

What is "Having Sex?" An Exploratory Investigation into Sexual Communication and Sexual Education Experiences

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Abstract

Although engaging in sexual activity is a common activity for many, research suggests the sexual communication skills of individuals are lacking. This may be due to a lack of knowledge about sexual communication, as well as an individual's own disposition toward sexual openness. Using survey data collected online via Qualtrics, this project explores the relationship between sexual education experiences in high school and how the big five personality traits are related to the perception of sex and sexual communication. The goal of this research is to subsequently identify the areas where sexual education can be improved based upon individuals' gaps in knowledge about sexual health and sexual communication.

Keywords: sexual communication, personality, mixed-methods, sexual education

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Introduction

Comprehensive sexual education (CSE) seeks to equip young people with “the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality—physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships” (Panchaud & Anderson, 2016, p. 1). CSE covers topics including sexual and reproductive rights, sexual health, interpersonal violence, gender expression, and sexual pleasure so that individuals are prepared navigate their own sexuality as well as intimate relationships with others (Panchaud & Anderson, 2016). Although a comprehensive sexual education is a crucial element for one’s overall wellbeing, the curriculum in the United States is varied in terms of its content, health-focus, and inclusivity (Guttmacher Institute, 2022). Given these differences, and the decrease in sexual education since 1995 (Lindberg & Kantor, 2021), it is likely there are also significant disparities in how individuals understand what constitutes sexual activity, practices of sexual communication, and the content that was covered during sex education, if at all. For example, despite the existence of pornography since the early 1500’s, research suggests the accessibility of pornography is taking an increased role in sexual education in recent years (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011). In a study containing 140 high school students, participants indicated in the absence of a comprehensive sexual education, pornography acted as a stand-in for learning about sex, with the average age of first watching pornography at 11 years old (Crabbe & Corelett, 2011). Given that 88% of pornographic materials contain some aspect of physical aggression, typically toward a female participant, students were rating these behaviors as being a part of normal sexual relationships (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011). With this research, there is an apparent need for comprehensive sexual education and students' needs for learning about these important topics. Subsequently, an

understanding of how adults operationalize various sexual concepts (e.g., “having sex,” expressing desire to a partner) is crucial to accurately portraying the sexual experiences of adults.

Abstinence-based sexual education programs are one of the top approaches to sexual education in the United States. An abstinence-based sexual education focuses on teaching students to refrain from any sexual behaviors with others, especially penetration. In 2009, a study was done with 298 university students examining their definitions of abstinence (Byers et al., 2009). In this study, participants were given a list of 17 sexual behaviors and asked which behaviors fell within their own definition of abstinence and “having sex.” While defining sexual abstinence, participants recorded activities that excluded genital stimulation but included behaviors such as making out and foreplay (which excluded any behaviors involving the genitals in participants’ definitions). Subsequently, participants excluded sexual behaviors from their definitions of having sex due to sex being defined as needing penetration (Byers et al., 2009). The results also indicated participants who reported practicing abstinence did not include sexual behaviors such as genital stimulation, but their definitions of having sex did include genital penetration as well (Byers et al., 2009). Additionally, although participants were mixed on behaviors involving unidirectional genital stimulation such as oral sex and genital fondling, these activities were still mostly understood as acceptable under the practice of sexual abstinence. Finally, the results also indicated males with a conservative, religious, and less sexually experienced background were more likely than other groups to consider bidirectional genital stimulation, sexual acts such as reciprocal oral sex and mutual masturbation, as behaviors constituting abstinence (Byers et al., 2009).

The quality of sexual education that individuals receive also makes a difference in the sexual behaviors people partake in both during early adulthood and adulthood. A study done

from 2011 to 2019 examined the number of adolescents who received formal sexual education that included topics on sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. Through the course of this study, the rates of formal sexual education decreased among individuals, and there were large discrepancies between sexual education among race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Overall, however, adolescents who received more quality sexual education were more likely to use contraception and engage in sexual abstinence (Lindberg & Kantor, 2021). With this research, it is apparent students are receiving varying levels of sexual education and the sexual health precautions individuals undergo also varies depending on the quality of their sexual education.

