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Attitudes towards condom use among young people

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Introduction

The promotion of condom use among young people has received increasing attention, given its importance in reducing levels of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Despite this however, a proportion of young people still fail to protect themselves during sexual intercourse and previous findings indicate condom use as more common among boys than girls (Currie et al., 2008). Adolescent condom use has been shown to be influenced by several factors, including personal health values, (Rosengard et al., 2001), previous sexual risk behaviours (Brown et al., 1992), availability of sex and relationships education (Mueller et al., 2008) and communication with parents (Miller et al., 1998). Attitudes and feelings towards condoms and condom use may also influence subsequent use of condoms among young people (Bell, 2009; Nguyen et al., 1994). Having a positive attitude towards contraceptive responsibility, for example, has been associated with a positive effect on intentions to use condoms among adolescent males (Nguyen et al., 1994). Likewise, embarrassment surrounding purchasing and carrying condoms has been shown to inhibit acquisition and use of condoms among young people (Bell, 2009).

The impact of sex education on sexual health and condom use is still largely unclear. A large proportion of studies have shown positive impacts on sexual risk behaviour, including improved awareness of risk and knowledge of risk reduction strategies and intention to practice safer sex (Kirby et al., 2005; Wellings et al., 2006). However, other studies have shown no change, with an investigation of the theoretically based sex education programme (SHARE) showing no difference in conception or terminations compared with conventional provision (Henderson et al., 2007). This briefing paper supplement investigates attitudes towards condoms among young people in Scotland. It identifies gender differences between attitudes and subsequent use. Associations are explored between key sex education topics in school and attitudes towards condoms among young people.

Summary of main findings

- Girls are more likely than boys to feel embarrassed about buying condoms or uncomfortable carrying condoms. There are no gender differences in the proportion of boys and girls who find condoms too expensive to use regularly.

- Boys who do not feel comfortable carrying condoms are less likely to use a condom than those who do feel comfortable or who do not have an opinion on this topic. Among boys, there is no significant association between condom use and reporting condoms as too expensive to use regularly, or embarrassment of buying condoms. No significant associations are evident between condom attitudes and condom use among girls.
- Among those young people who have positive attitudes towards condoms (do not feel embarrassed buying condoms or do not feel uncomfortable buying condoms), boys are more likely than girls to have used a condom at last intercourse.
- Pupils who receive sex education are less likely to have negative views about condoms than those who have not received sex education. With the exception of menstruation and HIV / AIDS, all topics have an association with attitudes (either feeling condoms are too expensive to buy regularly and/or not feeling comfortable carrying condoms), although the topics influencing these attitudes vary by gender. Having received sex education appears to have no significant influence on feeling embarrassed about buying condoms for either gender.

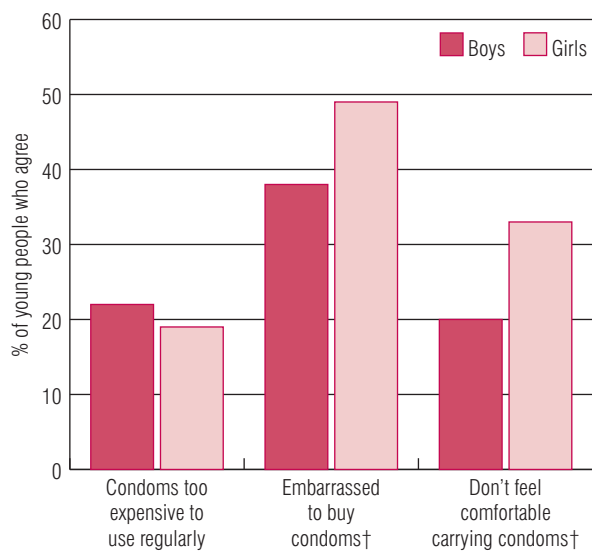
Attitudes towards condom use

Young people were asked how much they agreed with statements about buying and carrying condoms. **Figure 1** shows attitudes towards condoms for boys and girls. Around one fifth of boys and girls feel that condoms are too expensive to buy regularly. However, significantly more girls than boys would feel embarrassed buying condoms or carrying condoms with them. Almost two-fifths (38%) of boys report that they would be embarrassed buying condoms compared with almost half (49%) of girls. Similarly, only one-fifth (20%) of boys do not feel comfortable carrying condoms compared with one third (33%) of girls.

