

arrested *development* ?

Stonewall survey on the age of consent & sex education

Stonewall
Working for lesbian & gay equality

Survey results

A questionnaire was distributed using a wide range of gay mailing lists. About 40,000 copies were sent out. 2,408 completed surveys were received.

Sex

Male	87%	(2,088)
Female	13%	(315)

The sample was largely male due to the fact that many of the mailing lists used were predominantly gay male.

Sexuality

Bisexual (m)	5%
Bisexual (f)	2%
Lesbian	11%
Gay	82%

Age

16-20	8%
21-30	43%
31-40	26%
41-50	14%
51-60	5%
over 60	4%

Over half of the sample were under 30, and another 26% were in their 30s. A large proportion of the sample would have been directly affected by the age of consent of 21 introduced in 1967.

Age of first gay sex (men only)

Under 18	57%
18-20	21%
21 or over	22%

78% of nearly 2,100 gay and bisexual men had had gay sex before the law allowed them to. 57% would still have been criminalised if the age of consent were 18.

Age of first lesbian sex (women only)

Under 18	34%
18-20	31%
21 or over	35%

Overall assessment of sex education

Very good	1%
Good	3%
Adequate	12%
Poor	26%
Very poor	22%
None	31%
Can't remember	3%
Not applicable	2%

Assessment of coverage of male homosexuality:

Very good	0%
Good	1%
Adequate	2%
Poor	4%
Very poor	9%
None	82%
Not applicable	2%

Assessment of coverage of lesbianism:

Very good	0%
Good	0%
Adequate	1%
Poor	2%
Very poor	5%
None	89%
Not applicable	3%

Only 31% of respondents said they did not receive any sex education in school. But 82% learnt nothing about homosexuality between men, and 89% learned nothing about lesbianism.

This applied to younger respondents as well as older respondents, and where AIDS education is concerned, an even more worrying statistic emerged. Of 390 young men who received sex education since 1987 (the year of the first government AIDS awareness campaign), 161 (41%) said safer sex had been discussed. However only 10 (2.5%) said safer sex for gay men had been discussed.

Personal stories: age of consent

"Arrested for kissing"

Anonymous (39)

In 1972 - when I was 18 - I was in a car one evening parked down a farm track with a man of 22. We were kissing and fondling. An off-duty policeman knocked on the car window and arrested us. Had we been straight he would have told us to move on. We were prosecuted for "gross indecency" and fined £50 each. The publicity in a small North Yorkshire town was devastating to us and my family and job.

Jonathan (25)

In Yorkshire, as an isolated teenager, my only "release" was cottaging. In 1984, aged 16, with the use of two agents provocateurs, I was arrested, even though I was innocently wandering out of a cubicle alone, having made **no** contact that time. I was dragged home, where we had to wait for my mum and dad to return. That was how they found out I'm gay! We were all taken to Bradford police station where I suffered a humiliating examination by a police doctor, stuffing his fingers up my rectum just to "see how far they'll go" until I screamed, with the two agents provocateur laughing behind me.

After this, I made a statement until the early hours of the morning, concerning my cottaging activities, private consenting activities etc with my dad sat at my side (he had to be there as I was a minor) - this, after he'd found out I'm gay 2 or 3 hours earlier.

I was always brought up to tell the truth, so both parents encouraged me to do so. Being a naive teenager, and being promised that there would be no court case, I did just that.

Then, after I'd told them of 3 or 4 sexual contacts (**all** taking place in private) they arrested them and a chain was started.

After a few months of continuous questioning (during which I'd thankfully grown a little wiser and told them of no one else), after the police had stopped following me home from college in unmarked cars etc, I was taken to Huddersfield court with 4 others.

They thought the case was so shocking that it was transferred to Leeds Crown Court a few months later, when sentences handed out included a suspended sentence, fines, a 9 month prison sentence and I was given a 2 year probation order. I was branded by my own solicitor "a prostitute" in front of my mother, shortly before I found out that he himself (although married with a daughter) is gay.

