



Boston Children's
Digital Wellness Lab

PULSE SURVEY



How Teens Navigate Sex, Relationships, and Social Media



Date of Release: July 2026



Boston Children's
Digital Wellness Lab



HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
TEACHING HOSPITAL



Boston Children's Hospital



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Executive Summary



Adolescence is a period of relational and sexual exploration, and teens today are making sense of it across their offline and online worlds. Between January and February 2026, the Digital Wellness Lab surveyed 1,124 US teens (ages 16 to 18) to better understand how they form their beliefs and decisions around sex and relationships. This report examines three interconnected dimensions of that landscape: the social norms teens hold around sex and relationships, their sexual health literacy and access to education, and the relationship and sexual content they encounter on social media.

We investigate three core questions:

1. What social norms do teens hold around sex and relationships?
2. What is the state of sexual health literacy and education among teens today?
3. What types of relationship and sexual content are teens encountering on social media, and where is it coming from?

DEFINITIONS FOR KEY TERMS IN THIS REPORT

Social media: The platforms teens reported using most: YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Algorithm-recommended posts: Content that appears in a feed from accounts the teen does not follow, suggested by the app.

Posts from creators teens follow: Content from creators the teen intentionally follows but does not know personally.

Sex: Oral, vaginal, or anal sex with another person, with any partner.

Unprotected sex: Vaginal or anal sex without a condom.

Casual sex: Sex with someone the teen is not in a committed relationship with.

Topline Takeaways



Social Norms Around Sex and Relationships

Teens perceive their broader peers and close friends differently. Across both norm groups, we found a consistent pattern: teens perceived their broader peer group as more sexually experienced, risk-inclined, and permissive in their attitudes compared to their close friends.

Girls and boys perceive peer norms differently. Girls are more likely than boys to perceive higher levels of sexual experience and permissive attitudes among broader peers, while reporting more cautious norms among close friends.



Sexual Health Literacy and Education

Many teens have not discussed sexual health with adults. Despite widespread support for condom use and access to formal sex education, many teens have yet to engage in essential conversations about sexual health with their parents/guardians (39%) and healthcare providers (43%).

Boys report less sexual health information and weaker safe-sex attitudes. Compared to girls, boys were less likely to report receiving sexual health conversations or formal sex education and, expressed less favorable attitudes towards safe-sex practices overall.

Formal sex education may be associated with lower exposure to explicit content. Teens who reported receiving formal sex education showed consistently lower exposure to more explicit and sensitive content than their peers who reported not receiving formal sex education.



Sexual and Relationship Content Exposure

Teens reported moderate-to-low exposure to relational- and sex-related content. Even the most frequently encountered topics—ongoing relationship dynamics/maintenance and breakup/transition—were seen only some of the time.

Teens see relationship- and sex-related content through algorithm-recommended posts. Across themes, teens reported that their exposure was largely driven by the algorithmic recommendations, rather than by the accounts they chose to follow.

Sexual and relationship content exposure differs by gender. Girls reported higher exposure to content involving ongoing relationship dynamics, while boys reported higher exposure to animated, edited, or promotional sexual content.

Taken together, these findings show that teens' decisions about sex and relationships aren't just shaped by individual knowledge. Young people are making sense of intimacy within overlapping peer, family, educational, and digital environments, which points to the value of a coordinated response across schools, healthcare, families, and platforms.



INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Context of Teen Sexual Development

The Stakes of Healthy Sexual Development

Relational and sexual exploration is an integral, and normative, part of adolescence that may have both negative and positive implications on one's physical and mental health outcomes depending on the features of those relationships (e.g. Kansky & Allen, 2018; Peragine et al., 2022). Developing healthy sexuality goes beyond bodily changes and evolving healthcare needs, it also encompasses fostering one's self-worth and bodily autonomy, and building the capacity for mutual consent, respect and communication (ACT for Youth, n.d.). However, without a safe, inclusive, and evidence-based learning environment, young people can face elevated risks of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (El-Sherbiny et al., 2025). Research has also shown that gaps in sex education can have lasting effects throughout adulthood, including relationship challenges, lack of confidence, and lower quality of life (Hille et al., 2025). Thus, examining how teens obtain, interpret, and apply information related to romantic relationships and intimacy can help identify opportunities to address misinformation, strengthen decision-making, and support healthy relationship development.



INTRODUCTION

The Role of Trusted Adults and Peers

Teens today are navigating sexual health in an environment where both interpersonal relationships and digital context shape what they believe, expect, and feel about sex and relationships. In their offline worlds, young people receive these messages from families, healthcare providers, educators, peers and their larger communities. Trusted adults and mentors who create open, non-judgmental spaces for conversations about sex and relationships can play a meaningful protective role (e.g. Coakley et al. 2019; Rogers et al., 2019). Positive peer relationships, too, are consistently associated with better health outcomes during adolescence (e.g. McGraw et al., 2008). But the nature of peer influence is complex: what teens perceive their peers to be doing and approving of can shape their own choices as powerfully as what peers are actually doing (Helms et al., 2014).

The Role of Digital Media

Most adolescents are also engaging with digital media platforms that may expose them to relational and sexual content—whether it’s passively or unintentionally through their platform’s algorithmic recommendations (e.g., TikTok’s For You Page) or actively as a tool to seek out information on topics they might not feel comfortable raising with the adults in their lives (e.g. Livingstone et al., 2014; McCrimmon et al., 2025). Social media, in particular, occupies a complex role in the landscape: while these platforms can serve as a space for community, information and even risk reduction (Dülger et al., 2025; Engel et al., 2023), they can conversely perpetuate misinformation, unrealistic norms, and content that is neither accurate nor developmentally appropriate (Farooq et al., 2025). For instance, research has shown that social media can often function as a safe space for LGBTQ+ teens to connect with others and learn more about their sexualities since many have cited not having access to comprehensive sex education and/or supportive offline communities (Tiches, 2025). However, seeking out information in this unregulated space can also expose them to unreliable, and even harmful content.

What This Report Examines

This report examines three interconnected dimensions of teens’ sexual health landscape: their perceptions of social norms around sex and relationships, their sexual health literacy and access to education, and the relationship and sexual content they encounter on social media. Together, these three domains reveal young people’s understanding of intimacy, risk, and healthy relationships, and can help identify the sources of these beliefs and opportunities to better align them with healthy attitudes.



About the Research

Research Questions

Drawing on findings across all three sections, this report addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What social norms do teens hold around sex and relationships?

RQ1a: What are teens' descriptive norms (perceptions of what peers are doing) and injunctive norms (perceptions of what peers approve of) around sexual behavior and relationships?

RQ1b: How do these norms differ when teens think about their broader peer group versus their close friends?

RQ2: What is the state of sexual health literacy among teens today?

RQ2a: What are teens' basic attitudes and knowledge around safe sex practices?

RQ2b: How common is it for teens to have sexual health conversations with trusted adults, and how many have received formal sex education?

RQ2c: How do boys and girls differ in their access to sexual health education and their attitudes toward safe sex?

RQ3: What types of relationship and sexual content are teens encountering on social media, and where is it coming from?

RQ3a: How frequently are teens exposed to different types of relationship and sexual content across their social media platforms?

RQ3b: To what extent is teens' content exposure driven by algorithmic recommendations versus their own choices?

RQ3c: How do gender and formal sex education relate to the types of relationship and sexual content teens encounter online?

Methods

A sample of 1,124 US teens (ages 16-18) were surveyed between January and February, 2026, using Alchemer's online research platform. After a set of screener and demographic questions, participants were asked to identify their engagement and exposure to relationship and sex-related content on social media. Participants then responded to a series of questions about their perceptions regarding their peers' versus their close friends' sexual experiences and attitudes. Finally, teens answered items designed to assess their basic level of sexual health literacy and a series of questions inquiring about what sources they were receiving this information from.

A full description of methods can be found in the Appendix.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Notes About the Findings

Definitions

When we reference “social media” in this report, we’re specifically referring to YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok as these were the top three platforms teens used regularly.

- In the survey, we defined **social media** as: spaces where people can share photos, videos, and information about themselves or others with audiences in a variety of ways.

In the section where we asked teens to identify the sources of content from social media platforms, we distinguished the following as:

- **Algorithm-recommended posts:** content that appeared on your feed from accounts you do not actively follow, suggested by the app itself. Examples include TikTok’s “For You Page,” Instagram’s “Explore” tab, or YouTube’s Recommendations.
- **Posts from content creators you follow:** This category includes content from creators mostly around your age whom you intentionally follow, but do not know personally in real life (i.e., they are not your friends, family, peers, or teachers). These accounts typically create content for a broad audience and often have brand deals or verified status.