Attitudes towards condoms and condom use

Figure 2 shows the association between attitudes towards condoms and condom use. Boys who do not feel comfortable carrying condoms are less likely to use a condom than those who do feel comfortable or who do not have an opinion on this topic. Over four fifths (85%) of those who feel comfortable

Figure 1: Attitudes towards condoms among 15-year-olds by gender



† Significant gender difference (p<0.05)

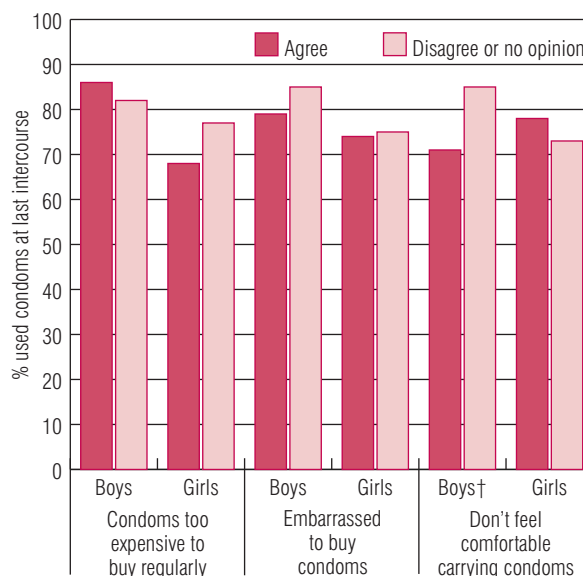
carrying condoms report having used a condom at last intercourse, compared with less than three quarters (71%) of those who do not feel comfortable carrying condoms, or do not have an opinion on this topic. There is no significant association between condom use and feeling condoms are too expensive or being embarrassed buying condoms among boys. No significant associations are evident between attitudes towards condoms and condom use among girls. Among those young people who do not feel embarrassed buying condoms or have no opinion on the topic, boys (85%) are more likely to have used a condom at last intercourse than girls (75%). Similarly, among those who do not feel uncomfortable carrying condoms or have no opinion, 85% of boys report having used a condom at last intercourse compared with 73% of girls. There are no gender differences between positive attitudes and condom use in relation to the price of condoms.

Sex education and attitudes towards condoms

Young people were asked about the sex education they received at school. Over 80% of pupils report discussing eight out of the ten key sexual health topics at schools (personal relationships, sexual feelings and emotions, menstruation, sexual development, sexual intercourse, getting pregnant / getting a girl pregnant, condoms, other contraceptives, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections). Only discussion of menstruation and getting pregnant was reported to be significantly higher among girls.

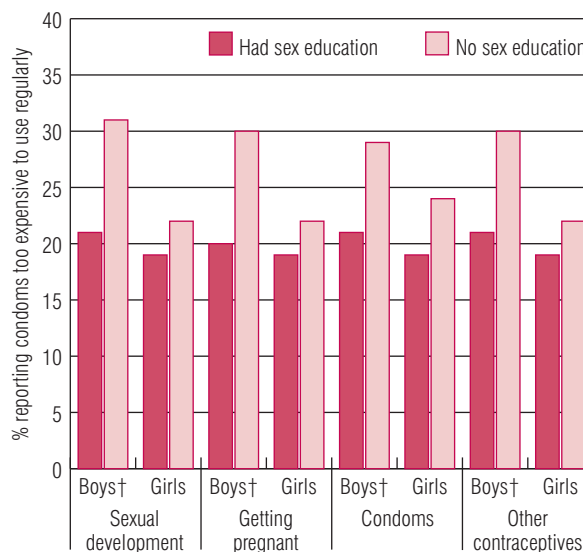
Positive associations are found between sex education topics and young people's attitudes towards condoms (either feeling condoms are too expensive to buy regularly and/or not feeling comfortable carrying condoms). The only topics that have no effect on these attitudes towards condom use for either gender are menstruation and HIV/AIDS. No significant associations are found between sex education and feeling