Sexual communication involving sexual behaviors is an area that is lacking in the sexual education curriculum. In formal sexual education, sexual communication is rarely discussed beyond the provision of a legal definition of affirmative consent that constitutes “yes means yes.” This leaves students to learn about nonverbal and verbal sexual communication on their own (Hayes et al., 2022). In a study done by Babin (2013), researchers examined the predictors of communication, pleasure, and sexual encounters. The researchers first looked at nonverbal communication during sex itself and found nonverbal sexual communication was the biggest predictor of sexual self-esteem and sexual satisfaction (Babin, 2013). This shows participants who displayed more engaging and confident sexual behaviors also displayed higher rates of sexual satisfaction. Surprisingly, verbal communication about sexual activities itself did not predict positive sexual satisfaction (Babin, 2013). The lack of sexual communication taught in sexual education can be seen in both verbal and nonverbal sexual communication as it is displayed in sexual experiences in participants who lack experience and comfort in both verbal and nonverbal sexual communication.

With the rise of technology, relationships and communication are also moving to the digital world. Young adults are utilizing accessibility to maintain relationships online without having to leave the comfort of their own homes in almost all of their relationships, including sexual ones. In a study evaluating the extent to which young adults use technology in sexual relationships, it was found that 25% of 12–17 year olds have sent a “sext,” or sexually explicit text, and 25% of 12-17 year olds have been sent a sext (Widman et al., 2021). However, these young adults also reported not receiving sexual education in regard to sexually explicit content using technology (Widman et al., 2021). A comprehensive sexual education would include aspects of sending sexually explicit content as well as prepare students for the risks associated with engaging in such behaviors.

Lastly, personality traits are also significant in predicting sexual behaviors. The big five personality traits play a role in how individuals approach and experience the world around them and can be tied to sexual interactions (Caprara et al., 1993). The big five personality traits include openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism. Openness reflects the extent to which a person is open to new ideas, experiences, and ways of thinking. Conscientiousness refers to the degree of organization, responsibility, and dependability a person has. Extraversion relates to how outgoing, sociable, and energetic a person is. Agreeableness reflects how cooperative, compassionate, and considerate a person is in their interactions with others. Neuroticism refers to the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and insecurity. Together, these traits may predict sexual behaviors. For example, someone high in extraversion might be more open to new experiences and seek out social interactions, which could influence their willingness to engage in sexual activities and explore different aspects of their sexuality. Conscientiousness could affect how responsible and careful

someone is in their sexual encounters, while openness to experience might influence their willingness to try new things sexually. Agreeableness could impact how considerate and empathetic a person is toward a sexual partner's needs and neuroticism might affect a person's level of anxiety and insecurity in intimate situations. These traits can shape how individuals communicate, connect, and behave in sexual experiences.

Given the disparities in sexual education and different factors that may affect sexual communication, the following research questions are forwarded:

RQ1: *How do individuals define "having sex"?*

RQ2: *To what extent do the big five personality traits predict openness to sexual communication?*

RQ3: *What are some of the most commonly covered topics in high school sexual education?*

Methods

Participants

Participants' ($N=89$) ages ranged from 19 to 73 years old ($M_{age} = 24.06$, $SD = 11.45$). The majority of respondents were women (57.8%), followed by men (30.1%), non-binary individuals (8.4%), genderfluid individuals (1.2%), and 2.4% of individuals preferred to self-describe (e.g., agender). A little less than half the sample identified as heterosexual or straight (49.4%), but the majority of participants identified with a sexuality under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, including bisexual (20.5%), queer (10.8%), lesbian (7.2%), and pansexual (4.8%) as the largest non-heterosexual identifications. Additionally, 41.6% of participants were in a committed relationship of more than 6 months, 36.0% were single, and 12.0% were casually dating. When participants described their own relationship status, 4.8% of participants noted that they were

married or in a polyamorous relationship with multiple partners. Lastly, the majority of participants were White (76.5%), followed by Hispanic and/or Latino (14.8%), then Asian (2.5%), Black (2.5%), and 3.7% of participants self-described as mixed-race.