In this study, we specify “sex” as oral, vaginal, or anal sex with another person, with any partner (including partners of the same sex or different sex). Furthermore, we conceptualized the following as:

- **Unprotected sex:** vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- **Casual sex:** sex with someone you are not in a committed relationship with

Gender

For ease of analysis and comparison, this report focuses on gender differences between teens who identified as a girl or a boy. Individuals identifying differently (e.g., non-binary) constituted roughly 3% of our sample. Due to this small representation, it was not feasible to perform meaningful comparative analysis for these categories. We acknowledge the importance of considering gender beyond the binary framework and recommend future research that oversamples sexual minority youth to explore these experiences more comprehensively.

Reporting

For ease of reporting and visualization, we have sometimes combined responses from five-point scales to simplified, three-point scales. For example, “strongly disagree” and “disagree” are combined into “disagree,” while “almost always” and “often” are combined into “often.” Throughout this report, numerical values might not sum precisely to 100% due to rounding, the presence of multiple response options, or instances of skipped questions or responses.



FINDINGS



FINDINGS

Social Norms Around Sex & Relationships

Social norms are a salient part of how adolescents begin to form beliefs around what kinds of attitudes and behaviors are typical, socially acceptable, and expected among others (Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Young people are often shaped by two distinct types of social norms: **descriptive norms** refer to teens' perceptions of what their peers are actually doing, while **injunctive norms** reflect teens' outlook of what their peers approve of or expect them to do. Specifically, we measured both norm types across two social reference points: the **broader peer group** (teens their age in general) and their **close friends**. This allows us to better understand how teens make sense of relationship choices around communication, boundaries, consent, and protection, as well as what they view as normal, healthy, or risky in romantic and sexual experiences.

In congruence with the national data (CDC), roughly one-third of participants (31%) in this study reported being sexually active. Given that most participants had not had sex, this base rate offers useful context for understanding how perceptions of peer sexual behavior may be shaped by broader assumptions about adolescent sexuality or the salience of sexually active peers.

SOCIAL NORMS AROUND SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

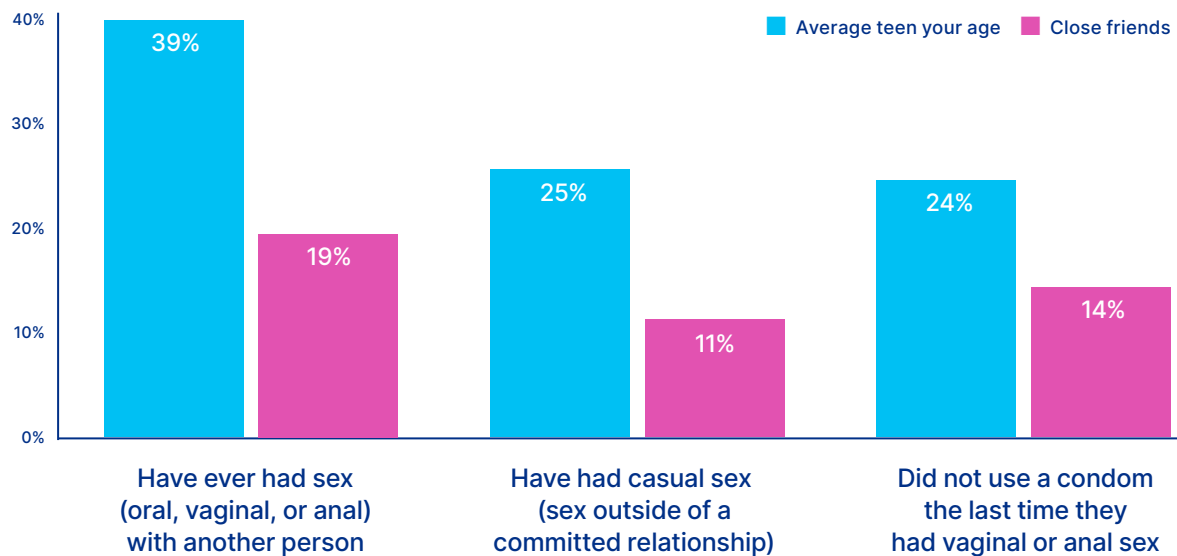
Descriptive Norms: What Teens Think Peers and Friends are Doing

Teens perceived the broader teen group as being more sexually experienced and permissive.

When participants were asked to think about the percentage of people who have ever had sex before, 39% of teens believed that the majority (60%+)* of peers their age had done so, as opposed to only 19% who thought the same about their close friends. We observed a similar gap in teen's perspectives around their peers versus their close friend's experiences around having casual sex: 25% assumed that the majority of peers their age had engaged in this type of behavior, while 11% reported the same about their close friends. In parallel, teens also perceived condomless sex as more common among their broader peer group (24%) than their close friends (14%).

Teens' Perceptions of Peer Sexual Behaviors: Majority Engagement Beliefs Among Broader Peer Group vs. Close Friends

Percentage of Teens Who Perceive Majority (60%+) Engagement



* For survey questions evaluating descriptive norms, we asked teens to think about the percentage of “teens their age” and their “close friends” who have engaged in these behaviors. The answer options range from 0%, 10%, 20%...90%+; thus, when we reference “the majority” in this section, we’re referring to teens who believed 60%+ of peers and/or close friends who have had these experiences before.

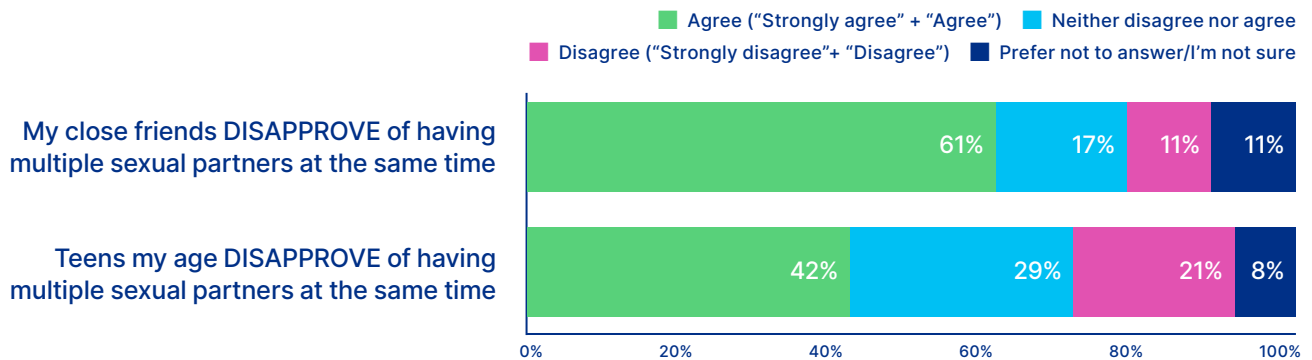
SOCIAL NORMS AROUND SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

Injunctive Norms: What Teens Think Peers and Friends Approve Of

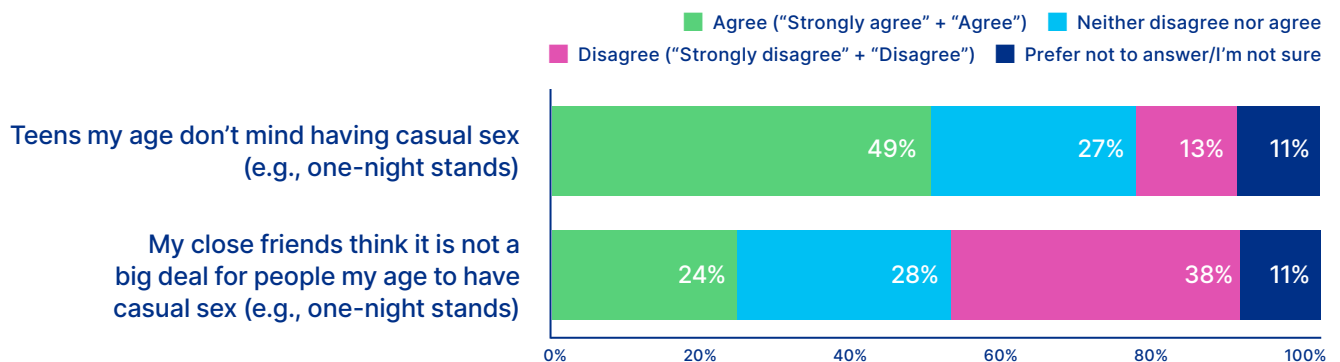
Teens generally perceived their broader peer group as holding more permissive views towards casual sex, sex without a condom, and multiple sexual partners than do their close friends.

