

# PARENTS' AND CAREGIVERS' VIEWS OF RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

## Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should expand support and resourcing for schools to effectively teach relationship and sexuality education, according to *Sexuality Education: A Guide for Principals, Boards of Trustees, and Teachers*, acknowledging parents' and caregivers' view that this is an important area of the curriculum. There should be a mechanism for accountability, such as more prescriptive curriculum requirements in this area, and/or regular review by ERO.
2. The Ministry of Education should support schools to enhance engagement and communication with parents and caregivers about their relationship and sexuality education programme reflecting parents' and caregivers' confidence and interest in having wide-ranging conversations with their children on these topics.
3. There should be a coordinated, evidence-based approach taken by Government to funding relationship and sexuality education initiatives in schools and the community, including the development of new resources for parents.

## Introduction

Relationship and sexuality education is learning that helps people gain knowledge and skills, and be clear about their attitudes and values, so they can make informed decisions about their sexuality, relationships, sexual activity and health. Relationship and sexuality education is a partnership and shared responsibility between parents, families, whānau, teachers, schools and the community. Parents also role model relationship behaviours, gender roles and expectations.

In New Zealand, sexuality education is one of seven key areas of learning for Health and Physical Education in *The New Zealand Curriculum (2007)*. Since 1999, it has been a requirement for sexuality education to be taught in schools from Year 1 up to and including Year 10.

The Ministry of Education published *Sexuality Education: A Guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers*<sup>1</sup> in 2015 to support schools to effectively deliver this area of the curriculum. The Guide states: *In sexuality education young people learn about themselves and develop knowledge and skills that will help them to interact in positive, respectful, and supportive ways with others. Through learning about sexuality students also come to understand about the social and cultural influences that shape the way society views gender and sexuality.*

There has been limited research into parents' and caregivers' perceptions of relationship and sexuality education in New Zealand, at home or at school. The Gender Attitudes Survey<sup>2</sup> found strong support for teaching consent, healthy relationships and gender diversity education in school, with very small percentages of respondents indicating that they do not support the content being discussed at school. A Family First survey of 1,000 respondents<sup>3</sup> found that 55% of parents thought New Zealand law should require sexuality education to be taught in schools with parents needing to opt-out if they didn't want their child to participate. Only 34% of respondents to this Family First survey thought parents should need to opt-in to have their child taught sexuality education. Netsafe conducted research on parents' attitudes and actions around their children's exposure to sexually explicit content and found that 63% of parents reported having open conversations about sex and sexuality with their children, with about one-third (29%) reporting they did not.<sup>4</sup>

Family Planning thought it was timely and important to hear more from parents in New Zealand about their views of relationship and sexuality education, both at home and school. This survey is a follow-up to a survey on young people's views of relationship and sexuality education<sup>5</sup> and is part two of a three-part series to improve our understanding of how we can better meet the needs of young people, parents and caregivers, and teachers.

## Online Survey

In November 2019, Family Planning launched an online survey to gather information about parents' and caregivers' views of relationship and sexuality education. As with our previous youth survey, this was not intended to be a formal research project, but simply an online survey. The survey responses may not be representative of the views of all parents and caregivers in New Zealand. This should be considered when viewing survey results.

We received responses from 745 parents and caregivers. Eighty-seven percent of respondents were NZ European and 12% were Māori. Respondents were able to choose multiple ethnicities. Pasifika

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education (2015) *Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers*. Retrieved from: <https://health.tki.org.nz/Teaching-in-HPE/Policy-guidelines/Sexuality-education-a-guide-for-principals-boards-of-trustees-and-teachers>

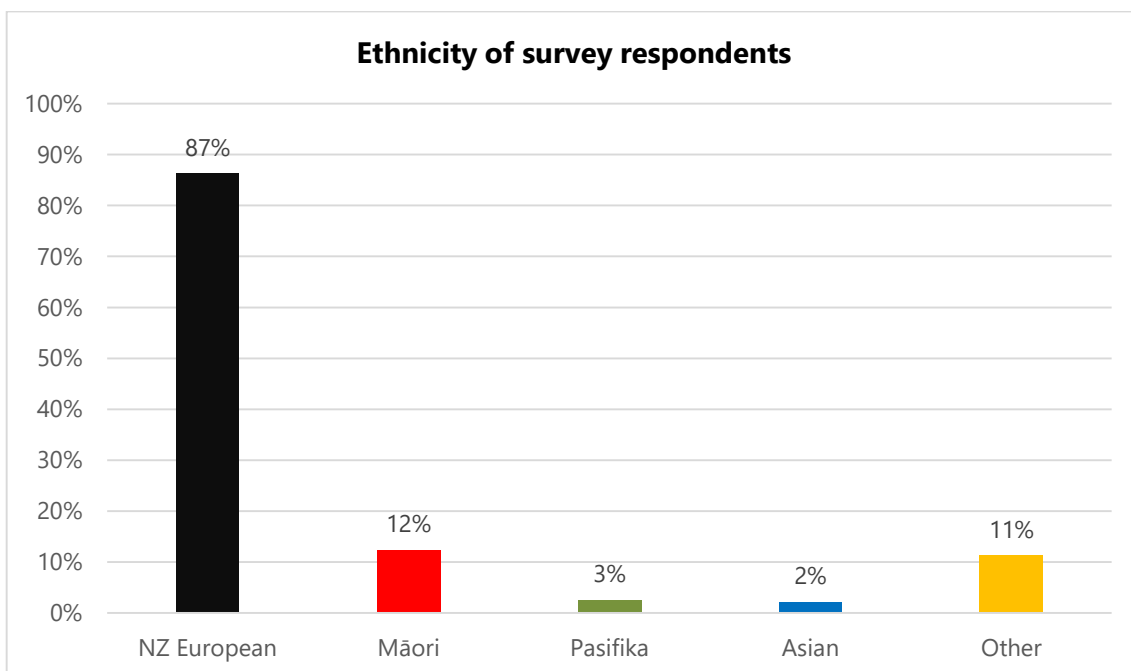
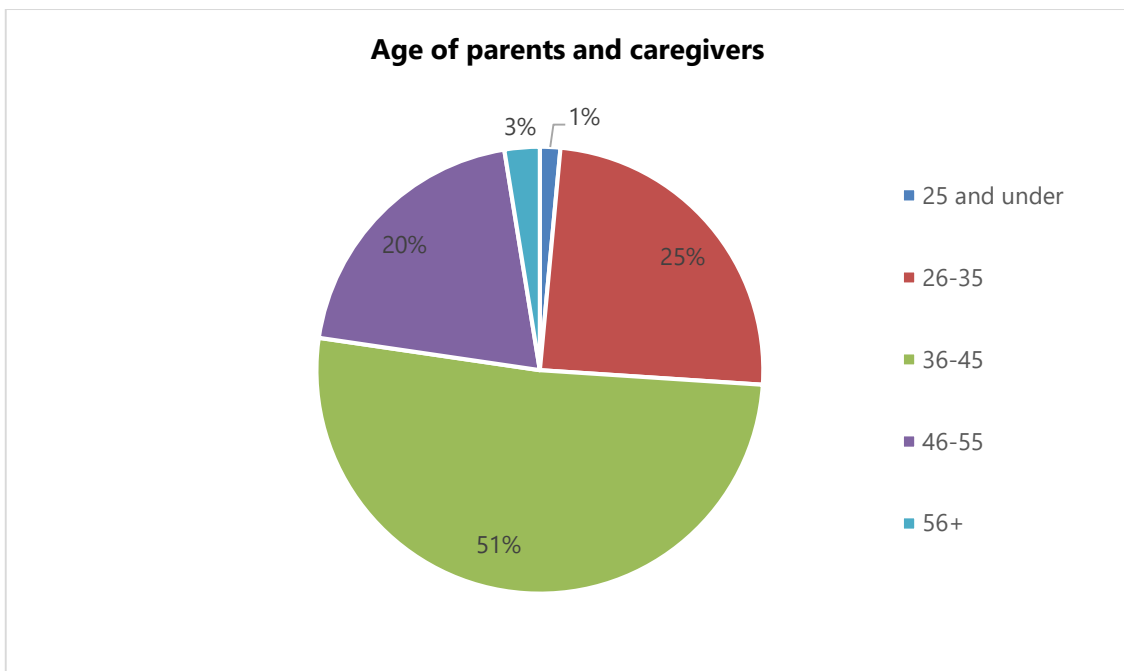
<sup>2</sup> National Council of Women of New Zealand (2018) *Gender Attitudes Survey 2017*. Retrieved from: <https://genderequal.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gender-Attitudes-Survey-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Curia (2018) Sex Education Opt-in, Opt-out poll. Retrieved from: <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Sex-Education-Opt-In-Results-2018.pdf>