For the next few months, I visited a probation officer in Halifax who told me (and I quote - something that I shall never forget and caused me great pain) "... homosexuals do not deserve a place on the earth".

I was shortly offered a place at Middlesex Poly in north London. My probation order was transferred to Enfield, where to the horror of my new probation officer (and my delight) I was told he was completely shocked and disgusted, and shortly terminated the order.

These events did actually bring me very close to my family, which is the only good thing, but the guilt I was made to feel developed into depression only after it was all over. During my college studies, I was treated for depression, and it is only during the last couple of years that I have been able to deal with it all, even though I have been openly gay to everyone since 1986.

Graham (38)

Back in 1974, I was 17 and in love with a boy of the same age. We went away together on a working holiday. It was wonderful and to be honest, we did not even think about the law and the age of consent at the time. We were so much in love. It wasn't until we went back to college after the summer that my partner began to get worried and called the whole thing off. I was devastated and heartbroken, to say the least. I attempted suicide and ended up spending a month in a psychiatric hospital for my "sins". It took years of tears, confusion and heartbreak to get my life back together. I am sure with more public understanding and a lower age of consent, much of this trauma could have been avoided.

Then, at 23 I fell in love with a 17 year old boy. This, too, went by the wayside because of the law. I feel we could have had a long and lasting relationship too. We live far apart now, but still keep in touch even today. Unfortunately, he has decided to stay in the closet and was getting engaged last time I heard from him.

David (31-40)

I have a partner who was 21 a month ago. We've been living together for a year i.e. illegally. Had someone tried it, I would have lost my job, my home etc - I'm a teacher, a "respectable" member of society. So the judge would probably have been very severe. However I am out at school. The staff are fine. Some parents know, others speculate. So far so good. Yet there's always the doubt that if someone decides to muck rake would the school or the LEA support me?

Jim (31-40)

Mine is a very simple story. I started having gay sex at 13 with people above and below 21 at boarding school. So did many

others; some are now married, some single and gay. No ridiculous law will ever stop this from happening. An equal age of consent will simply stop Britain from being the laughing stock of Europe.

Tim (28)

My partner and I have been together for 9 years. I am 28 and he is 40. When we first met, I was 18 and he was 31. By the age of 18 I was already well aware of, and completely comfortable with, my sexuality (I already knew I was gay at the age of 13 or 14) and I was not going to allow archaic age of consent laws to prevent me from enjoying a full sex life with the person I loved. However we were all too aware of the possible consequences of being reported by a vindictive bigot or misguided do-gooder - especially in view of the age gap between us and the inevitable "corruption of minors" gloss that is always applied liberally by the tabloid media. We also resented the de-valuing and literal criminalisation of the most important thing in both our lives - namely our overall relationship - NOT simply our sex life.

Henry (21-30)

At the age of 16 I fell in love with a wonderful man aged 34. I met him at a gay party in Cardiff. We fell in love and saw each other for about a year. I never felt that age was a problem, I never felt dominated or indeed in awe of the older man. I was just in love. When my mother finally met my partner she threatened him with the "law". We contrived to see each other but the risk was too great. He left and moved home. I had a breakdown. I have never forgotten him and I have never gotten over the tearing apart.

Peter (25)

In October 1989 at the age of 20 years and 10 months I was arrested along with an older man by the Metropolitan Police. They told me it would help my case if I admitted

that the other man was aware I was under age, the thinking being "this man has a record as long as your arm and we really want to get him" (a direct quote). I refused.

Anonymous (21-30)

We are a couple, one of us being under the current age of consent.

We live and love our own way - we can't and don't wait for misguided politicians to start living in the 90s and get things sorted out for us.

Anonymous (21-30)

When I was 19, I came out to my parents, and told them I wanted to spend the summer with my boyfriend, since I was due to spend the following 11 months in Germany. They continually used the threat of the law to split us up and I was eventually forced to stay with my parents for a month for fear of my boyfriend being arrested. I eventually learned my father had already contacted the police because of my age, but they were unwilling to act, considering me not to be "in danger".

