

# THE FUTURE OF SEX ED: A GLOBAL YOUTH-LED APPROACH TO REIMAGINING INNOVATIONS IN SEX EDUCATION

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## BACKGROUND

Traditional approaches to designing and delivering sex education are failing to meet the needs of young people (YP); a problem that has persisted across geographies, genders, and generations (Guttmacher 2022).

School-based sex education and education policies have often failed to support crucial aspects of sexuality, such as pleasure, consent, and sex-positivity, leaving many YP without the tools they need to make confident and informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being (UNICEF 2020; Sadiq-Sani 2016).

The failure to provide sex education that is responsive to youths' real questions and concerns is contributing to alarmingly poor sexual health outcomes including unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and non-consensual sex.

The world is changing. Innovations in content design and delivery are transforming the way that people, especially youth, consume information.

A future-forward, youth-led approach to designing and delivering sex education is urgently needed. In service of this, YLabs set out to conduct the first ever, youth-driven, global study, the Future of Sex Ed (FSE), to understand what youth want to learn with regards to sex education, and how they want it to be delivered.

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## RESEARCH APPROACH

YLabs conducted a youth-driven mixed-methods research study involving 12,692 YP ages 15-24 and 68 key stakeholders from Nigeria, India, the USA, and El Salvador.

Quantitative data was collected using Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Facebook surveys, which were supplemented by qualitative interviews with YP and key influencers. Ethical approval was obtained for all regions, and informed consent and assent were acquired from the participants. The project recruited and trained young researchers from each region to lead in all technical and design aspects of the study.

# STATUS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND ACCESS TO SEX EDUCATION

Globally, 86% (n=4,690) of 5,486 YP who responded to the question were sexually active at the time of the survey.

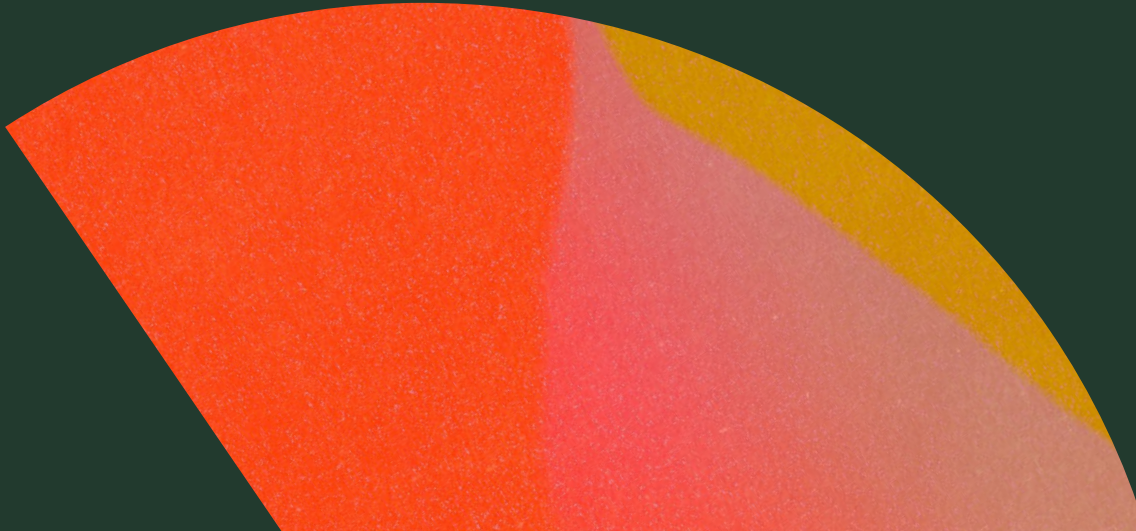
Youth are having sex for the first time at a very early age:

12.7% (n=595) of 4,690 YP  
were less than ten years old

17.3% (n=810) of 4,690 YP  
were between 10-14 years old

One in four youth have never received any sex education. Of those, **81% are sexually active.**