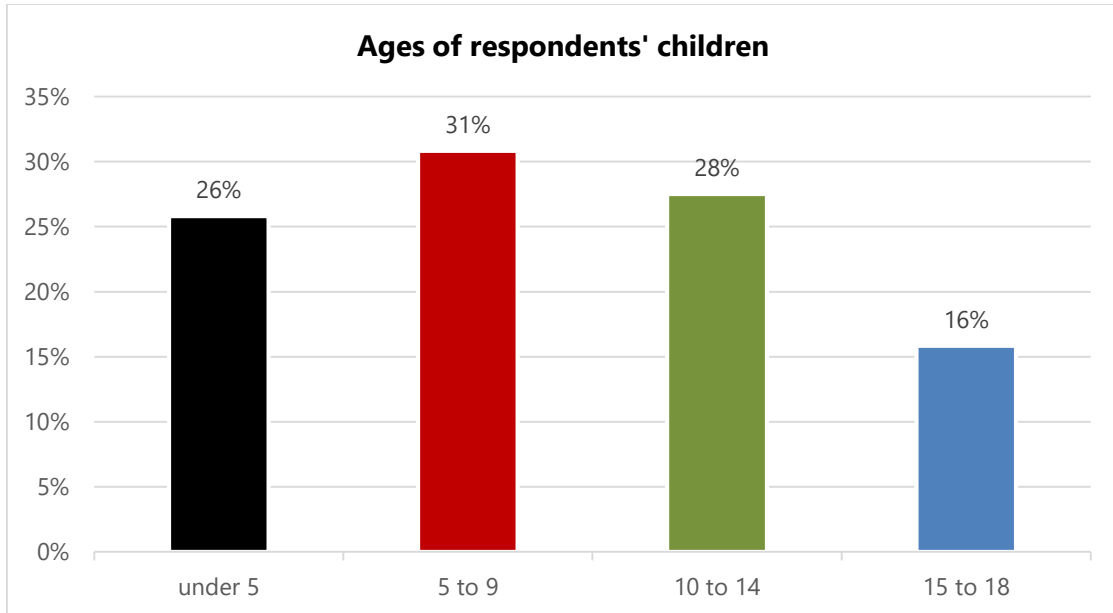
<sup>4</sup> Netsafe (2018) *Children's exposure to sexually explicit content: Parents' awareness, attitudes and actions*. Retrieved from: [https://www.netsafe.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Parents-and-Pornography-2018\\_10Dec2018.pdf](https://www.netsafe.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Parents-and-Pornography-2018_10Dec2018.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Family Planning (2018) Survey on young people's experiences of sexuality education. Retrieved from: [https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303993/youth-survey-summary-report\\_march2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303993/youth-survey-summary-report_march2019_final.pdf)

respondents were underrepresented with only 3% of respondents identifying as Pasifika. The majority (51%) of respondents were between 36 and 45 years of age. Respondents were from all regions of New Zealand and aligned well with distributions based on Census 2013 data, with the exception of respondents from Wellington being over-represented and respondents from Auckland under-represented. Most of the parents and caregivers who responded to our survey identified as female (93%), which reflects Family Planning clients and members, however, could also indicate how gender may play a role in which parents and caregivers talk to their children about these issues. Only 5% of respondents identified as male, and 1% transgender or gender diverse.