David (21-30)

I studied European and International Law at Leiden University in Holland. At the age of 20 I met a boy, 18, and we had an affair which we decided to continue once I came back to England. My boyfriend came over and the relationship continued for a year, with both of us travelling back and forth. British law is absurd. In the Netherlands, it was legal, in England we were breaking the law!

Andrew (21-30)

I knew I was gay from about the age of 12. I moved to London when I was 16 and started to have sex with people of a similar age. I have always chosen partners in my age group and I'm not stupid enough to let myself get taken advantage of. This period from 16-20 years was very important as this is the natural age for exploring one's

own sexuality. All my straight friends were doing the same. I felt the law was preposterous and consequently ignored it!

Robert (21-30)

From January 1983 to November 1984 I was employed as a police constable in the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary. I lived in digs in the small seaside town in Devon where I was stationed. When I was 20 I had to resign from the police because I had fallen in love with my landlady's son. We were both under 21. We had a mutually loving and caring relationship. We had no concept of being gay or bisexual, and we tried to suppress our feelings for each other. However, the inevitable had to happen. We had oral sex once. That is all. I wrote him a love letter, which was discovered, and I was arrested on suspicion of buggery. I was told to resign and I would probably only face a caution. I resigned from a very promising career - I was a good policeman. Two years later, under resultant psychotherapy, I attempted suicide.

Martin (31-40)

After years of occasional secret guilt-ridden sex with men, I finally came out at the age of 20. I'd fallen in love for the first time and I didn't care who knew it. Liberation!

When a friend pointed out I was committing a crime, I found it hilarious. Not only had I been breaking the law for years but my strong sense of personal justice in coming out contrasted absurdly with it. I was in the final year of university - and yet was judged still too immature to decide whether I could have sex with the man I was in love with! Now, I just feel angry. The vulnerability of one's teenage years is not protected by the law - it is increased immeasurably for gay people. My greatest regret is those years of suffering. Let future kids enjoy their sexuality, not be scarred by years of guilt, self-hatred and loneliness.

George (31-40)

I knew I was gay at 12. I simply couldn't stand the frustration of doing nothing about it — at 19 I went to a local gay pub and went from there. I have lived, totally monogamously, with one man whom I love more than life itself, for 9 years. We are open to all our family and friends, we now even work in the same place with the full knowledge of our employer, as well as being well known members and organisers of a major car club. From our experience, I find the public are far more tolerant and open minded than government or the media.

We had sex when both under age, and as I am 2 years old, continued to do so when I was over 21 and Richard was still 19 and 20. Nothing, certainly not the law, would stop us and it never even crossed our minds.

John (32)

At 32 years old I am only just coming to terms with being gay. I knew I was gay at 13, yet foolishly chose to suppress my sexuality and mix exclusively with heterosexuals in an effort to turn myself straight. Of course, I failed. My situation has caused me much unhappiness and I've often thought of suicide. I feel that if I had received a decent sex education at school which covered homosexuality, I would not have had so many problems as an adult. Finally, I had consenting sex at least 100 times between 16 and 20, the law didn't stop me! I don't think it stops anyone!

Shaun (21-30)

The first gay sex I had was with a school friend of the same age. This carried on for 3 years until we went our separate ways. We still keep in touch. He is happily straight with a girlfriend, and I am happily gay with a boyfriend of three years.

Anonymous (21-30)

At the age of 17, my first sexual experience was with a school mate. This became public knowledge and provided me with an

opportunity to come out. Yet as we were both still under 21, I had to repress this desire to tell the truth. Instead, I replied "no comment" to each questioning, which left me in a limbo situation - neither being gay nor totally heterosexual, which confused friends and enemies alike. I spent a year of hell, in torment, until finally leaving for university.

Anonymous (21-30)

I met my partner when I was 25 and he was 18. He is Italian; we met in Italy, and had an ongoing sexual relationship in Italy for 2 years. Then we moved to England, and spent a year living illegally until his 21st birthday in July. We are now legal here and needn't necessarily live in a 2 bedroomed flat - before July, we had to as a legal precaution. Silly that after two years in Italy (legally) we went BACKWARDS in legal terms as he grew older...