This trend is also evident in adolescents' beliefs about their peers' and friends' permissive attitudes and approval of riskier sexual practices. Notably, when it comes to perceptions around having sex without a condom, the majority of teens (60%) said their close friends think they should use a condom every time they have vaginal or anal sex. To add, almost half (45%) reported that their close friends would disapprove if they had vaginal or anal sex without a condom. Comparatively, less than a quarter (21%) of teens challenged the notion that their peers viewed unprotected sex (i.e., vaginal or anal sex without a condom) as acceptable.

Teen's Attitudes Around Having Multiple Sexual Partners at the Same Time



Teen's Attitudes Around Casual Sex



These findings across descriptive and injunctive norms point to teens navigating two competing normative environments: a broader peer culture perceived as sexually experienced and permissive, and a close friend group that reflects more cautious and protective norms. **This raises an important question about which reference point teens are more likely to draw on when making their own decisions, and whether the gap between these two environments creates confusion, pressure, or a buffer against risk** (Nogueira Avelar E Silva et al., 2020).

SOCIAL NORMS AROUND SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

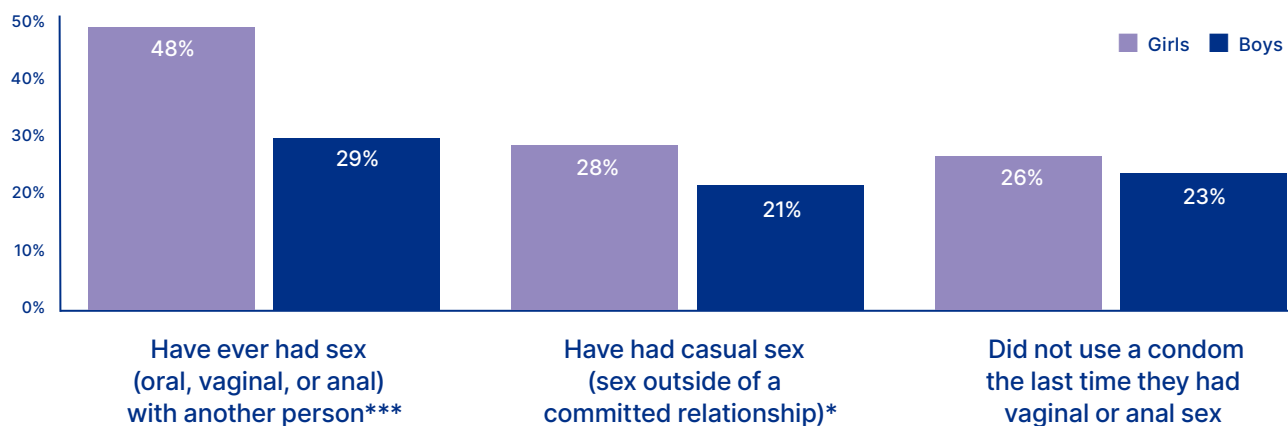
Gender Differences in Social Norms Around Sex & Relationships

Girls were more likely than boys to perceive broader peers as sexually experienced and permissive, and to perceive close friends as more cautious around some safer-sex norms.

While both girls and boys expressed similar sentiments around descriptive versus injunctive sexual norms, there are some notable differences between genders. For one, girls were more likely than boys to perceive their broader peer group as engaging in riskier sexual practices and holding more permissive attitudes.

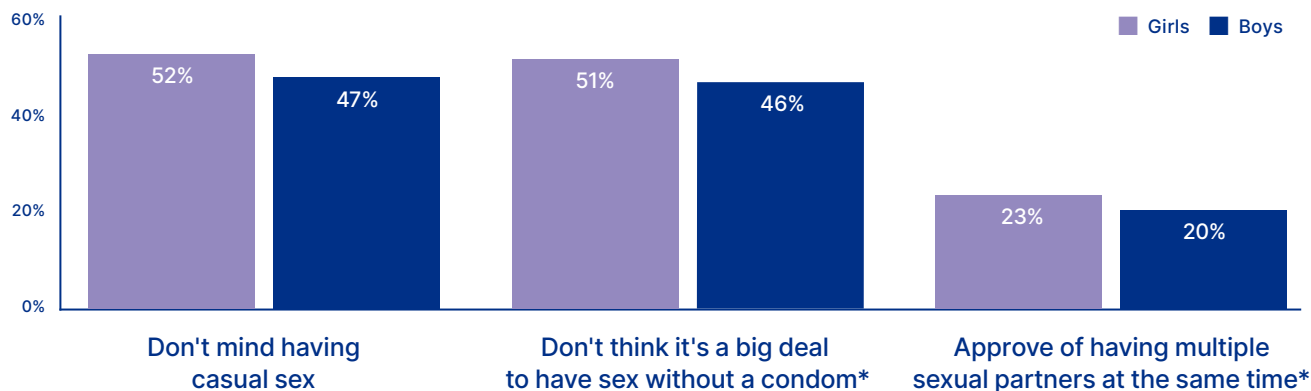
Girls vs. Boys Who Agree that the Majority (60%+) of Teens Their Age...

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



Girls vs. Boys Who Agree that Teens Their Age...

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



At the same time, girls were also more likely to view their close friends as engaging in and supporting safer sex practices. For instance, 44% of girls believed none of their close friends had ever had casual sex, compared to 32% of boys. Similarly, 39% of girls believed none of their close friends had engaged in vaginal or anal sex without condoms, compared to 30% of boys.

Taken together, these findings suggest that girls may experience a sharper contrast between what they perceive as normal in the broader peer culture versus within their immediate social circle. This tension could shape how they weigh competing social influences when navigating their own relationship and sexual health decisions.



FINDINGS

Sexual Health Literacy

Sexual health literacy among adolescents refers to the ability to obtain, comprehend, evaluate, and apply information to make decisions around sexual behavior and reproductive wellbeing (Alhussaini et al., 2025). This set of skills plays a vital role in improving health outcomes—from disease prevention to the promotion of bodily autonomy and healthy relationship development, empowering young people to take control and encouraging them to make safer and more informed choices.

This section examines teens' perspectives around condom use and their basic understanding of its efficacy to reduce sexually transmitted infections (STIs). We also asked teens to report whether they've had informal and formal conversations about sexual health and protection with a variety of people in their lives. Given the diverse avenues through which adolescents currently seek and receive information (e.g., social media), these findings speak to the ongoing need for open, destigmatized sexual health conversations that ensure all young people have safe spaces to learn and ask questions.

Teens' Perspectives Toward Safe Sex Practices

Overall, teens demonstrated favorable attitudes toward safe sex.

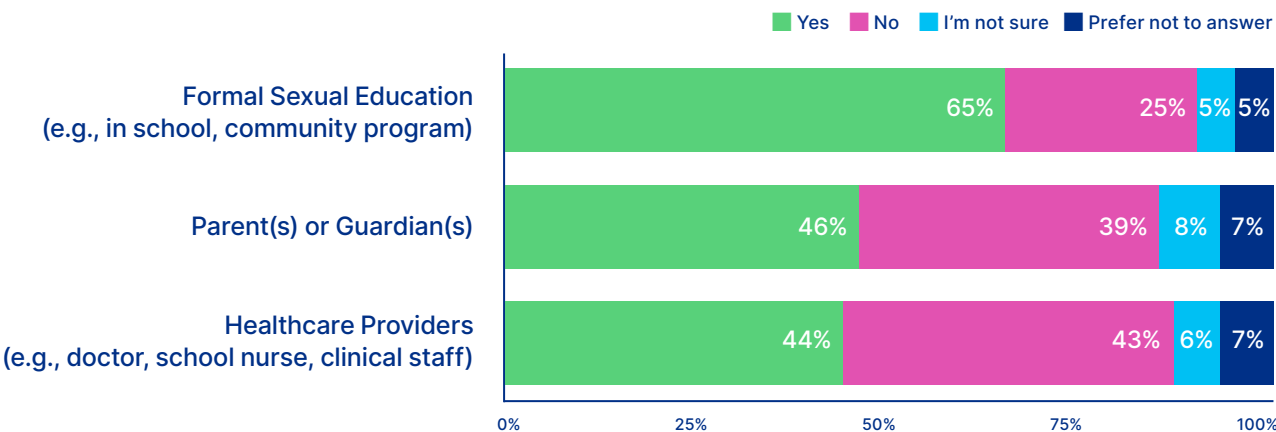
Nearly three-quarters of participants (73%) agreed that condom use during vaginal or anal sex can help mitigate the risk of STIs, and 66% agreed that using condoms signals care for a partner's health.

Conversations About Sexual Health

While most teens engaged with some level of formal sexual health education, less have had these conversations with the adults in their life.

Most teens reported having had conversations about sex with adults in their lives, and the majority (65%) said they've received some form of formal sexual education through school or community programming. Still, these conversations are not reaching every adolescent. Over a third of teens reported never having talked about sexual health or protection with their parents or guardians, and a similar proportion said the same about their health provider.