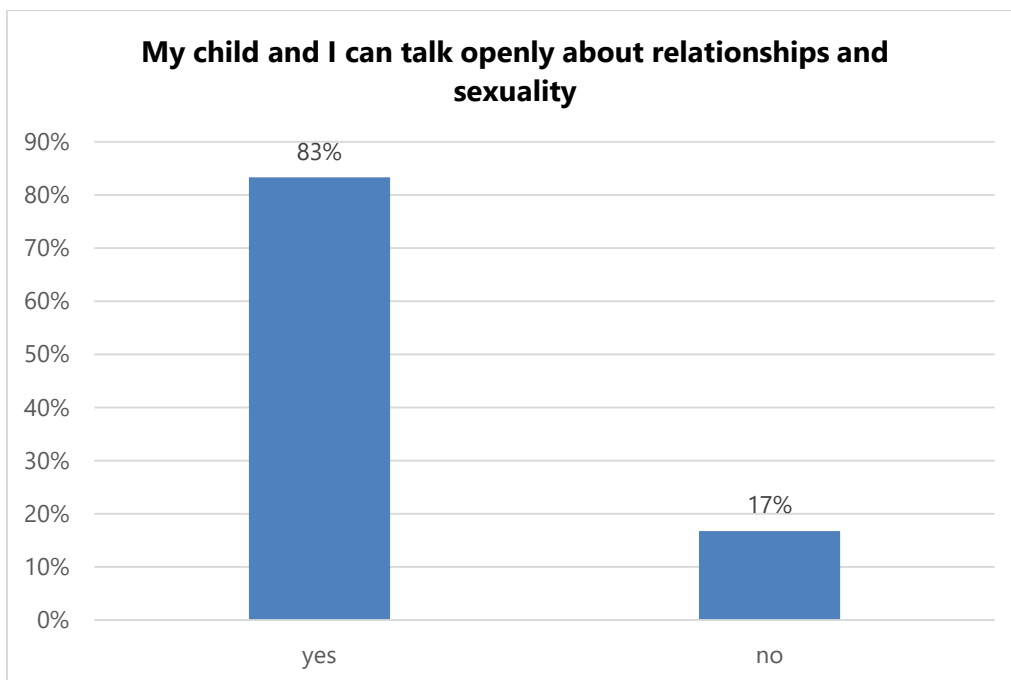
Parents and caregivers who responded had children of all ages, from under one to 18 years.



Not all respondents answered each survey question. However, there was good retention through the whole survey with only a small decline in the number of respondents at the end.

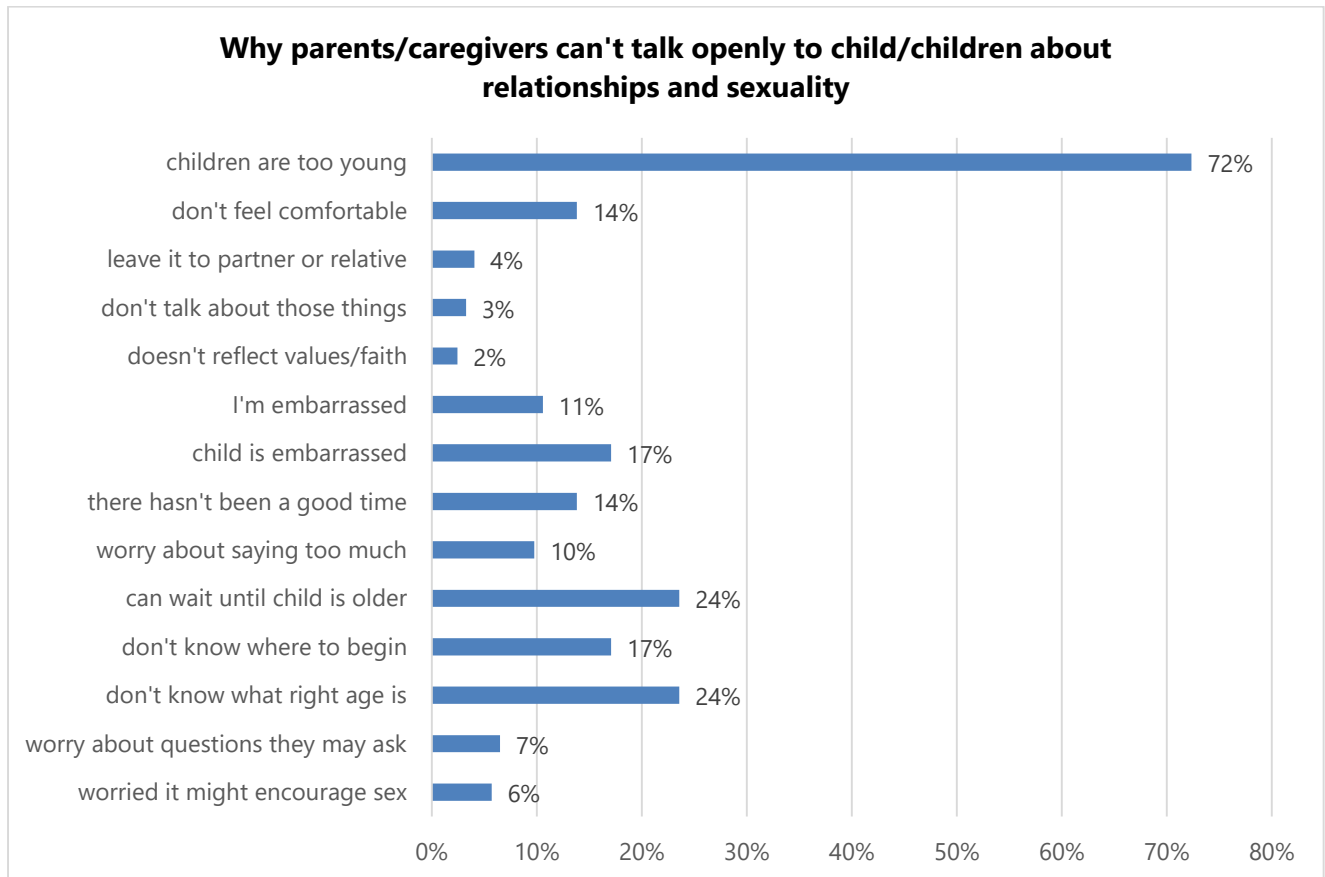
### **Talking to children and young people about relationships and sexuality at home**

We asked parents if they talked openly to their child/children about relationships and sexuality. Eighty-three (83%) of parents and caregivers said they could talk openly to their child about relationships and sexuality, with only 17% saying they couldn't.



Among those who did not feel they could talk to their child about these issues, most (72%) said it was because their child was too young, they didn't know what the right age was to start the conversation (24%) or they thought the conversation could wait until the child was older (24%). This could reflect

that 26% of survey respondents have children under age 5. Only 14% of parents and caregivers reported feeling uncomfortable, while 17% didn't know where to begin. Seventeen percent (17%) felt their child was embarrassed. Very few respondents thought talking about relationships and sexuality was not reflective of their family values (2%) or that it might encourage young people to be interested in sex too soon (6%).