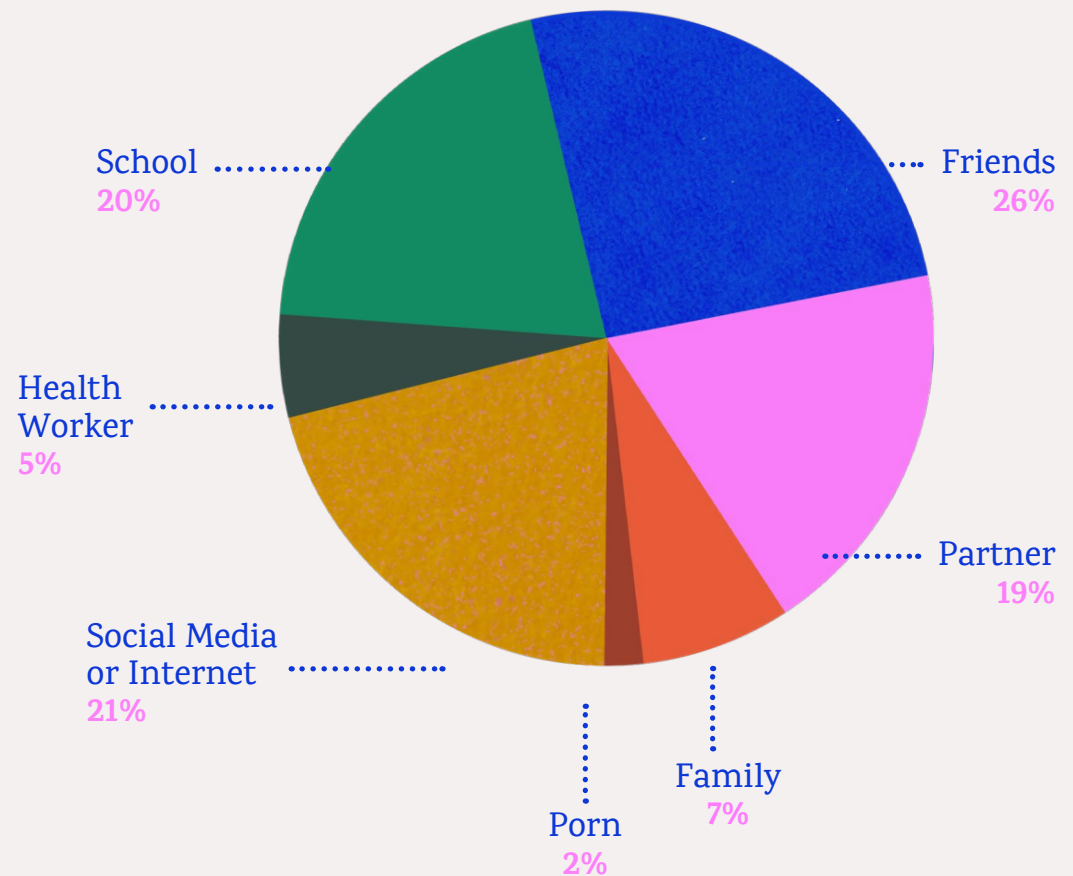
Only 37% of 5,351 YP who had received sex education had it before their sexual debut.



# RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. YP lack a single, trusted resource for their sex education needs. They feel exhausted from having to ping-pong among parents, peers, portals, and porn for their information needs. Since many contradict one another, YP are left confused and forced to validate information through their own personal experience and risk.

FSE global data from 6,430 YP confirms that, currently, YP do not have one primary resource for sex education.



# RESEARCH FINDINGS

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2. Silence from caregivers at an early age about consent and bodily autonomy results in increasingly common experiences of early, coercive, and traumatic sexual experiences for today's youth.

18% of 8,848 young people selected 'how to say no if I don't want to have sex' as their most preferred topic to learn about in sex education. Those whose sexual debut was less than 10 years are 2.3 times more likely to be interested in learning about how to say no.