Have you ever discussed or received education around sexual health and protection with the following...

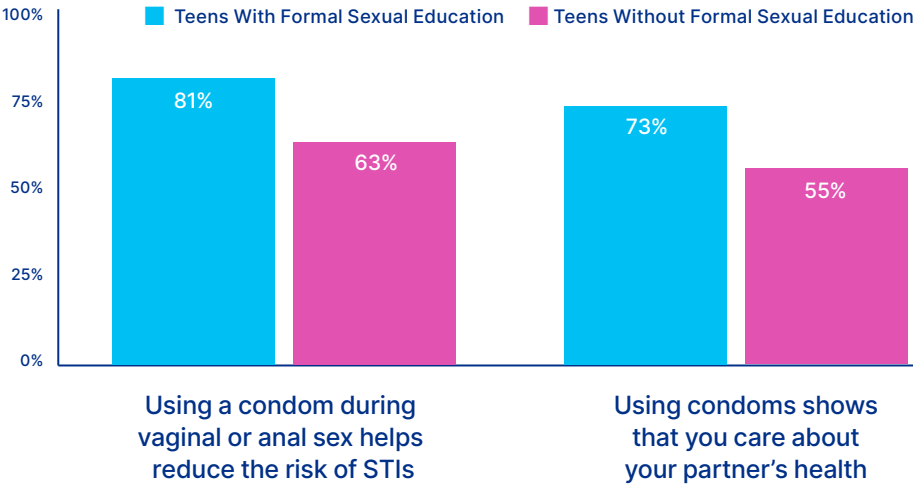


Teens who missed out on structured sex education or conversations with central adult figures tended to hold less favorable views of safe sex practices.

Among the quarter of teens who reported that they haven't had any formal sexual education, more than half (56%) reported not getting this information from their parents/guardians, and nearly two-thirds (65%) said the same about their healthcare provider. When young people are unable to access such information from their primary support systems, they may turn to alternative sources, such as social media, which can vary widely in accuracy and may even normalize more permissive or risky behaviors (Altintas & Gul, 2022; McCrimmon et al., 2025; PettyJohn et al., 2025).

SEXUAL HEALTH LITERACY

Teens Who Agree That...



Gender Differences in Sexual Health Literacy

Nearly half of boys reported never discussing sexual health with a parent/caregiver or healthcare providers.

Previous literature has suggested girls tend to demonstrate higher foundational knowledge around sexual and reproductive health (Burnell et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2025). Moreover, past studies have also delineated a possible difference in what's being taught to girls versus boys, which could result in varying sexual health outcomes and attitudes (Guttmacher Institute, 2022). Consistent with these existing research findings, our data also found meaningful gender differences in sexual health literacy.

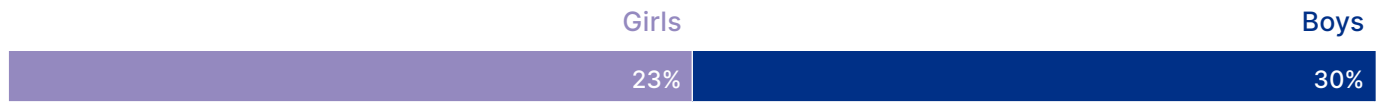
Boys were significantly less likely than girls to have had conversations about sexual health across every setting we examined.

Percentage of Teens Who Reported Having Never Discussed Sexual Health With Their...

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$

	Girls	Boys
Parent(s) or Guardian(s)**	34%	45%
Healthcare Providers (e.g., doctor, school nurse, clinical staff)**	38%	50%

SEXUAL HEALTH LITERACY

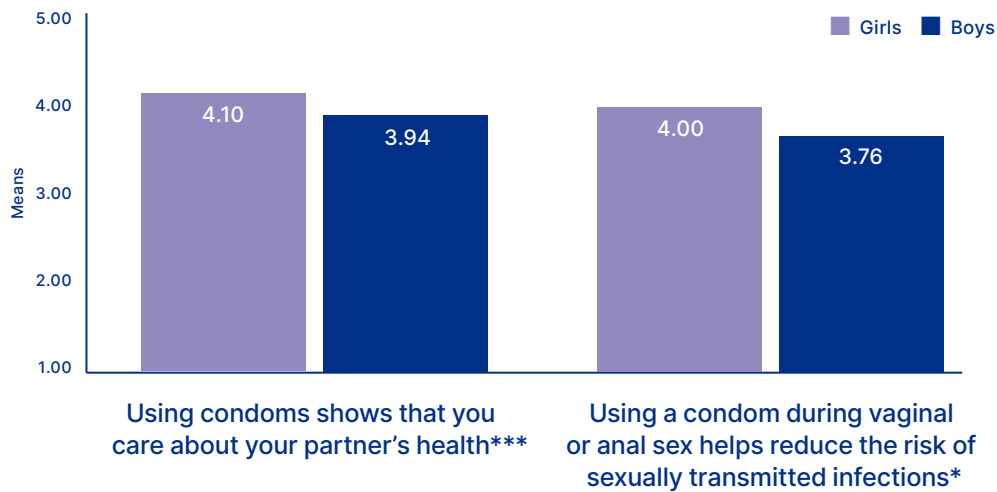
Percentage of Teens Who Reported **Never Receiving** Formal Sex Education (e.g., in school, community program)**Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$ 

Attitudinally, both boys and girls largely expressed favorable views toward safe sex practices, though girls reported significantly more positive attitudes overall.

Percentage of Teens Who Expressed Favorable Views Toward Safe-Sex Practices:

	Girls	Boys
Agree ("Strongly agree" + "Agree") that condoms help reduce STI risk during vaginal or anal sex	77%	68%
Agree ("Strongly agree" + "Agree") that using a condom shows care for a partner's health	70%	60%

Girls vs. Boys Agreement of Safe Sex Practices

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$ 

Collectively, these findings suggest that boys may be receiving less sexual health information across both formal and informal channels, and/or may also be less receptive to safe sex messaging; thus, highlighting a need for more targeted outreach and programming that speaks directly to adolescent boys.



FINDINGS

Sexual and Relationship Content Exposure

The widespread use of digital media and social platforms has created new pathways through which teens encounter content related to relationships, dating, and sex. Although online resources can broaden access to accurate information, they can also expose young people to content that misrepresents or normalizes risky behaviors (PettyJohn et al., 2025). To understand this landscape, we examined how often teens encounter relationship- and sex-related content, where that content comes from, and how exposure differs by formal sex education and gender.

The Five Content Domains

To capture a comprehensive spectrum of content related to relationships and sexual behaviors, we organized a variety of social media content topics into five broader domains: 1) Relationship Initiation and Early-Stage Dating, 2) Ongoing Relationship Dynamics/Maintenance and Breakups/Transitions 3) Casual or Noncommittal Encounters, 4) Sexual Content/ Behaviors, and 5) Animated, Edited, or Promotional Sexual Content (full list of items within each domain in Table 1.). Within each domain, we asked teens to think about how frequently they encountered this type of content and where it was coming from (i.e., content creators they actively follow or algorithm-generated recommendations).

Table 1. Content Exposure Instrument: 5 Themes, 20 Items

Relationship Initiation & Early Stage Dating	OnGoing Relationship Dynamics/ Maintenance & Breakups/ Transitions	Casual or Noncommittal Encounters	Sexual Content/ Behaviors	Animated, Edited, or Promotional Sexual Content
How to meet people, start talking, or plan a first date Defining the relationship/talking stage (e.g., posts about deciding what you are, exclusivity conversations, situationship stories) Dating apps: posts that discuss using dating apps (e.g., Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, Grindr, etc.)	Healthy-relationship skills: advice on communication, boundary-setting, conflict resolution, trust building Standards & expectations: list of bare minimums, green/red flags, or gestures partners should do Cheating accusations, jealousy, or “checking your partner”/loyalty tests Break-up experience and recovery: story-time about break-ups, heartbreak, glow-up arcs	Hook-up culture (one-night stands, body count jokes, walk of shame memes) Ongoing casual situations (friends with benefits, situationships, “no labels”)	Personal sexual story-times or advice (verbal discussion, not visually explicit) Near-nudity/thirst traps (often features more explicit or suggestive visuals/ display of one’s body) Sexually suggestive gestures/simulated sexual acts (dry-humping, thrusting, oral gestures) Protection and contraception talk (condoms, birth control, Plan B) Sexualized dance trends (twerking, slow body rolls) Lip-syncing videos to explicit lyrics Interactive sexually themed games/ challenges/filters: smash or pass, rate my body	AI-generated or virtual influencer dating/sexual content Animated sexual edits (e.g., anime, cartoons) Paid-content teasers (e.g., OnlyFans link in bio) Parasocial romantic or sexual content: posts or edits that portray a public figure (celebrity or influencer) or fictional character as a romantic or sexual partner (e.g., sexualized edits, “POV” relationship content)

Note: Table 1. presents topic items to the survey items that read: “Think about content related to [domain]... How often do you see each type of content listed below?” Response options were rated on a 5-point scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Almost Always.