Among those who didn't feel they could speak openly, some parents commented that they struggled with figuring out what was age-appropriate or found the conversations challenging due to their own experiences of not talking about these issues when they were young. Others felt their children didn't want to hear from them.

*I selected yes (I want be open and honest with my children, but I find this very hard, given that this was not open for myself as a child; I did not know where/how/when to start)*

*I haven't initiated anything, but have answered questions as they have arisen - trying to be as honest as possible.*

*Mostly I struggle with giving them factual but age appropriate explanations because of my desire to be accurate but also I tend to explain things too much*

Parents and caregivers overwhelmingly (>90%) reported that they feel confident or very confident talking to their children about a broad range of topics related to sexuality and relationships, including puberty, gender stereotypes and respecting different values and beliefs. Slightly lower

percentages of parents and caregivers reported feeling confident or very confident talking about safety online (86%), sexually transmissible infections (STIs) (88%), sexting (82%), sexual violence (86%) and pornography (79%).

<b>topic</b>	<b>not confident</b>	<b>confident or very confident</b>
bodies, how we grow and puberty	3%	97%
friendship skills	5%	95%
communication skills	3%	97%
bullying and harassment	8%	92%
differences in gender and sexuality	5%	95%
gender stereotypes	3%	97%
conception/how babies are made	8%	92%
respecting different values and beliefs	1%	99%
safety online	14%	86%
knowing who and where to go for support (whānau, an agency, teacher, police, websites, etc)	9%	91%
relationships	3%	97%
contraception (the pill, the jab etc)	7%	93%
sexually transmissible infections (STIs/STDs)	12%	88%
sexting (sending nudes)	18%	82%
alcohol and drugs	4%	96%
consent	2%	98%
sexual violence/abuse	14%	86%
pornography	21%	79%

### **Relationship and sexuality education in school**

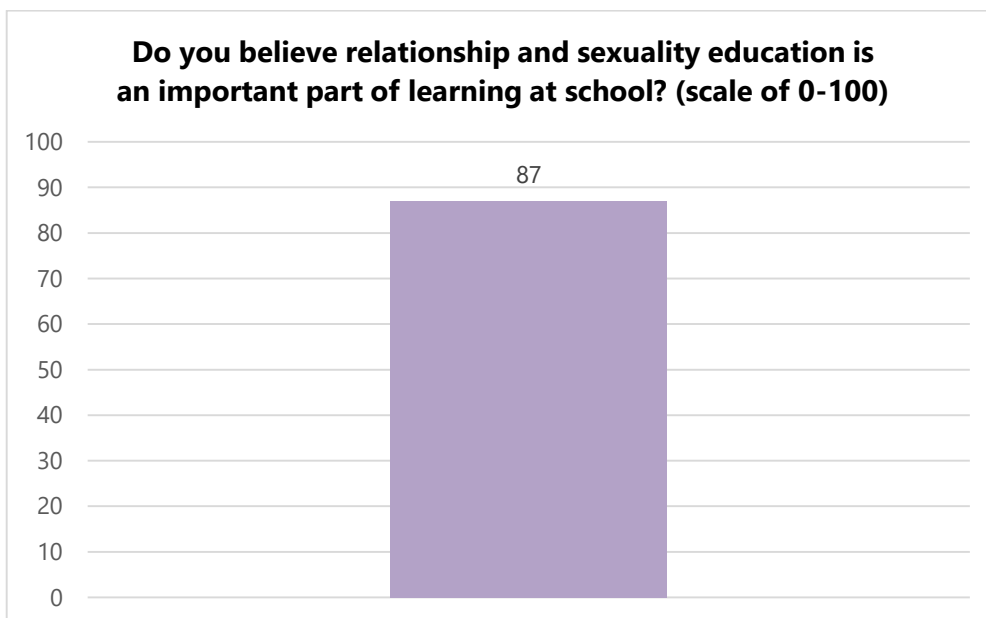
About one-third (31%) of parents and caregivers did not know that relationship and sexuality education was a required part of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. There could be a range of reasons contributing to this, including not knowing the range of topics covered under this area of the curriculum, what the schools call their relationship and sexuality education programme or how parents and caregivers interpret relationship and sexuality education.

*I did not realise that the education started in the younger years.*

*I know they have been given some information about puberty, but not sure about relationship or sexuality education -- I am not aware of what education is being given to children younger than this and to be honest I have not asked my son's teacher about it either.*

*...it is not widely understood what is being taught to our children during these periods and parents are often not included which means if they don't know the info or what is being taught they can't have follow up discussions with their children at home.*

Most parents and caregivers reported that they think relationship and sexuality education is a really important part of learning at school. On a sliding scale of 0 (not important) to 100 (very important), the average rating of importance was high at 87.



*All children need to be fully informed so that they know about their bodies and as they get a little older learn about sexuality and safety. children need to be aware of how to keep themselves safe*

*Kids don't always want to talk to parents about this stuff, so having other adults they can trust give them accurate information is really important. I always ask them about what they've learnt and encourage them to ask me questions though!*

*Because it takes a village; for parents who don't communicate this info to their kids is a huge risk; for parents who do it's simply normalising the subject/s*

*It gives children a chance to discuss it with peers and others from outside our immediate family so they can experience different views first hand*

*...some kids don't get good advice at home, and because my child might feel more comfortable to learn at school. Will spark conversation at home, and hopefully reinforce some of the good information given at home. There needs to be a lot to counteract the less helpful info on tv and online.*

*Thank goodness, it's my job to talk to my children, but it's also good that there are other ways for them to get info too.*

*impacts on our lives in numerous ways. About how we see ourselves, others and our relationships with others*

A much smaller number of parents – estimated to be about 12% - expressed concern about this area of learning for younger children, or preferred that this learning took place at home, rather than school.

