

Sex education taught to 8 year olds

[Health & Medicine](#), [Sex](#)



Eight-year-old children are being targeted for more detailed sex education in schools. In Christchurch today, Family Planning is launching a new resource for teachers of late-primary and intermediate-age children. The launch has upset the conservative lobby group Family First, which is urging Family Planning to "butt out" and leave sex education to parents. The resource, called The Sexuality Road, is aimed at younger children because research shows that they are now entering puberty earlier. Young people have a right to understand what is happening to their bodies and their emotions," Family Planning director of health promotion Frances Bird said. "Sexuality education that works starts early, before young people reach puberty, and before they have developed established patterns of behavior. " The Sexuality Road provides teachers with a programme of 10 lessons and evaluations per year. Each year comes with lesson plans, activity worksheets, and resources. Year 5 and 6 (nine and 10-year-old) pupils look at pubertal change, friendships, gender, families, menstruation, fertility, conception and personal support. Year 7 and 8 pupils focus more on changing feelings and emotions and their effects on relationships, sexual attraction, decision-making around sexual attraction, conception and birth, contraception and support agencies. Bird said international evidence showed children were entering puberty earlier than had been seen in decades. The average age of puberty for girls in New Zealand had fallen to between nine and 14 and for boys, it was between 11 and 16, Bird said. "Some people are concerned that providing information about sex and sexuality arouses curiosity and can lead to sexual experimentation.

There is no evidence that this happens," she said. New Zealand teenagers rate second-highest in the developed world for teen pregnancies. The Press last month revealed research showing more than a third of 16-year-olds have already had sex and half say they have been in love. An Education Review Office report, commissioned by the ministries of Women's Affairs, Health and Education, found at least half of all sex education in schools was presented by teachers with no qualifications in the subject.

Liggins Institute director, and newly appointed chief science adviser, Professor Peter Gluckman has earlier called for action to address the "emerging national crisis," in sex education for younger children. "Sex and health education has to become mainstream and away from the idea that it's only for the physed teacher who is least equipped to deal with it," Gluckman said. Family First national director Bob McCoskrie said children should be taught sex education by their parents when they were ready. "The simple message to Family Planning is 'butt out and leave it to parents'," McCoskrie said. Parents know their kids the best. They know their emotional and moral development best and have their own values. Family Planning should not be interacting with kids of that age. "McCoskrie said schools had become "one-stop shops" for dealing with social problems in the community. Some parents felt overawed by "the sex talk" with their children, so resources should be put in to helping them better understand what was required, McCoskrie said. "It needs to be values-based and we think parents are the ones who determine the values. Bird said children should be exposed to a range of values, attitudes and opinions. According to a survey run on the Netmums parenting website, the majority of parents believe children should start

learning about sex and relationships when they are eight years old. I can hear them already. The shocked and outraged tones of the other "moral" majority reacting to yet another progressive plot to corrupt children. "We'll have no sex education here!" Or if we must, let them wait until they're actually doing it.

That is sad, because such views are themselves transformative, turning sex from a natural and evolving topic to a dangerous threshold, making childhood sexualisation more, not less, likely. Talking about sex starts much earlier transforms the likelihoods that children will be better informed. Children use sexual terms long before they reach the age of eight (year 3). Listening recently to year 1 conversations, I overheard boys talking about "having sex" (they mean "cuddling"). They insult each other using terms such as "gay".

Discussion of sex runs through the playground discourse like Blackpool through a stick of rock: it's just very badly formed. Talking about sex needs to start earlier so that children will not be confused at a later time when it is learned thru their peer group. A straw poll of local school kids suggests little useful sex education is received before the age of 13. That's two years after the average age at which girls begin their periods – five years after some. If you're not told about such stuff at home, how terrifying to be eight and suddenly bleeding.

A range of studies report puberty starting earlier in western societies – and while the reality of sexual experimentation may not be as graphic or extreme as the tabloids would have us believe, that, too, can begin long before 13.

Sexual orientation and identity, too, can be obvious at a very early age (from six onward): once more, how scary to grow in an atmosphere that makes "queers" always the butt of jokes with no balancing official information. Sex doesn't have to be sexual in nature. Many of the dirtiest, smuttiest most adult things about sex are just that: adult.

There is a depressing read-across from adult values to child: many people assume that a child doing something "sexy" understands their behavior and intends the result. Children learn through play. Girls dress, use makeup and dance in ways that would be erotic if their mums did them – but absolutely aren't when they do. Children can be educated about sex without focusing on the erotic. It's never too young to learn respect for the beliefs of sexually actions. The most misleading thing about this debate is that opponents caricature sex education as being about just one thing.

In fact, broad and structured sex education will provide grounding in relationships, biology, safety, health, respect for others and consent. These will be introduced at the appropriate point using language appropriate to the age discovering them. In a world in which many adult relationships continue to be conducted through the emotions of childhood – and one in four women (and one in five men) are still suffering domestic violence – early sex ed is as much about learning the most basic of lessons – the right to say no – as anything else.