone single student, regardless of their ethnicity or gender or sexuality, be given relevant relationships and sexuality education. It is their right to have access to knowledge that will prepare them for later in life, and mitigate anxiety and unhealthy relationships and abuse. It should be mostly up to the school to provide a good education for this topic, as so many young people are clueless and susceptible to harm or embarrassment. Please try harder.”

“The LGBTQIA+ needs to be featured a lot more in these types of classes, otherwise, student’s health is going to be put at risk due to lack of knowledge. RSE should start earlier in life and continue later into college, as a lot of students start getting sexually involved very early and having a place to learn and talk about relationships and sex during teenage years is very important.”

3. Student Consultation – provide opportunity for input

Respondents expressed a desire for their schools to consult them on the information taught in RSE. Many conveyed that RSE was relevant and helpful to them but many reported that schools did not ask their opinions about RSE. Many called for more information on several topics they felt were insufficiently covered: sexual abuse and violence, reproductive cycles and fertility, and the positive aspects of sexuality such as pleasure.

- 55% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed that “My school asked me for my opinions about RSE”
- 58% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed that “My school asked students for their opinions about RSE and acted on them”
- 51% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “Things I learned in my RSE lessons have helped me”

Quotes from respondents:

“Please consult students (and adults who have gone through the school system) on what they want or wish they had! Please include info about queer identity, relationships, sex, and people, and about different cultural beliefs regarding relationships and sex; Māori voices need to be heard!”

“These topics are very important especially for teenagers and should be gone about in the right way but that may look different depending on the students themselves.”

“Information needs to be accessible. Don’t let parents opt their kids out, start it as early as possible and continue as it is feasible and it can work to be age appropriate through the years of schooling.”

4. RSE is wanted and important – give it time and make it accessible

Students consistently articulated the importance of this component of their education. When asked about barriers in their RSE education, respondents pointed to challenging learning environments, insufficient time dedicated to RSE and passive modes of conveying information such as videos or slideshows.

- 45% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed that “Enough time was dedicated to RSE in my school”
- 51% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “I had enough opportunities to ask questions, and get answers to them, in RSE at school”
- 55% agreed that “RSE was taught by people with enough knowledge and confidence”

Quotes from respondents:

“The students are not being protected by limiting their access to this education. By not providing them with it, you are essentially throwing someone into a sword fight without a weapon, shield, or training.”

“Teach more and more often!”

“I believe that RSE needs to be taught more in-depth to students, as most teachers rush over these topics and only spent a short amount of time on each meaning that it gets looked over and not as understandable.”

5. Teacher Training – help them feel more confident

Many respondents noted the importance of teachers in their experience of RSE. They expressed the perception that teachers were often uncomfortable with the RSE content and that led to attenuated lessons and fewer topics covered. Several also noted that RSE is best taught by teachers in the school as opposed to outside providers. They identified teacher training as a critical way to address this issue.

- 48% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that “RSE was taught by people who enjoyed teaching it”
- When asked to rank seven ways to improve RSE, the top three most popular options selected:
 - “Provide training for teachers so they can develop more confidence with RSE.”
 - “Flexibility for schools to cover RSE topics at the age that their students need.”
 - “Schools to ask students for feedback on their RSE lessons and use their suggestions to improve them”

Quotes from respondents:

“Please be confident in teaching these classes and being fun on these uncomfortable topics and know how to navigate them with a teenage audience with many different topics covering as much as possible.”

“Teachers from the school are your best resource. Yes, outside organisations may have more training but the teachers know the school, they know the students. Please encourage teachers to take on these roles and give them the support they need to do well. Train your facilitators on appropriate language and terms to use for LGBTQ+ identities. Ensure every student feels welcomed and safe. Cover a wider range of topics and examples (not just boy abuses girl, girl abuses boy). Learn to talk about these situations as reality for some people, not just an abstract thing. Teach about how there can be small things in a relationship that aren’t quite right – abuse doesn’t have to happen all at once or be like the TV shows.”

Recommendations and Conclusion

The respondents provided clear and consistent messages for decisionmakers around RSE. Their articulate open-ended responses communicated the following calls to action:

- Provide more RSE earlier and continue it into later years of secondary school
- Ensure that RSE content is inclusive and comprehensive for all genders and diverse sexual orientations
- Students want to be consulted on what content is included in RSE
- Students see RSE education as critically important and necessary
- Many perceived that teachers are uncomfortable with the content and want them to have access to more training.

It is crucial to listen to what young people have to say about these topics. They are eager to learn and want to do so in a way that prioritises their safety and that of their peers. They want to be involved in what they learn and receive the information from educators who are comfortable with the content. They see that this information is important for their health and wellbeing.