What Teens are Actually Seeing: Content Exposure by Domain

Relationship content was the most common, but overall exposure was low.

To grasp the landscape of relationship and sexual content teens encounter online, we examined the frequency of exposure across the five content domains. Largely speaking, teens' exposure to social media varied significantly across domains ($p < .001$), and some types of content were more prevalent than others.

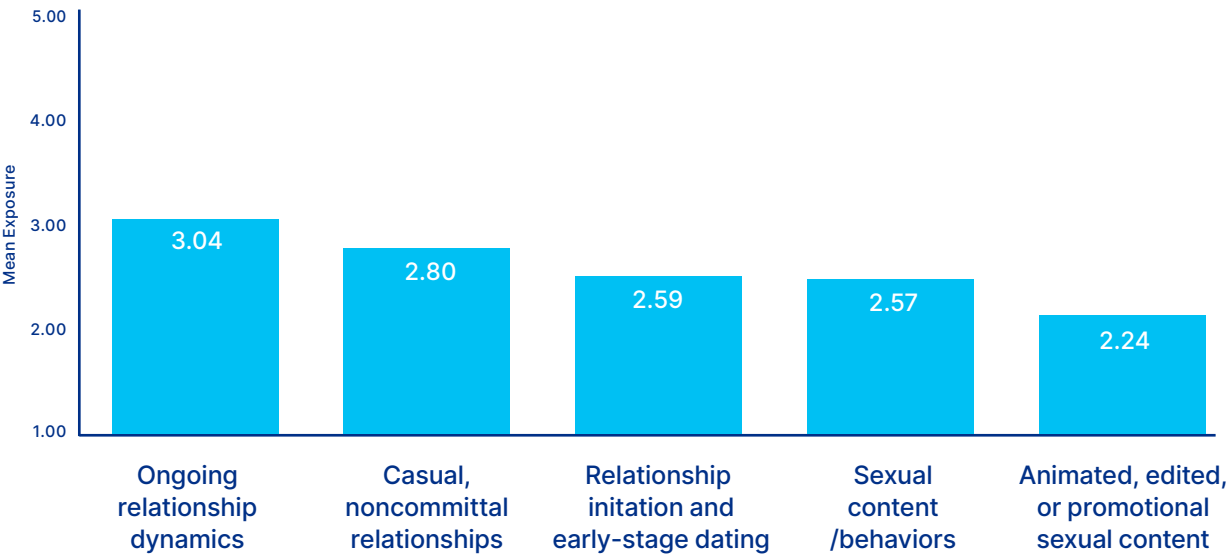
Of the different types of content, **ongoing relationship dynamics/maintenance and breakup/transitions** emerged as the most common domain among the five we've identified. Still, teens on average are only seeing this category some of the time ($M = 3.04$).

The rest of the domains were encountered less frequently, reflecting teens' low overall exposure to relation- and sex-related content online. **Casual or noncommittal encounters** ($M = 2.80$), **relationship initiation and early-stage dating** ($M = 2.59$), and **sexual content/ behaviors** ($M = 2.57$) were all reported to be in between "sometimes" and "rarely" exposure. **Animated, edited, or promotional sexual content** was the least frequently encountered ($M = 2.24$), with over half of teens reporting that they rarely see this type of content at all.

Means of Teen's Sexual and Relationship Content Exposure on Social Media

By domain

1.0 = Never, 2.0 = Rarely, 3.0 = Sometimes, 4.0 = Often, 5.0 = Almost Always



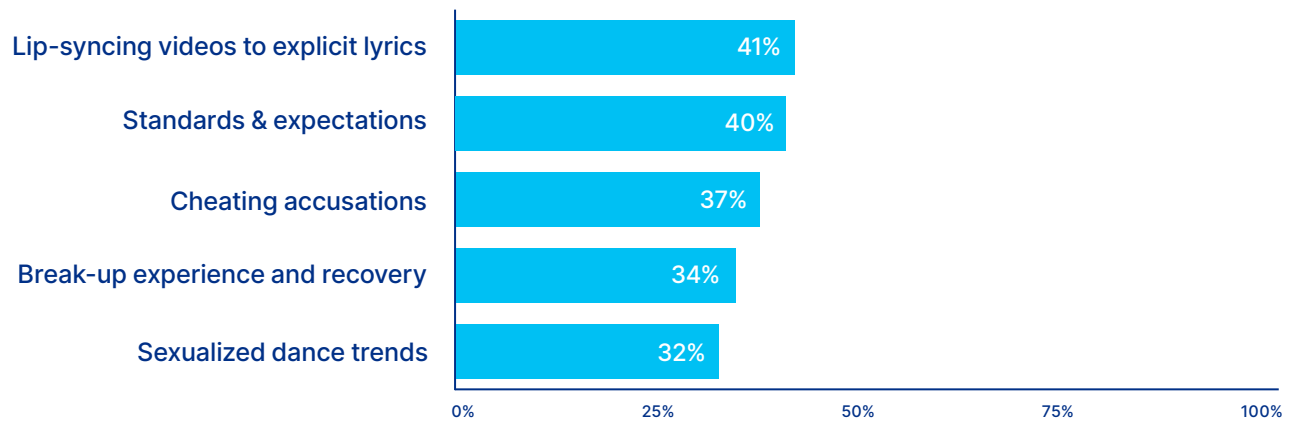
It is worth noting that within the sexual content domain, teens' experiences were more varied. Looking at topics within this domain, around one-third of teens reported often seeing content featuring lip-syncing to explicit lyrics and sexualized dance trends (i.e., twerking). The least seen topics were sexually suggestive acts (i.e., dry-humping) and personal sexual storytimes (verbal discussion), reported by only around a quarter of teens. These findings point to meaningful differences in what kinds of sexual content are most prevalent in teens' feeds, even within the same broad category.

SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP CONTENT EXPOSURE

This nuance extends across domains as well. The top five most encountered topics suggest that teens' exposure predominantly stems from the **ongoing relationship dynamics/maintenance and breakups/transitions** and **sexual content/behaviors** domains.

Top 5 Topics Teens Frequently See on Social Media Across Content Domains

Teens who frequently ("almost always" + "often") see these types of content



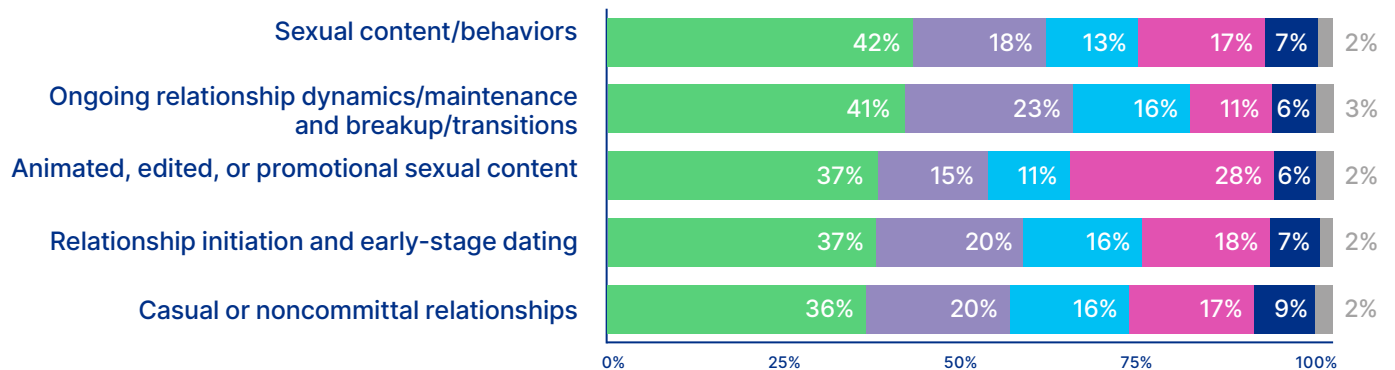
Algorithms, not personal choices, drive most content exposure.

Across all domains, teens consistently reported that the primary source of their sexual content exposure was algorithm-generated recommendations, such as TikTok's For You Page or Instagram's Explore Page, rather than content creators they actively follow. This pattern held regardless of content type, suggesting that much of what teens encounter online related to relationships and sex is being pushed to them rather than sought out. This trend is especially pronounced in the **sexual content/behaviors** domain, where 42% of teens said that posts related to sexual content/behaviors mostly came from their recommended page.