*Years 1 - 6? Really? That's far too young!*

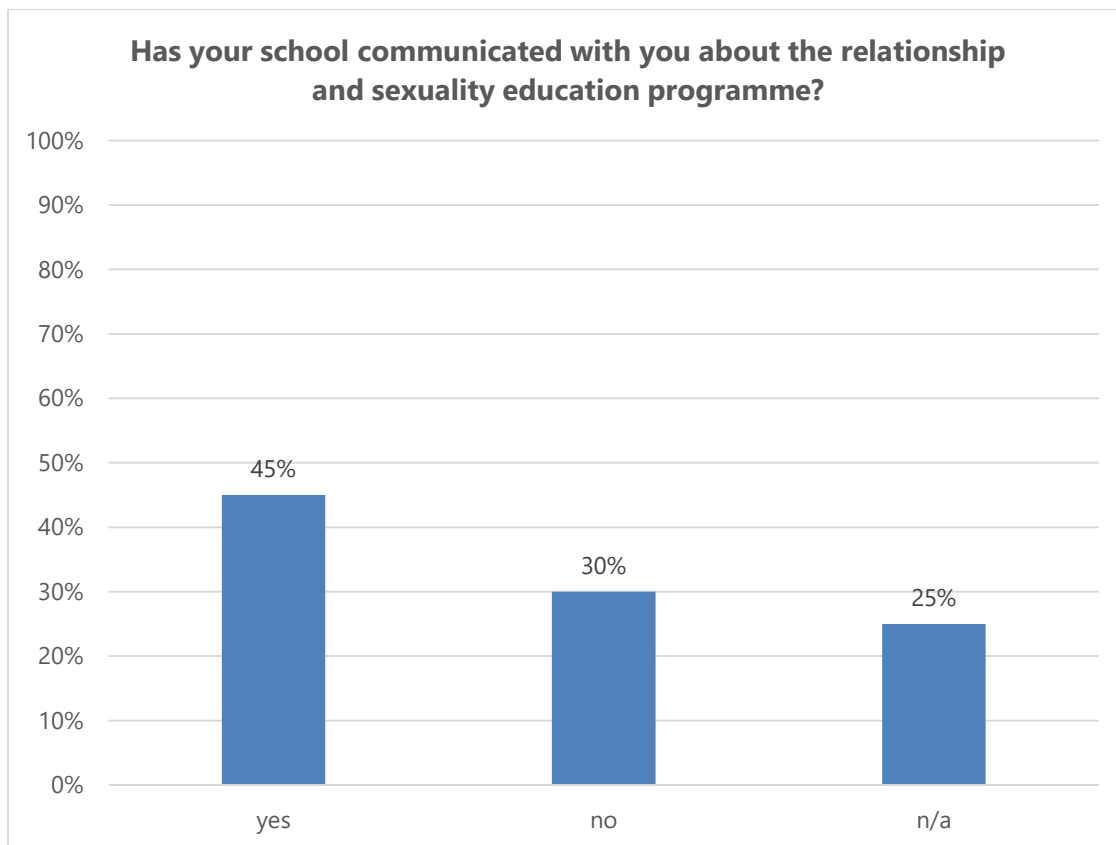
*I didn't know sexuality was taught so young now. As a parent we should be involved of what our children are being taught about sexuality*

*I believe it's a parent's role to have these talks. But I am aware that not all parents have these conversations for whatever reasons. I would like the option from the school to decline the school conducting these conversations since me and my wife are confident and competent to canvass this subject with our children.*

*I worry about the people teaching this as I believe it's a value laden topic and would like my whānau viewpoints to be not put down*

A little less than half of parents and caregivers (45%) reported that their child/children's school had communicated with them about the relationship and sexuality education programme and nearly a third (30%) said they had not. The remainder said the question was not applicable as presumably their children were not in primary or secondary school. There could be a range of reasons contributing to parents reporting that their child/children's school had not communicated with them, including what the school calls their relationship and sexuality education programme or how parents interpret relationship and sexuality education.





There was a range of comments about the information provided by schools – both positive and negative. A number of comments indicated that there was better communication from primary schools than secondary schools.

*they've been great at sending emails warning us and recapping what the kids are learning about.*

*Both were extremely good - sent a detailed message well in advance covering everything that would be discussed - I was very impressed with this.*

*Parents have been given full knowledge of what is discussed, able to attend a meeting about it.*

*Parents need more information in handouts or emails. So we know what we should talk about at different ages.*

*More info about what was covered at each age and stage would've been reassuring and helped initiate and continue the conversations at home.*

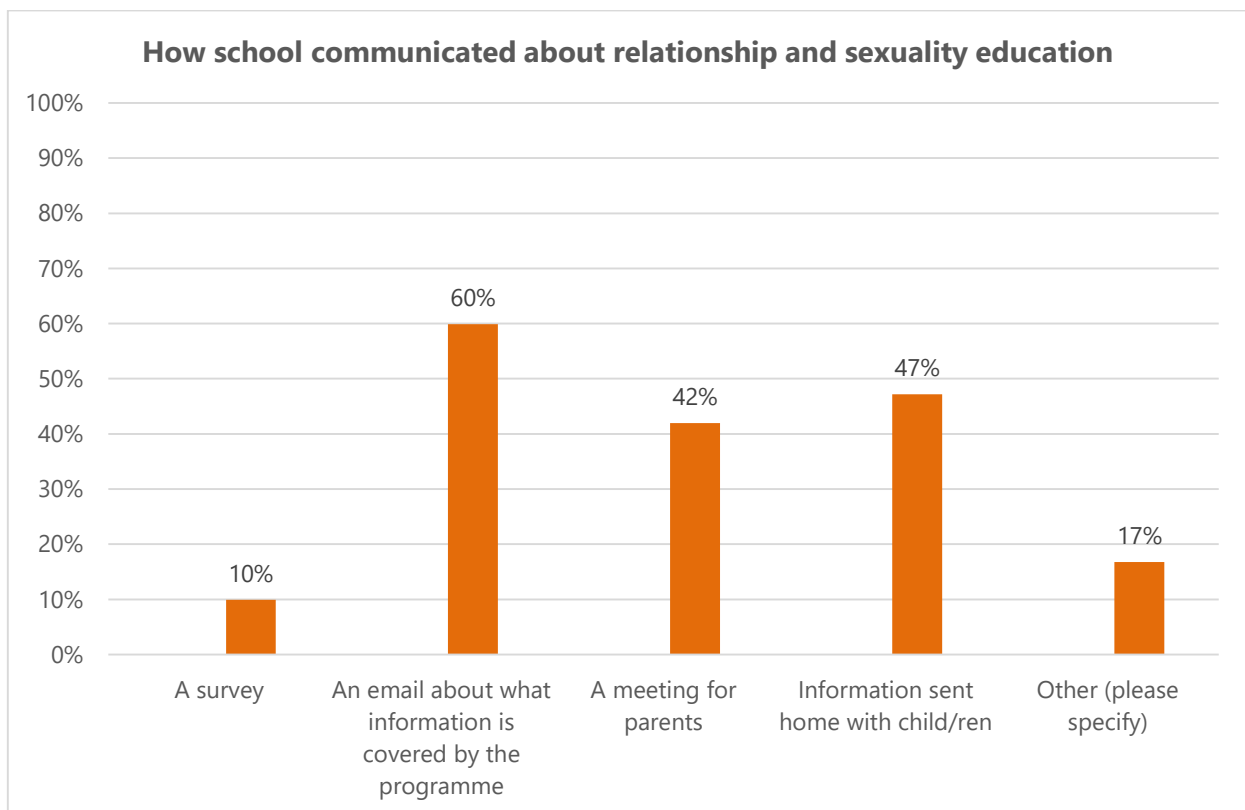
*Was told they were doing classes but not really what was involved*

