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Sex has moved far beyond 'should we or shouldn't we?'

Doreen Rosenthal
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TOO many young women would rather risk pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and infertility than possibly upset their boyfriends by suggesting they use condoms.

As a survey reported in *The Age* last week found, nearly 80 per cent of sexually active women aged 16 to 25 have had unprotected sex.

This online poll gave a glimpse of the risks many young people are still taking in their sexual relationships. After more than 20 years of research into adolescent sexual health, I can attest that while young women and men today seem much more savvy about sex, they are actually under siege, confronted by more sexual pressures than previous generations.

The paradox is that although they think they know more about sex than their parents, many young people are basing their sexual decision-making on myths, miscommunication and misconceptions.

This is despite the fact there is more information available than ever before about sex — but it is often misleading or downright wrong.

As well, this generation is facing unprecedented expectations to make relationship decisions more rapidly. Electronic communications are compressing the time spans in which relationships are developing, leaving young people with less time to make the kinds of choices that can have life-changing consequences.

One of the key reasons our young people seem more sophisticated about sex is their exposure to it in the form of media content.

But when this content perpetuates old myths (such as "nice girls don't carry condoms"), the overall impact can be to hinder rather than help young people to make wise decisions about sex. It may actually increase the pressure on young people by creating a sense that "everybody's doing it". Research in Australia and overseas finds that teenagers cite as a reason for having sex a belief that their peers are having sex, even when that belief is unfounded.

Another example of a common misconception is that young people confuse safe sex (using condoms for disease prevention) and contraception (pregnancy prevention). Research has shown that some young people believed that they were practising safe sex because the female partners were on the pill without understanding that the pill doesn't provide protection from STIs.

A personal issue regarding safe sex occurs even among teenagers who know that condoms protect against STIs. They are commonly still reluctant to use them — often because they believe using condoms shows a lack of trust

in their partner to be monogamous.

"If I ask him to use a condom, it means I don't trust him", is a reason cited by many young women for not practising safe sex, revealing a confusion between a health issue (safe sex) and a relationship issue (trust in one's partner).

Deciding whose responsibility it is to use condoms may require skilful negotiation and a degree of self-confidence — both of which are often lacking among young women. It can also mean having the power to resist pressure to not use condoms.

As a society, we need to look past the apparent sexual assuredness of our teenagers to recognise that they still need our support and guidance and, most importantly, easy access to reliable, accurate information. This information needs to equip them to make the best possible choices, when it comes to sex.

For the past year, the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society at The University of Melbourne has been developing a sexual and reproductive health website that does more than just provide the facts. This site (www.yoursexhealth.org) helps young people deal with everything from communication to condoms to coming out.

By providing insights into the consequences of their choices, it aims to give young people the skills to navigate through today's sexual minefield. It also advises them on how to evaluate the information they receive from modern technologies.

A better understanding of their sexuality will help young people enjoy better health, better relationships and, ultimately, better lives.

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