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3. Traditional approaches to deliver sex education optimize for biology, leaving young people unprepared to navigate the emotional and psychological hurdles of their sexual behavior and identity.

The FSE survey indicated that 55.06% (n=4,258) of 7,733 young people preferred channels that employ story-based learning that address the emotional dimensions of sex education, such as social media, porn, TV, and books.





# RESEARCH FINDINGS

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4. Young people are learning about sex in isolation, which prevents them from understanding the lived experiences of people who share different gender or sexual orientations. The more marginalized they are, the more isolated they feel, which creates greater division, stigma, and harm.

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5. YP define 'pleasure' as psychological safety and consent but lack the skills to advocate for their needs, let alone their physical pleasure.

Global quantitative data from the FSE survey shows females are 2.39 times more likely than males to be unsatisfied with sex ed, and non-binary youth are 3.56 times more likely than heterosexual peers.

Globally, 36% of 8,848 YP are most interested in learning how to pleasure themselves or their partners sexually.



# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT SEX EDUCATION

“If I had known about sex at a young age, I would have had the information to prevent the molestation from happening. To some extent, I couldn’t forgive myself. I would love to learn about sex education in my primary school days from my parents.”

— Male, 21, Nigeria

“When my body started to react to seeing men, I thought something was wrong with me. All I kept hearing in school and from my parents was that I should only be attracted to women...Everything I learned and heard said I [LGBTQ] should not exist and that I am an abomination.”

— Male, 23, Nigeria

“Pleasure comes from having a trusted partner and their consent, as without them the whole experience would be meaningless.”

— Female, 16, India

# DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The future of sex education is one in which young people are in the driver's seat of reimagining, testing, designing, and implementing sex ed content and delivery channels. To get us started, young people across the globe co-designed five principles and a set of tips on how to design the future of sex ed:

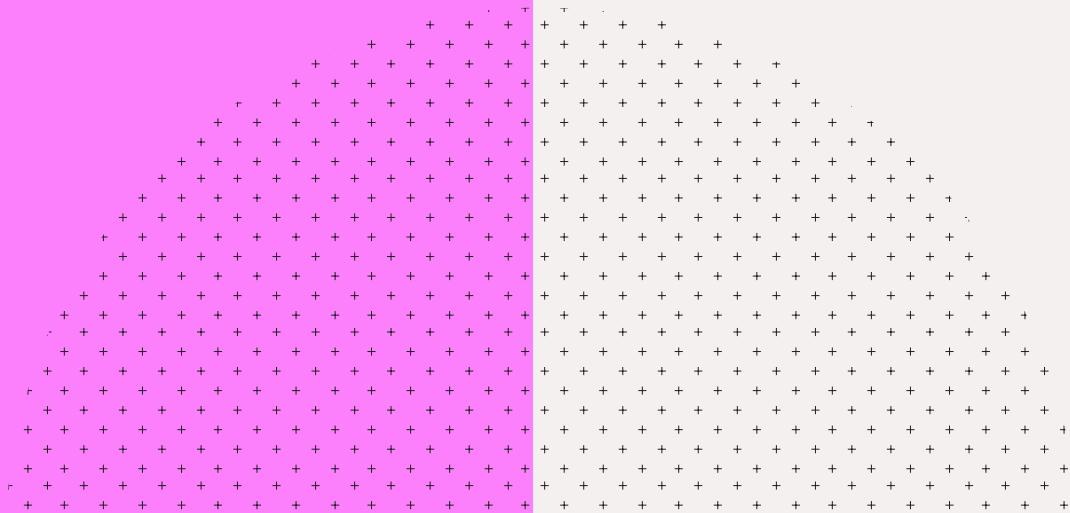
## THE FUTURE IS MORE THAN BIOLOGY

Successful innovations will embody a gradual and holistic approach to sex ed delivery.