Teen's Content Exposure: From Recommended Page vs. From Personal Following Choices

By domain

■ Mostly ("always" + "mostly") from recommended page
 ■ Half and Half
 ■ Mostly ("always" + "mostly") from creators they follow
 ■ Haven't seen this type of content
 ■ I'm not sure
 ■ Prefer not to answer



SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP CONTENT EXPOSURE

Who Sees What: The Role of Formal Sex Education

Teens who reported receiving formal sex education showed consistently lower exposure to more explicit and sensitive content across most domains.

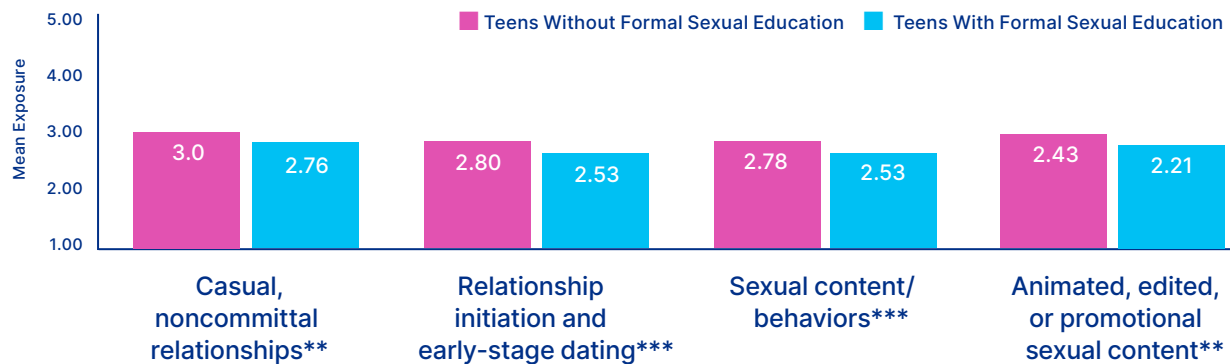
Teens with formal sex education reported significantly lower exposure across **relationship initiation and early-stage dating** (W/ formal sex ed M = 2.53 vs. W/o formal sex ed M = 2.80), **casual or noncommittal encounters** (W/ formal sex ed M = 2.76 vs. W/o formal sex ed M = 3.00), **sexual content/behaviors** (W/ formal sex ed M = 2.53 vs. W/o formal sex ed M = 2.78), and **animated, edited, or promotional sexual content** (W/ formal sex ed M = 2.21 vs. W/o formal sex ed M = 2.43).

However, **ongoing relationship dynamics/maintenance and breakups/transitions** were the only domain in which the two groups shared similar exposure levels. This pattern may suggest an association between lacking formal sex education and exposure to content with permissive sexual attitudes and explicit visuals, although this association may reflect other underlying factors, such as differences in school context, media access, or broader family and peer environments.

Exposure to Relationship and Sexual Content Domains by Formal Sex Education Status

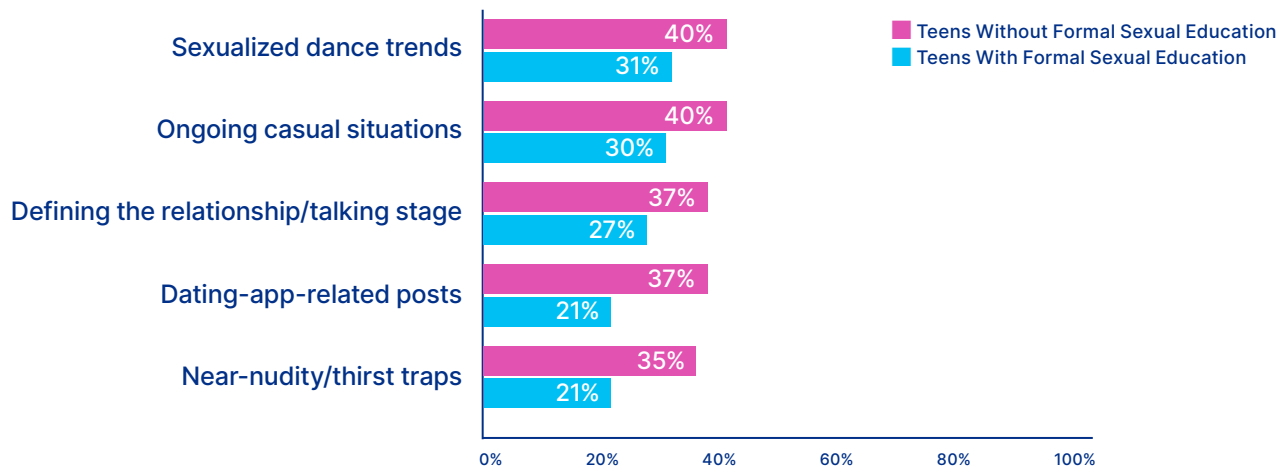
1.0 = Never, 2.0 = Rarely, 3.0 = Sometimes, 4.0 = Often, 5.0 = Almost Always

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



Exposure to Topics Related to Relationship and Sexual Content on Social Media by Teen's Formal Sex Education Status

Teens who frequently ("almost always" + "often") see these types of content



SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP CONTENT EXPOSURE

Gender Differences in Content Exposure

Overall, boys and girls reported similar levels of exposure across most content domains. Exposure to **relationship initiation and early-stage dating**, **casual or noncommittal encounters**, and **sexual content/behaviors** did not differ significantly between genders.

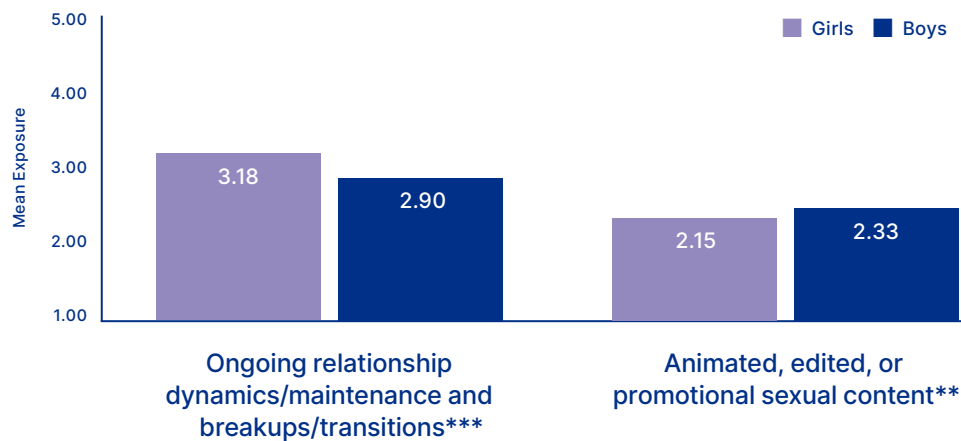
However, two domains stood out as exceptions. Girls reported significantly higher exposure to content about **ongoing relationship dynamics/maintenance and breakups/transitions**, including healthy relationship skills, standards and expectations, cheating, and breakup experiences, compared to boys (Girls M = 3.18 vs. Boys M = 2.90). Boys, on the other hand, reported significantly higher exposure to **animated, edited, or promotional sexual content** (Boys M = 2.33 vs. Girls M = 2.15).

Girls vs. Boys Exposure to Sexual and Relationship Content on Social Media

By domain

1.0 = Never, 2.0 = Rarely, 3.0 = Sometimes, 4.0 = Often, 5.0 = Almost Always

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



While the overall exposure measure of **sexual content/behaviors** did not differ significantly by gender, boys and girls did differ in the types of sexual content they encountered. Boys reported significantly higher exposure to thirst traps (i.e. content features explicit visuals of one's body) (Boy M = 2.76 vs. Girls M = 2.35) and sexually suggestive acts (i.e. dry-humping) (Boys M = 2.53 vs. Girls M = 2.13). Girls, on the other hand, reported significantly higher exposure to lip-syncing to explicit lyrics (Girls M = 3.40 vs. Boys M = 2.74) and sexualized dance trends (i.e. twerking) (Girls M = 2.90 vs. Boys M = 2.67). These differences may reflect and reinforce broader gendered scripts around how boys and girls are expected to relate to sex and relationships.

