

LET'S TALK ABOUT

“Girls bleed because Eve was a little skank. If she didn't eat the fucking apple I wouldn't be shedding my insides through my vag every month.”

That was the main lesson Sarah took away from her sexual education classes in high school.

“They kind of implied bleeding serves as a reminder for us women not to give into temptation,” she says. “It was never directly said but certainly the way I felt. I still feel a little guilty when I'm riding the crimson wave.”

Sarah and her peers were taught the basics: men and women make babies when the penis enters the vagina. Boys have wet dreams. Girls bleed monthly.

Jordyn went to an all-girls Catholic school and was “taught and encouraged that sex was for marriage and sex during marriage was for babies”. If the sex ed class experiences of many of my peers are to be believed, that's all doing the deed ever is. For babies, between a man and woman. Preferably married. Probably in the missionary position.

Yet the 2008 *National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health* found more than one in four Year 10 students had had penetrative sex, and by Year 12, that number was one in two. The same survey found 27% students had at some stage had unprotected sex and nearly 38% of females had experienced unwanted sex.

Somewhere between the classroom doctrine of abstinence and the estimated 28% of teenagers living with chlamydia, something is going wrong. That's where comprehensive and inclusive sexual education is vital.

The UNAIDS 2008 global report found strong worldwide correlations between lack of information about sex, and rates of HIV and AIDS. With this lack of information in schools, it's no wonder gaps in knowledge are often filled in by pornography for anyone with five minutes and an internet connection.

“There's stuff that's missing from pornography,” says Justine Kiely-Scott. “You don't see people feeling shy or awkward, talking nicely to each other, discussing mutual pleasure, using condoms or giving clear consent.”

Kiely-Scott has over 15 years experience as a teacher and works for Sex Education Australia, providing sexuality and relationship education for students and parents.

“It's not like [the students] are doing anything that's terrible, but really it's important for them to understand that pornography is not a good place to learn about sex, or healthy relationships,” she says. “It's fantasy, it's not reality.”

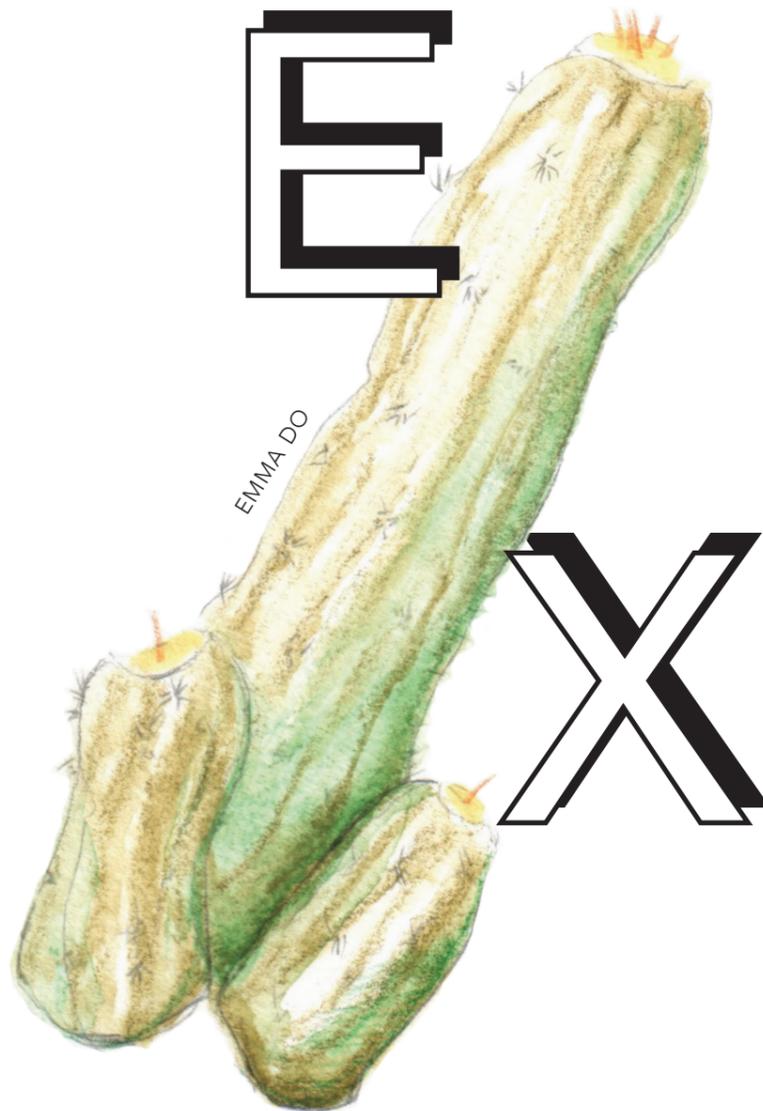
Cyndi Darnell, a sex therapist and counselor, says the visually spectacular moves in pornography set standards that are neither realistic nor pleasurable.