Procedure

Participants completed the survey through the online survey distribution service Qualtrics. Individuals completed basic demographic information, followed by a series of questions regarding their own sexual experiences within the past six months, preferred sexual communication styles, personality-related questions, and content covered during grade-school sexual education. The majority of the items on the survey were assessed through Likert-style items (e.g., rating agreement with a statement on a scale from one to five), followed by open-response formats. This procedure was approved by the IRB office of the authors' institution.

Measures and Analysis

Definitions

Participants were asked to define, in their own words, what behaviors constitute “having sex” with another person. Based on these open-ended responses, a codebook was generated and refined to categorize responses in the context of the behavior listed. For example, “penetrative intercourse” indicated participants described some form of penetrative sex. Codes were aggregated in the context of overall response percentage.

Big Five Inventory

Personality was assessed using a short form of the Big Five Inventory (BFI-20; Tucaković & Nedeljković, 2022). The BFI-20 uses 20 items to assess all extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Four items are used to assess each trait, through which participants are asked the extent to which a statement is reflective of them

and rate their agreement on a one to five scale where one = *strongly disagree* and five = *strongly agree*. Items were reverse-coded as appropriate in accordance with the BFI-20 rating instructions (Tucaković & Nedeljković, 2022).

Sexual Communication Scale

The Sexual Communication Scale (SeCS; Moazami et al., 2022) assesses various aspects of sexual communication, such as the ability to initiate discussions about sexual desires or preferences, the comfort level in sharing sexual needs, and how well partners feel they understand each other's sexual wishes. The scale contains a series of statements or questions that participants answer and rate their agreement on a one to five scale where one = *strongly disagree* and five = *strongly agree*. Two of the three factors within the scale, ease of own communication and ease of partner's communication, are comprised of items that indicate hypothetical communication patterns during sexual activity. The third factor, frequency of bidirectional communication, asks individuals to rate the extent to which certain behaviors occur while engaging in sexual activity with a certain partner. Only individuals who indicated engaging in previous sexual activity were presented with the entire scale.

Sexual Education Experiences

Sexual education experiences were assessed with a variety of self-report measures and asked participants to recall their sexual education received during grade school. Participants were asked whether sexual education was mandatory at their high school, to indicate whether their sexual education covered a list of various topics, and alternative sources of sexual education.

Results

RQ1: Definitions of “Having Sex”

A graph depicting the percentage of each definition of “having sex” is presented in Table 1. There were eight distinct definitional components that participants indicated; penetrative intercourse, any activity involving genitals/sex organs, sexual pleasure, oral sex, anal sex, activity with the potential for sexually transmitted infection (STI), and the phrase “having sex” itself. The most popular definition of “having sex” involved penetrative intercourse, with 33% of responses indicating some form of penetrative sexual activity in their responses. Penetrative intercourse was the most prevalent response (33% of responses), followed by genital/sex organ activity (25%), and any kind of sexual pleasure (17%).

RQ2: Personality and Sexual Communication

A multiple linear regression was used to predict overall sexual communication (all items on the SeCS) with each of the big five personality traits. Table 1 provides the standardized loadings for each of the big five traits, with extraversion as the only significant predictor at the .05 level with a loading of .266. For the overall regression equation, adjusted R -squared = .018, and the F -statistic $(5,75) = 1.39$. In this case, individuals who are more extraverted are more open with their sexual communication behaviors.

RQ3: Sexual Education Experiences

Sexual education was mandatory for 67.5% of participants ($n = 56$), it was not mandatory for 14.6.7% of participants ($n = 13$), and 15.7% of participants ($n = 14$) were unsure as to whether their sexual education was mandatory. When rating sources of sexual education from which participants learned the most, both friends and sexual partners were rated most highly with 13 participants each ranking them first, followed by high school sexual education with 12 first-

place ranks. Friends were also rated as the second-most important source of sexual education with 33 second place ranks, with 16 second place ranks for sexual partners and only four for high school sexual education. Other sources of sexual education, such as parents and guardians, medical professionals, and TV and movies were ranked much lower, while social media and porn were more likely to be ranked as fourth and fifth-most important.