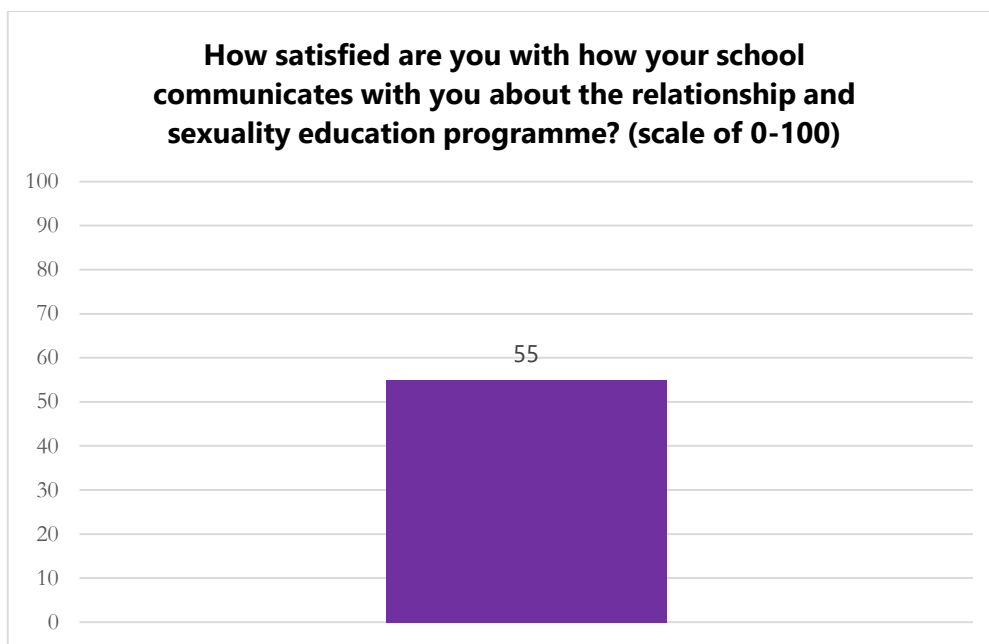
*Extremely minimally - a week long online survey with a single question, asking what content we wished to see.*

*Online material for parents to access would be better than meetings (which are hard to get to) or bits of paper (which tend to contain not very much info and just get lost). An email with links to the curriculum would be great!*

*Primary school was great we had a person come and talk to caregivers and could ask questions. Older schools not the greatest*

Sixty percent (60%) of parents and caregivers reported receiving an email about the relationship and sexuality education programme, 42% were offered a parent meeting and 47% had information sent home with their child/children. Some parents who responded that they had other forms of communication said that they had one to one discussions with teachers or that there was bit of information in a newsletter.

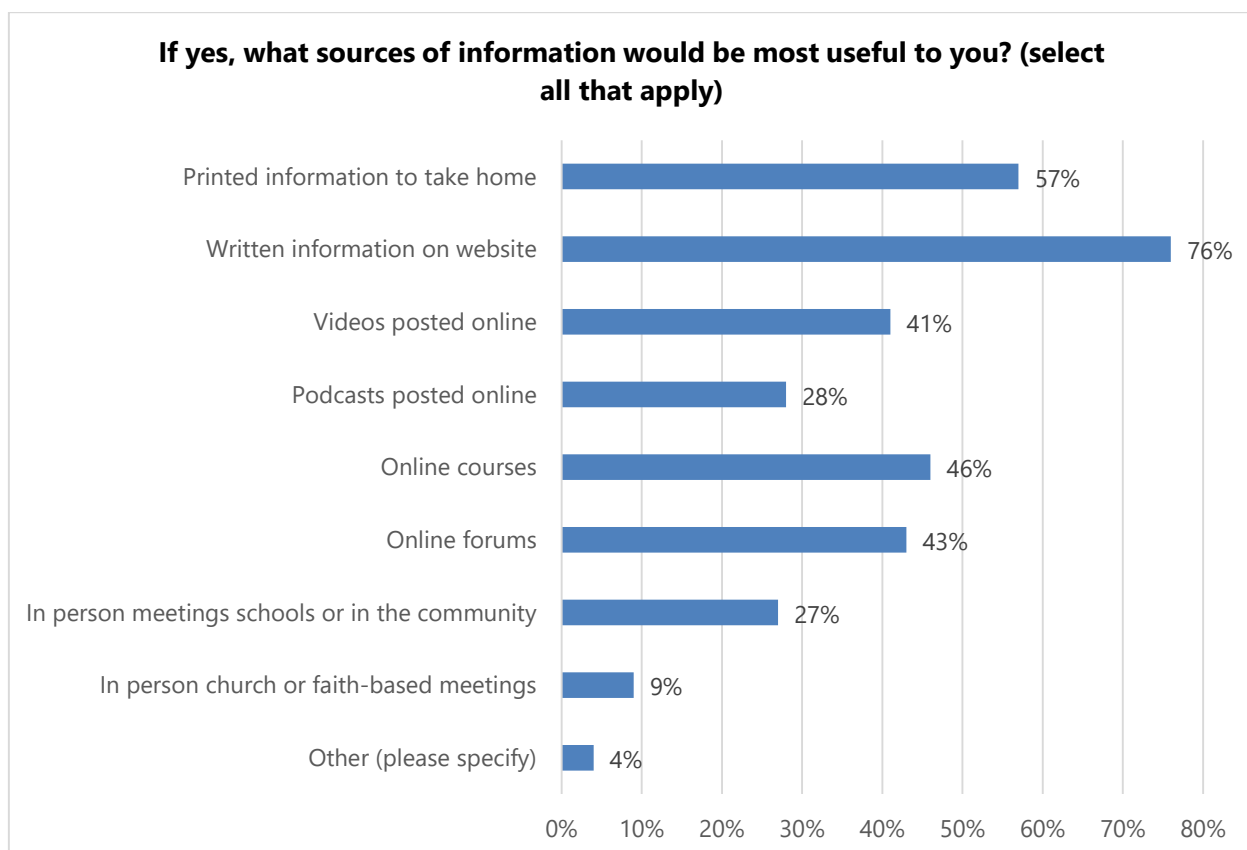
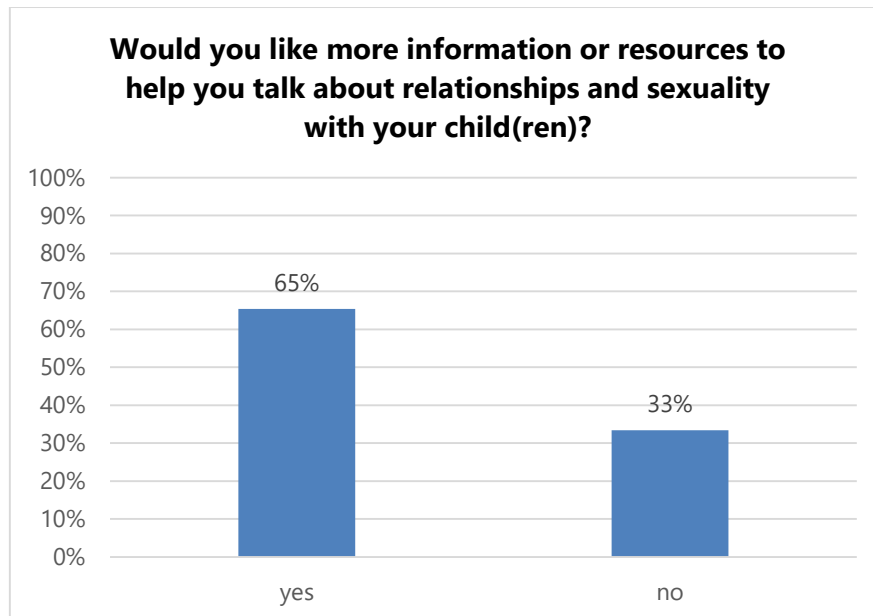