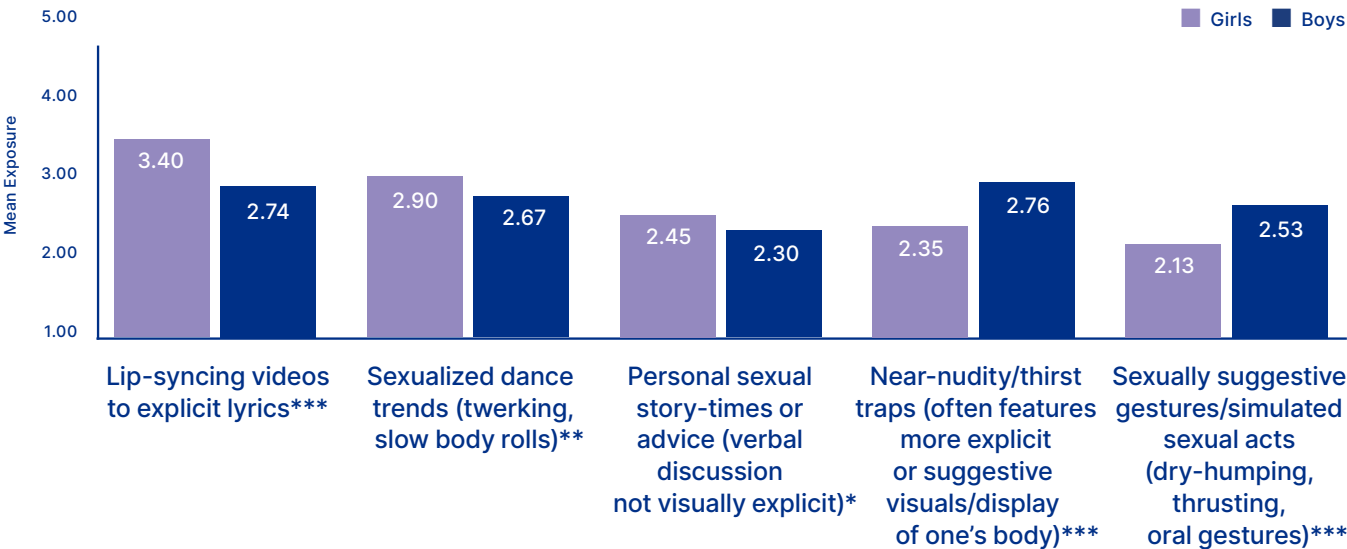


SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP CONTENT EXPOSURE

Girls vs. Boys Exposure to **Topics** Within the Sexual Content/Behavior Domain

1.0 = Never, 2.0 = Rarely, 3.0 = Sometimes, 4.0 = Often, 5.0 = Almost Always

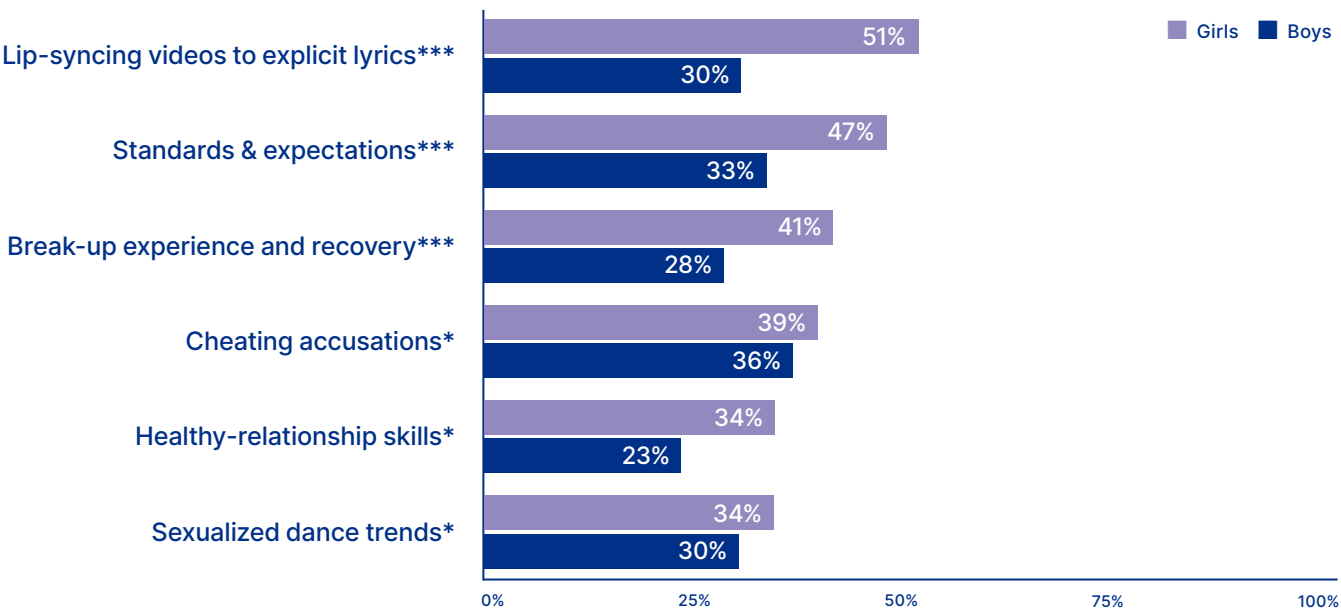
Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



Girls vs. Boys Exposure to **Topics** Related to Relationship and Sexual Content on Social Media (Girls' Exposure > Boys' Exposure)

Teens who frequently ("almost always" + "often") see these types of content

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$



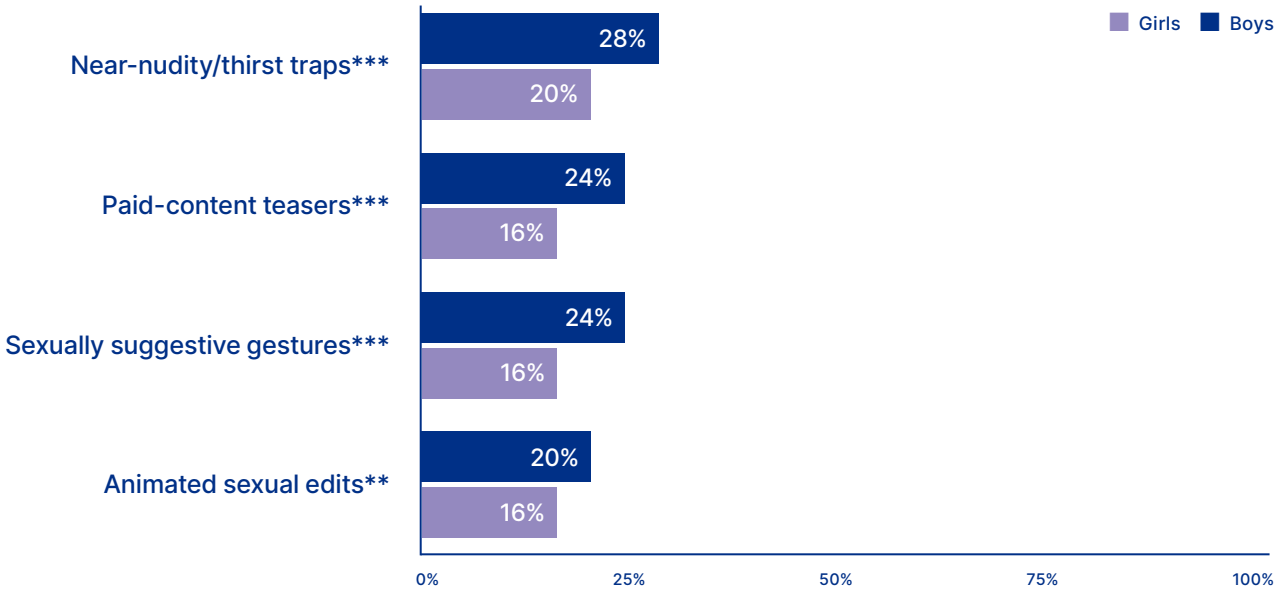


SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP CONTENT EXPOSURE

Girls vs. Boys Exposure to **Topics** Related to Relationship and Sexual Content on Social Media
(Boys' Exposure > Girls' Exposure)

Teens who frequently ("almost always" + "often") see these types of content

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (**) = $p < .01$, (***) = $p < .001$





CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS



CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Teens Navigate Sex and Relationships Within Multiple Social & Digital Contexts

As a whole, this report describes how adolescents today are navigating sex and relationships within a mixed social ecology. Teens generally endorse safer-sex attitudes, and their perception of their close friends' opinions also reinforces these ideas. Yet, young people also tend to view their broader peer group as more sexually experienced and having more risky and permissive sexual attitudes. Coupled with the varied messages teens may encounter through social media algorithms, including content that may be more sexually permissive or relationship-focused than the content they intentionally seek out, these patterns highlight the complex environment in which young people form ideas and make decisions about dating, intimacy, and relationships.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Teens appear to navigate two differing normative environments when it comes to sex and relationships.