Figure 2: Association between attitudes towards condoms and condom use by gender



† Significant difference (p<0.05)

Figure 3: Association between sex education topics and feeling condoms are too expensive among 15-year-olds

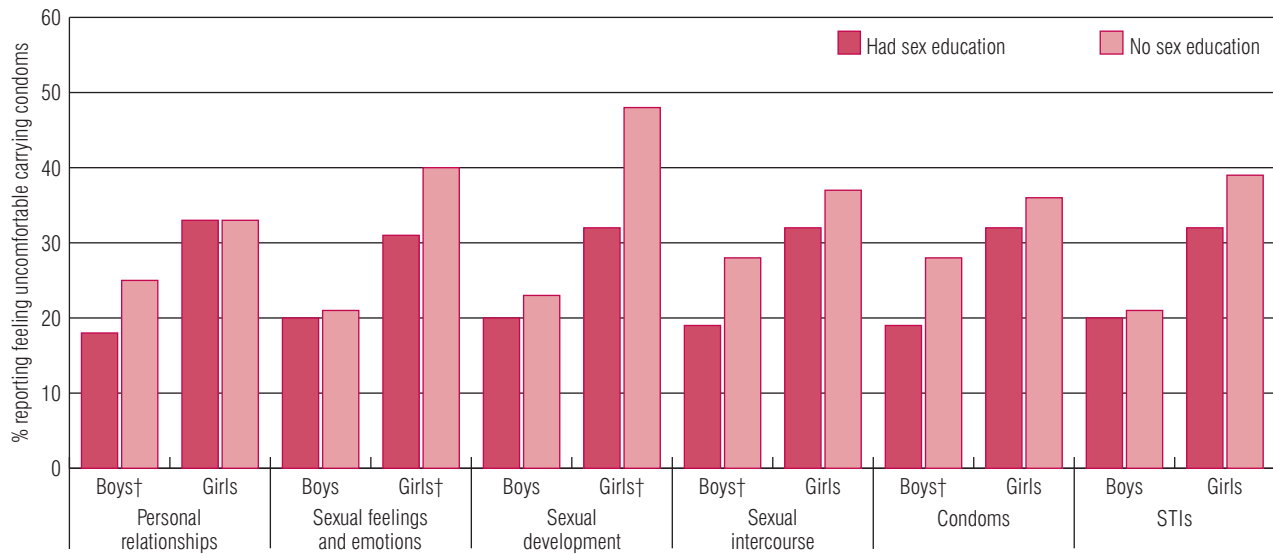


† Significant difference (p<0.05)

embarrassed about buying condoms for either gender.

Figures 3 and 4 show the association between sex education and feeling condoms are too expensive and feeling uncomfortable carrying condoms respectively. Figure 3 shows that boys who have sex education on sexual development, getting pregnant, condoms and other contraceptives are less likely to find condoms too expensive, compared with those who have not received sex education on these topics. Although a positive trend appears to be present, no significant associations are found among girls. Figure 4 shows that boys who have received sex education on personal relationships, sexual intercourse or condoms, are less likely to report feeling

Figure 4: Association between sex education topics and feeling uncomfortable carrying condoms among 15-year-olds



† Significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

uncomfortable about carrying condoms than those who have not. Among girls, those who have received sex education about sexual feelings and emotions, sexual development and STIs are less likely to report feeling uncomfortable about carrying condoms than those who have not.