Parents were somewhat satisfied with how schools communicated. On a scale of 0 (not satisfied) to 100 (very satisfied), the average rating was 55. It is useful to consider, and some respondents noted, the significant amount of information that schools are required to communicate to parents and caregivers. It is unclear whether satisfaction with communication about relationship and sexuality education would be different for a different area of the curriculum. It is also important to consider that expectations around how the school should communicate on this and other topics will be highly variable and personal.

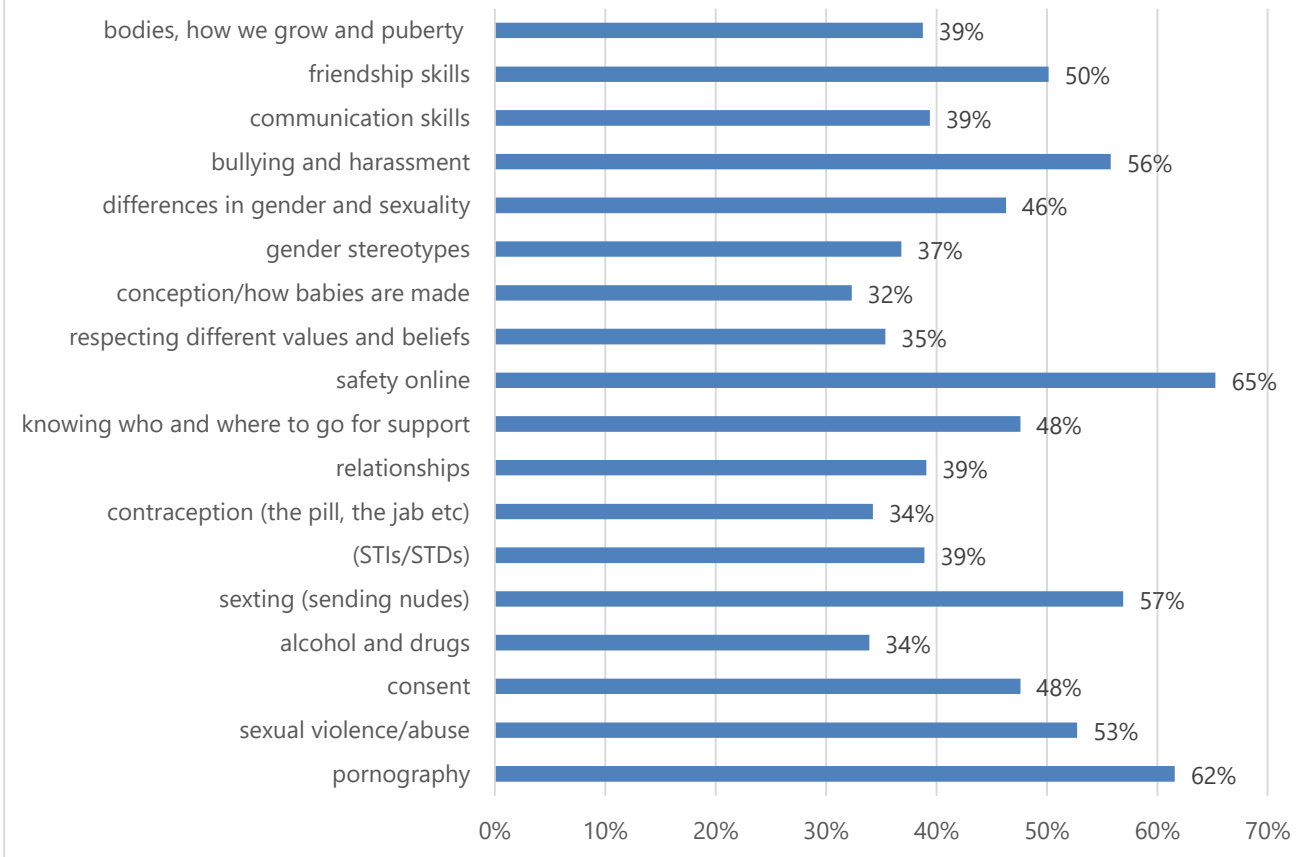
### **Additional resources**

Sixty-five percent (65%) of parents and caregivers said they'd like more information or resources to talk to their children about relationships and sexuality. Parents and caregivers were interested in getting information from a range of sources, but over three-quarters indicated they would like written information online on a website (76%). Over half would like printed information (56%) and nearly half were interested in online courses (46%) for parents and caregivers and/or online forums (43%).