“It's designed for the eye, not for the body,” she says. “So when we try and make our bodies do the things that are designed purely for the eye, what's going to happen is there's going to be an absence of pleasure. And this applies to all genders.”

“Everyone goes, ‘Oh it's porn that's making them do this.’ But it's not porn, it's an absence of information that sends them on a quest. How do we combat that? We provide them with better information.”

Sex Education Australia runs programs from primary school to university. Their focus is on age-appropriate discussion—from body parts in early primary, to puberty later on, and consent and contraception later still. The aim is to leave the participants confident and informed about sexuality, the law, consent, and healthy relationships.

S



YARA MURRAY-ATFIELD

As the Victorian Department of Education's *Catching on Early: Sexuality Education for Victorian Primary Schools* detailed in 2011, quality sex education has been found to reduce rates of STIs, unplanned pregnancy, and sexual assaults.

Without resources or speciality teachers, some schools are ill-equipped to provide comprehensive sex ed classes. David, who went to a co-ed public school, says one year his teacher was supposed to show them how to put a condom on a banana. Instead, he just talked about the time he dressed up as Elvis.

“Nothing they taught us was really useful beyond ‘use a condom and your common sense,’” he says.

Easier said than done.

“Talking about safe sex and STIs and that side of things is fairly straightforward, it's fairly clinical. But we think it's really important to weave into all of that the importance of making the right decisions for you,” Kiely-Scott says. “Sometimes it's very easy to talk about but not easy to do, like negotiating how to use a condom—it's really easy to say, ‘You must use a condom.’ But when it comes to the moment it can be really awkward or hard to do.”

Michael, who went to an all-boys school, says the focus in his Year 10 classes was on protection.

“My school was actually pretty good at sex ed,” he says. “Consent was covered in detail, but one issue would be that the majority of kids had already had sex by that point. It needed to be a lot earlier.”

Although some parents may not want to admit it, young people are having sex. Research by the Burnet Institute from 2008 to 2010 found girls aged 12 to 15 tested positively to chlamydia at a higher rate than older women.

Sex isn't always the vanilla portrayal in the *Where Did I Come From?* videos. Far from always being between a married man and woman, for the purpose of a baby, people are having sex for fun. When there's not enough information, people are having sex and then contracting chlamydia. And it's not always a man with a penis doing the deed with a woman with a vagina, yet sex ed often fails to incorporate queer relationships and sex.

“There was no discussion of non-heterosexual sex,” says Michael. “The focus was on babies and how to avoid them, which is incredibly worrying considering the rising rates of STIs among young queer people.”

A 2005 Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society study suggests same-sex attracted teenagers are five times more likely to contract sexually transmitted infections than their heterosexual counterparts.

“I think sometimes same-sex attracted young people are really left out of the conversation,” says Kiely-Scott.

The heteronormative view of many sex ed classes not only excludes queer teenagers from discussions of safe sex, but also provides a narrow view of sexuality in general.

“I guess it's just this idea that sexuality is a fixed thing,” says Cyndi Darnell. “And when that fixed thing is based around heterosexuality, we limit our capability for understanding the diversity of different sexualities.”

It's this diversity that needs to be discussed and celebrated in sex ed, rather than repressed and ignored.

“I wish school taught me about contraception. I wish I had the opportunity to apply a condom to anything,” Sarah says. “I wish they had anticipated that most of us would have sex before marriage.” As for Jordyn, she says she accepts the fact her Catholic school didn't want to delve into the finer details of sex.

“But I do wish that there was someone I could speak to about what to expect during sex,” she says. It's discussion that makes sex ed successful.

“The more age-appropriate discussions we have with young people, delivered in a matter-of-fact way, the more we demystify things and increase confidence,” Kiely-Scott says. “We give students a chance to clarify and openly ask questions about their health. I think the ability to talk to a teacher in a school is really vital. And for them to understand that they're not the only one thinking about these things.”

“Lots of other people are thinking the same thing as well. The hardest thing when you're growing up is, ‘Am I normal? Am I the same as everybody else?’”

One of the most important things sex ed can convey through discussion and accurate information is that ‘normal’, especially when it comes to sexuality, doesn't actually exist.

As Darnell says: “Everybody's experience with sexuality is inherently subjective and abnormal. And that's what's actually normal about it.” ●