Discussion

This briefing paper has shown how attitudes towards condom use vary by gender, and how this is associated with condom use. It also shows how the sex education topics covered in school may influence young people's attitudes towards condoms. Findings showed more positive attitudes towards condoms among boys than girls. Girls were more likely to feel embarrassed buying condoms than boys and more uncomfortable carrying them than boys. Furthermore, while having more positive feelings towards carrying condoms was associated with using condoms among boys; this was not the case for girls. Although reasons for this gender disparity are not further investigated within the HBSC survey, previous qualitative findings have shown that buying and carrying condoms in advance could suggest that sexual intercourse is anticipated; a label which is often seen as undesirable among girls (Bell, 2009). As such, this may be an area which needs to be addressed within SRE. Although no significant associations were found between finding condoms too expensive to buy, or being embarrassed buying condoms and condom use, it is important to note that since the 2006 HBSC survey, the availability of free condoms has improved in Scotland (e.g. c:card, a free condom service), as a result of the national sexual health strategy, *Respect and Responsibility* (Scottish Executive, 2005). Issues surrounding condom price, purchasing and availability may therefore be changing and warrant further investigation.

Sex education in schools is common among both genders, with high proportions of pupils reporting having discussed the

majority of key sexual health topics at school. An important and encouraging finding is the effect of sex education on attitudes towards condoms among young people. Results highlight the importance of sexual health education in helping to form positive attitudes towards condom use, particularly among boys. However, the types of topics which proved effective differed between boys and girls. This suggests that boys and girls may respond to different types of sex education and that lessons may benefit from being gender specific. Sex education on HIV/AIDS was not shown to have any associations with attitudes towards condoms. This may suggest that young people's knowledge and/or understanding of HIV/AIDS is limited, or that an association is not being made between HIV/AIDS and condom use among young people. A recent study has indicated that the relationship between HIV/AIDS knowledge and sexual behaviour is indeed complex. Findings indicated that better knowledge of HIV/AIDS could lead to more consistent condom use; however, adolescents who started sex earlier and used condoms inconsistently tended to be more knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS (Berten and van Rossem, 2009).

The findings from this paper must of course, be considered in relation to its strengths and limitations. Our findings suggest that sex education has an effect on influencing young people's attitudes towards condoms, and that these effects differ between boys and girls. It is important to recognise therefore, that other factors may be of more relevance to girls and that gender specific sex education may help to support changes in girls' sexual health. It must also be acknowledged that attitudes towards condoms may be influenced by other factors not covered in this briefing paper, such as family structure, socio-economic status, family, peer and other social influences. The subjective nature of pupils' reporting of their sex education and attitudes towards condoms must also be considered. A previous study also demonstrated that in a

group of young people who received HIV education 5-12 weeks prior to a survey, only two-thirds remembered attending the sessions when later questioned (Brown et al., 1992).

These results highlight the importance of further developing positive attitudes towards condoms among young people. Certain types of sex education are associated with young people's attitudes towards condoms, however these differ by gender. The importance of gender specific sex education is therefore highlighted. Importance must be placed on improving both adolescent boys' and girls' feelings towards obtaining and carrying condoms and reducing their inhibitions in the practicalities associated with this.

Additional measures used in this briefing paper

Sex education at school

Young people were asked about how often they had received school classes on a variety of topics. *Have you had any classes at school that have given information or discussed the following topics? Personal relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends / Sexual feelings and emotions / Menstruation (periods) / Sexual development (puberty) / Sexual intercourse / Getting pregnant or getting a girl pregnant / Condoms / Other contraceptives / HIV or AIDS / Other sexually transmitted infections (No / Yes, once / Yes, a few times / Yes, many times)*

Attitudes towards condom use

Young people were asked about their attitudes towards condoms. *Here are some statements about condoms. Please say how much you agree or disagree with each one. Condoms are too expensive to use regularly / I would be embarrassed to buy a condom / I don't feel comfortable carrying condoms with me. (Agree a lot / Agree a bit / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree a bit / Disagree a lot)*

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