Parents and caregivers reported wanting more information about the full range of topics, but particularly safety online (65%), pornography (62%), sexting (57%), bullying and harassment (56%), sexual violence/abuse (53%) and friendship skills (50%). Issues related to online safety, media literacy and healthy relationships are areas where parents are most interested in additional resources. While similar, the list does not completely align with the topics where parents reported they felt less confident talking to their children. It is unclear why some have been prioritised over others, or if there are some issues for which parents feel more resources won't help them have confidence?

### What topics would you like more information about to help you talk to your child(ren)? (select all that apply)



### Hopes and dreams for their children

We asked parents their hopes and dreams for their children, in relation to relationships and sexuality, now and in the future. Parents almost universally provided positive, inspiring answers like these:

*They have a healthy view of themselves and are in healthy relationships where everyone involved is loved, valued and respected.*

*I hope that my children are confident with their bodies, and safe. I would hope that they treat others with respect and are able to have open discussions with their peers and partners.*

*They are happy safe respected and respectful while in relationships*

*That they have the social skills and enough confidence and self-esteem to make the decisions that are right for them.*

*To be confident as an individual, and therefore comfortable in their relationships with others.*

*That she will have confidence and respect for herself and others. That she will form positive healthy attachments and relationships. That if she feels unsafe or unhappy that she will know supportive people she can talk to, like friends, family, and teachers.*

*That my son will be a respectful adult and always treat himself and other boys and girls with respect and compassion. Respecting boundaries and understanding the reasons for consent. I hope he will love himself and value his relationships with both sexes*

*That she enters relationships based on respect, that her choices of partner support her rather than drag her down, that her ventures into sexuality are through her own, informed choice*

*To respect themselves and others, to understand we are all different, but part of humanity. To be comfortable with their bodies and to take care of them.*

## **Discussion**

This survey provided an opportunity to hear directly from parents and caregivers about their views on relationship and sexuality education, both at home and at school. Findings of this survey align with other New Zealand surveys, which have found that parents are supportive of relationship and sexuality education in school and also generally feel confident discussing these issues with their children at home. It also aligns with international surveys, which have found that parents want more communication from schools about what is covered in sexuality education programmes and more resources for themselves.<sup>6,7</sup>

There are a number of positives to take away from this survey. Most parents and caregivers feel that they can have open conversations with their child/children about relationships and sexuality and the vast majority feel confident doing so. The majority of parents and caregivers are also supportive of schools teaching this area of the curriculum. Parents and caregivers want more resources and information about relationship and sexuality education. Nearly universally, parents have positive hopes and dreams for their young people's future relationships and sexuality and want them to be safe, healthy, confident and respectful in their relationships.

There were also some potential challenges identified in the survey. Many parents appear to be unclear about how relationship and sexuality education is included in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, and how their school implements it, particularly what content is covered and that it starts from year 1. While schools may already be working hard communicating with parents about relationship and sexuality education, it may be worthwhile considering new ways or expanding the information

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<sup>6</sup> Dyson, S. (2010) *Parents and Sex Education Parents' attitudes to sexual health education in WA schools*. Department of Health, Western Australia Retrieved from: <https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/HealthyWA/Original/Sexual-health/SexualhealthParentsShortReport.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Sex Education Forum (2011) *Parents and SRE A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/SRE%20and%20parents%20-%20evidence%20-%202011.pdf>

parents and caregivers receive about the age appropriate content in primary school, in particular. Parents and caregivers also reported that secondary schools communicate less about this area of the curriculum than primary/intermediate schools, so there could also be opportunities to expand engagement with parents on these topics across these years of schooling.

Thirty percent (30%) of parents and caregivers reported that they had not heard from their school about relationship and sexuality education. While there is a legal requirement for schools to consult with parents and caregivers about the delivery of Health and Physical Education every two years, consultation specifically about relationship and sexuality education may not be evident to parents and caregivers through this process because of the variety of terms used to describe this programme or because other aspects of the Healthy and Physical Education curriculum may feature more prominently. Parents who have received information reported being somewhat satisfied with the information they receive but would welcome more detailed information. However, some parents commented that schools were doing a fantastic job communicating with them about this area of the curriculum, with regular updates and clear information about the programme of learning.

The Ministry of Education *Sexuality Education: A Guide for principals, boards of trustees* provides guidance for schools, teachers and school leadership, but we know that some schools need support with implementation. There are real life challenges with implementation for schools, including some schools' nervousness around parents' and caregivers' response to this area of the curriculum. We hope this survey provides some useful information to schools. Government has a role ensuring schools have the resources and support they need to deliver this area of the curriculum – including informing and engaging parents -and that there is accountability.

It is interesting to consider these survey findings alongside the Family Planning youth survey on relationship and sexuality education<sup>8</sup>, which found that only about one-third (30%) of young people would seek information from parents about relationships and sexuality. At the surface, it appears that the findings are incongruous. However, even where there is open communication between parents/caregivers and their children about relationships and sexuality, there may be some issues that children and young people would rather not discuss with their parents. This may provide further evidence of why learning about relationships and sexuality from other trusted adults at school, and in a group setting with peers, alongside learning at home, is so important and must be consistently and effectively included in school programmes.

Parents have expressed a desire for a range of resources. While many schools already provide resources to parents, additional support and guidance would be useful so that there is some level of national consistency for providing adequate resources from trusted sources which align with the Ministry of Education sexuality education guidelines. Relationship and sexuality education is a partnership between parents and caregivers and schools. Schools should be supported to build on parents' and caregivers' confidence and interest in this areas of the curriculum in order to enhance

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<sup>8</sup> Family Planning (2018) Survey on young people's experiences of sexuality education. Retrieved from: [https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303993/youth-survey-summary-report\\_march2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303993/youth-survey-summary-report_march2019_final.pdf)

their learning programmes. Parents and caregivers can support and engage in these programmes through ongoing conversations with their child/children at home.

## **Recommendations**

1. The Ministry of Education should expand support and resourcing for schools to effectively teach relationship and sexuality education, according to the *Sexuality Education: A Guide for Principals, Boards of Trustees, and Teachers*, acknowledging parents' and caregivers' view that this is an important area of the curriculum. There should be a mechanism for accountability, such as more prescriptive curriculum requirements in this area, and/or regular review by ERO.
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