Figure 2 provides the responses to various topics within sexual education curriculum that may or may not have been taught to participants. Abstinence was the most commonly covered subject (84.1% of participants learned about the topic), followed by STI symptoms (80.5%), and reproductive anatomy (79.3%). The least covered topics were various sexual orientations, with only 15.9% of individuals recalling learning about the topic during grade school sexual education, followed by masturbation (17.1%). Overall, these results demonstrate although many individuals were taught about abstinence, a more comprehensive sexual education curriculum is lacking on a broader scale.

Discussion

The current literature demonstrates sexual education plays a key role in the sexual development of individuals. It also shows there is a need for a comprehensive sexual education that includes all areas of sexual communication, including the use of pornography and interpersonal relationships revolving around potentially sexual behaviors. It is apparent where people are learning the most about sexual education is playing a part in their sexual development as a whole. A better understanding of the role these outside sexual education sources are playing on sexual development is needed to better understand how the current sexual education curriculum can change to decrease negative sexual behaviors, such as domestic violence and sexual assault, and increase a better understanding of sexual communication in interpersonal

relationships. Overall, from the data it is apparent participants are defining having sex from a heterosexual perspective (i.e., focus on vaginal-penile penetrative intercourse), despite the prevalence of LGBTQ+ identities in the sample. Personality traits did not significantly predict sexual communication comfort. This analysis would benefit from a larger sample for a more accurate representation of personalities. A further evaluation can be done to determine what effects sexual education may have on later adult sexual experiences such as motivations behind STI testing, the rate unplanned pregnancies and abortions, and overall sexual behaviors.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1

Definitions of "Having Sex"

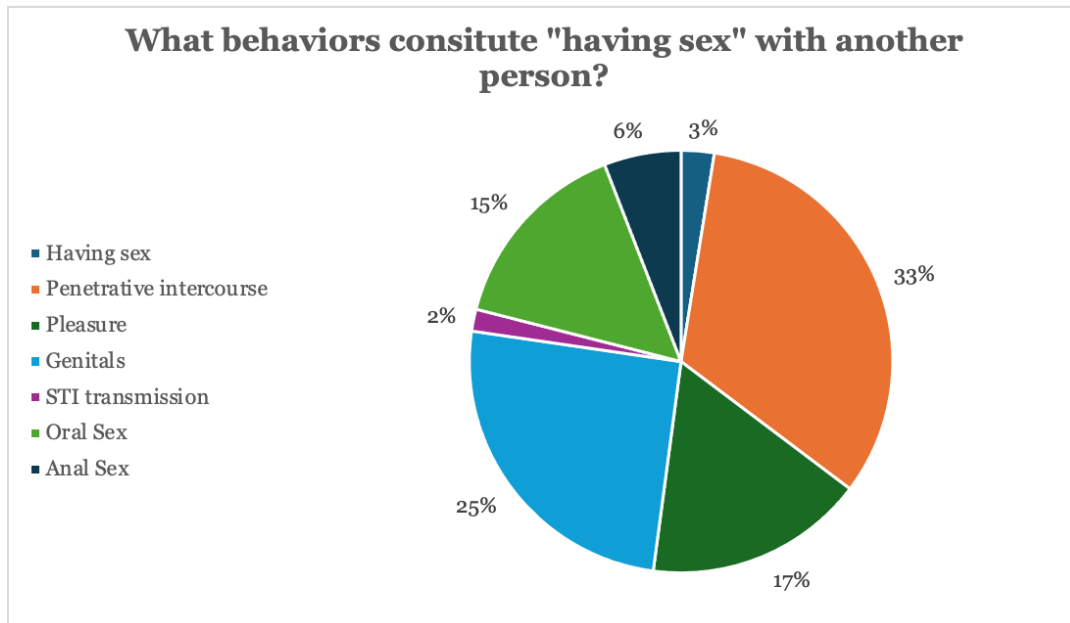


Table 1

Standardized Loadings for Big-5 Personality Traits to Predict Sexual Communication

Trait	Standardized Beta
Extraversion	.266*
Neuroticism	-.126
Openness	.126
Conscientiousness	-.105
Agreeableness	.054

*alpha level significant at the .05 level

Figure 2*Topics Covered in High School Sexual Education*