Peer influences are not uniform. Across multiple measures, young people viewed their broader peer group as more sexually experienced and harboring more risky and permissive attitudes towards sex than their close friends. At the same time, close friends were more often seen as supportive of safer sex practices, particularly around condom usage. The disparity between teens' assumptions versus the reality of how common certain risky sexual behaviors are also suggests that some adolescents may overestimate the prevalence of these experiences among people their age. Thus, it's imperative for those designing sex ed curricula and programming to recognize that perceived social norms can impact behaviors even when they're inaccurate or not representative (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018). To strengthen sexual health and encourage the development of healthier relationships, educators can leverage teens' close friends as a protective influence and potentially implement lessons that address misconceptions to minimize unnecessary social pressures to conform to teens' inaccurate perceptions around sex. Schools and youth-serving programs may also consider peer-led approaches that engage trusted or socially influential students within local networks to model healthier norms and help disseminate accurate information.

Most teens report favorable attitudes toward safe sex practices, but access to sexual health information remains uneven.

While the majority of teens endorsed positive attitudes towards condom usage and reported having received formal sexual education, there's still a sizable number of teens who have never had formal or informal discussions around sex with key adult figures in their lives (e.g., parents/guardians, healthcare providers). Teens without formal sexual education are especially vulnerable, as they report both weaker safe-sex attitudes and greater exposure to sexually explicit and sensitive content online. This suggests that some adolescents may face compounding informational gaps, underscoring the importance of early identification and outreach to youth who are not being reached by traditional educational channels. These findings underscore the collective responsibility for schools, healthcare systems, families, and communities to provide sexual health support and education so that teens aren't left to piece together critical information that has consequences on their health by themselves.

In addition, educators should recognize that social media may expose teens to messages about sexual health, dating, relationships, and sex even when they do not actively follow or seek out this content, particularly through algorithmically recommended posts. This makes health literacy an important component of media literacy, so that young people are equipped to evaluate the accuracy, relevance, and credibility of digital content. It also creates opportunities for mentors, educators, and providers to better understand teens' perspectives and to use digital platforms to share accurate, developmentally appropriate information.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Algorithms override personal choices in terms of what teens see on their feeds; however, there is no uniform or representative pattern of relationship-and sex-related content exposure across adolescents.

Although teens' exposure to relationship- and sex-related content on social media varies across individuals and content domains, these findings suggest that **algorithmic feeds may play an important role in shaping the relational and sexual messages teens encounter online**. Overall, teens did not report frequent exposure to these types of content, but certain domains, especially ongoing relationship dynamics, casual encounters, and some forms of sexualized visual or audio content, appeared more often than others. This pattern suggests that teens' social media environments are not defined solely by their personal following choices or preferences. Instead, platform algorithms may also influence the kinds of relationships and sexual content that appear in their feeds. Thus, industry designers should be mindful of how recommendation systems may shape teens' impressions of dating, intimacy, and sexual health. Platforms can use this influence to create more protective digital environments by elevating accurate, developmentally optimal sexual-health information and reducing the amplification of misleading, risky, or harmful content.

Gender differences between girls and boys suggest that support needs may not be the same for all teens.

Girls were more likely to perceive their broader peer culture as risky while viewing close friends as more protective, whereas boys were less likely to report receiving sexual health conversations or formal sex education and expressed somewhat less favorable attitudes towards safe-sex practices overall. Boys and girls also reported **different patterns of online content exposure**. Together, these findings suggest that sexual health communication and programming may be more effective when tailored to the distinct social pressures, informational gaps, and media environments different groups of teens are navigating.

In sum, these findings underscore that teens' sexual health decisions are shaped by more than individual knowledge alone. Young people are making sense of sex, dating, and relationships within overlapping social, educational, and digital environments, including perceived peer norms, conversations with trusted adults, formal sex education, and the content that appears in their social media feeds. Supporting adolescents therefore requires a coordinated approach that strengthens accurate sexual health education, creates more open and trusted spaces for conversation, addresses misperceptions about peer behavior, and helps teens critically evaluate the relationship and sexual messages they encounter online.



APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Methodology

Between January 23 and February 11, 2026, the Digital Wellness Lab conducted a nationwide survey of 1,124 teens, ages 16–18. Prior to the main data collection phase, a preliminary survey was launched January 16–22, 2026 to assess completion rates and response patterns; this initial pilot test included 175 respondents, whose data were subsequently excluded from the final analysis for any questions that were altered to reflect adjustments made after the soft launch. Two attention check questions were included in the survey to ensure that participants continued to read and respond appropriately to the items; those who answered these questions incorrectly were disqualified.

The final survey administered contained 95 multiple choice items largely consisting of likert-scale and matrix-style questions. All participants completed a series that covered demographic information, social media usage and engagement, sexual health literacy experiences, and attitudes around sex and condom-usage. Respondents were piped through a series of questions regarding their sexual experiences and practices, based on whether or not they indicated if they’ve ever been sexually active. Group differences were examined using ANOVAs for continuous outcomes and chi-square tests for categorical outcomes. For simplicity, only p-values are reported.

Full survey items provided upon request.

Participant Demographics

Age

16: 26.2% (N = 295)

17: 36.3% (N = 408)

18: 37.5% (N = 421)

Race/Ethnicity*

Multi-racial: 5.9%, (N = 66)

American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.6% (N = 7)

Asian: 5.3% (N = 60)

Black/African American: 12.5% (N = 141)

Native Hawaiian: 1.5% (N = 17)

Middle Eastern/North African: 0.3% (N = 3)

White: 51.2% (N = 575)

Hispanic or Latino: 21.8% (N = 245)

Other: 0.4% (N = 4)

Prefer not to answer: 0.5% (N = 6)

*Respondents could choose as many categories as they wanted; in order to avoid counting participants twice, those who selected multiple choices are included in the “Multiracial” category. Any respondent who selected “Hispanic” was included only in the Hispanic category regardless of other race/ethnicity selections they made. This approach results in the above-listed mutually exclusive categories.

APPENDIX

Gender Identity

What is your gender identity?

Female: 50.3% (N = 565)

Male: 45.8% (N = 515)

Non-binary (e.g., genderqueer, gender non-conforming): 2.9% (N = 33)

Other identity: 0.2% (N = 2)

Prefer not to answer: 0.8% (N = 9%)

Do you identify as transgender, or identify with a different gender than the one you were assigned at birth?

Yes: 5.2% (N = 58)

No: 91.3% (N = 1026)

I'm not sure: 2.3% (N = 26)

Prefer not to answer: 1.2% (N = 14)

Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual (straight): 72.4% (N = 814)

Gay or Lesbian: 6.1% (N = 69)

Bisexual: 11.1% (N = 125)

Pansexual: 2.5% (N = 28)

Queer: 0.5% (N = 6)

Asexual: 1.9% (N = 21)

I describe my sexual identity some other way: 0.9% (N = 10)

I am not sure about my sexual identity (questioning): 2% (N = 22)

I do not know what this question is asking: 0.6% (N = 7)

Prefer not to answer: 2% (N = 22)

Sexual Activity

Yes (Sexually active): 31.1% (N = 349)

No: 60.9% (N = 683)

Prefer not to answer: 7.9% (N = 89)

Education

Traditional public school (part of a larger district): 69.6% (N = 782)

Magnet school (uses an exam, application, or lottery system): 6.4% (N = 72)

Charter school (independent public school): 8.5% (N = 95)

Religious private school: 3.4% (N = 38)

Secular (non-religious) private school: 2% (N = 23)

Private boarding school (students live at the school): 1.1% (N = 12)

Technical/Vocational school: 1.3% (N = 15)

Homeschool: 7.7% (N = 86)

Other: 0.1% (N = 1)

APPENDIX

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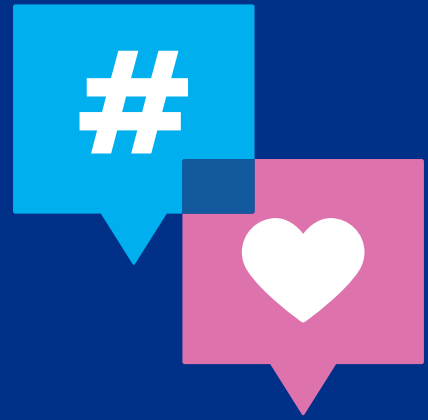
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Boston Children's
Digital Wellness Lab



The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital seeks to understand and promote positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, from birth through young adulthood.

The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital is supported by a diverse portfolio of philanthropic foundations, corporations, and individual donors. All research conducted by the Digital Wellness Lab is designed, implemented, analyzed, and reported independently by Lab investigators. This report was produced as part of the Lab's broader research mission to generate independent, evidence-based insights on young people's experiences in digital environments.

For more information about our work, please contact us at dwl@childrens.harvard.edu or visit digitalwellnesslab.org