Youth are on a learning journey, and require information to be delivered in an evolving way, to meet them with the information they need at that time. As early as age five, conversations about “good touch and bad touch” can establish the importance of bodily autonomy and consent. For young adolescents, topics such as healthy communication, exploring one's sexual identity and gender expression, reproductive anatomy, disease prevention, and pleasure and sexual agency are critical for navigating their next stage of development.

## THE FUTURE IS PLEASURE

Pleasure is not provocative, it is practical. Successful innovations will elevate young people's definition of pleasure-based approaches: ones which center agency, safety, and consent. They will provide a platform for young people to safely build and explore their sexual self-efficacy and will give them the language to talk about their sexual preferences, expectations, and boundaries.





# DESIGN PRINCIPLES

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## THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL

Future programming must embrace emerging technologies, digital trends, and trusted influencers/personas to revolutionize the delivery of sex education. Digital approaches offer limitless opportunity to reach audiences at scale with on-demand information that supports both private learning, and learning with peers and family. End-to-end digital solutions provide opportunities for information-sharing and linkage to sexual health products and services—providing young people the one-stop-shop experience they need and deserve.

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## THE FUTURE IS FAMILY

The new wave of sex education will break intergenerational cycles of trauma and shame regarding sexuality and gender expression by working with caregivers and children, together, to support healthy and open conversations about sex. Effective engagement of caregivers may require specialized modules that support the process of unlearning harmful myths and stereotypes so that they can serve as effective guides to their children as they nurture their own sexual identity and journey as well.

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## THE FUTURE IS INCLUSIVE

Transformative sex education teaches everyone the same thing. Boys will learn about menstruation and that pregnancy is a shared responsibility. Information about diverse forms of gender expression and sexual identities will not be separate modules, but rather, embedded in the DNA of sex education. Inclusive sex education will recognize and uphold the diverse experiences and challenges faced by young people, especially those who identify as female or LGBTQ.





# PRO TIPS ON HOW TO WORK WITH YOUTH TO DESIGN AND DELIVER THE FUTURE OF SEX EDUCATION.

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## CO-CREATE CONTENT

Engage diverse groups of young people (taking into account age, sexual orientation, and literacy) to co-design and test informative and engaging content that is:

- 1) **responsive to their real questions and concerns;**
- 2) **inspires behavior change;**
- 3) **fosters mutual understanding and empathy among diverse groups of young people.**

Ensure that the information is safe and trustworthy for young people by testing the writing style, tone, and content format. Ensure content is reflective of diverse cultural backgrounds by using language and examples that are culturally appropriate.

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## PROTOTYPE AND TEST PROGRAM/PRODUCT FEATURES

Before diving into implementation, work with youth to build and test various program features (such as Q&A sections, crisis-support channels, and link to care options) to determine which features youth find most engaging and support knowledge, self-efficacy, and behavior change outcomes. Use routine feedback sessions with youth during implementation to monitor and improve program relevancy and effectiveness.

Test, design, and plan for an evolution in different information needs and delivery preferences depending on the different stages of YP's sexual journey and ages.

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## EXPERIMENT WITH MULTI-STAKEHOLDER EXPERIENCES

Engage young people and caregivers to prototype family-centered channels that allow caregivers and young people to explore sex education together by identifying commonalities among their preferred channels and content.

# WRAP UP: THE FUTURE OF SEX EDUCATION IS HERE, AND IT IS BEING LED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Findings from this one-of-a-kind study, with this degree of geographic representation, inclusion of diverse segments of YP, and robust sample size make the case that a youth-driven pleasure-based approach is essential for future innovations in sex ed design and delivery.

Young people have a unique perspective on the issues that impact their lives and are well-positioned to offer valuable insights into the type of sex education they need to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

## y·labs

For more tips on how to co-design with youth, check out the [Quality and Standards Framework](#).

[Join us](#) in creating the future that young people deserve.

Citation: Adedamola Adebayo, Aly Beeman, Andrea Lacorazza, Nicole Ippoliti. The Future of SexEd: a global youth-led approach to reimagining innovations in sex education. Youth Development Labs; 2023.

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