Ellis (25)

I am 25. My last boyfriend was 17. I was very much in love and we were very close. I had to break it up because I was terrified of being caught. I am respected and popular in my local community and my family business and my family rely on me. I just couldn't take the risk of being caught and branded a "pervert" or whatever. I would be ruined. I'm not afraid of being gay or people knowing - but I am afraid of the law.

That's our life, what on earth has the state got to do with it?

Brian (21-30)

I have no particular story to tell but I would want to register my near disbelief that my consenting sexual loving between the time I "came out" at 17 and for 4 years after were all illegal in some way or another, it seems bizarre.

Tim (21-30)

I knew I was gay when 15 years old. I had my first sexual experience at 17. But even when I was almost 21 (about a month before my birthday) my partner (who was then 22) worried about having consensual sex with me because he was training to be a solicitor and any criminal offence would have caused problems with the law society. My 21st birthday was a great relief! the age of consent should definitely be 16. There is no sensible reason for it to be otherwise.

Andrew (21-30)

I did not sleep with another man until I went away to college at age 19. In my first year I had a very short relationship with an 'out' bisexual man (21) who messed me about and then dumped me. It was quite a negative relationship and I became very depressed and kept it to myself because of possible legal problems. That summer I ended up at the Samaritans in my home town. My problems were being doubled because of necessary secrecy and internalised homophobia and my family being Catholic. They were very helpful. In my second year I met a mature student (28) who was in his first year and we had a blissful 9 month affair. We were however discreet and having to hide how you really feel is very damaging internally and harmful to any relationship.

John (24)

My partner is 19. He came out to his parents this week and unfortunately they are not very accepting of the situation. They are unaware of the legal aspect, however if it came to their attention I would be worried about the consequences. We're both very out in other regards eg work, friends and yet the fear of prosecution will loom over us for another 2 years. Why is this country so bloody unjust? I hope with all my heart that your campaign succeeds.

David (21-30)

My story is, I believe, typical. I suppressed my sexuality until over 21 because I knew that as well as being inappropriate / immoral, it was also illegal. If legal at 16, I would have been more relaxed about coming out at university.

All that I suffered was 5 more years of misery. But isn't that typical for young gay men?

Tom (21-30)

I knew I was gay from the age of 12 or 13. Nothing could change the way I feel. However I did attempt to sleep with various women to convert myself. My first encounter at the age of 16 was overwhelming. To be honest I had absolutely no doubt in my mind what my sexual orientation was. For the law to expect me to wait until I was 21 is a complete and utter nonsense. I was in a relationship then for 6 years and it was a good relationship although we always knew there was a risk because of the law.

Anonymous (20)

I am a typical gay man under the age of consent, I realised I was gay around 12 and there was a feeling of complete isolation - Norfolk is not the best place to grow up gay. It wasn't until university 2 years ago that I became happy with myself and felt prepared to come out to some friends and colleagues. I find it ridiculous that at 20 years, under British law I am apparently unable to think for myself.

Personal stories: sex education

Mark (55)

I did not as a young man have the confidence or courage to overcome the taboos of the time and to defy the law. Instead, I got married, had three children and felt I then had to stick with the decisions I had made. After 27 years of marriage, of pretending, and in some ways, hiding, I told my wife and children that I was gay and that in future I intended to live with a man whom I loved. For them, as for me, this was a traumatic experience, but my children have come through it and our relationship is better than it has ever been. I no longer have any contact with my wife. I regret the pain of a lifetime which has hurt so many other people as well as myself. Most of all I regret the power of the law and of social disapproval combined to distort all my relationships, to make me hate myself, and to persuade me to pretend to be what I was not and to dislike what I most wanted. My lifetime's perversion has not been homosexuality, but the pretence that I was straight. I am glad to be free of that at last. I hope that I can now help to change laws and attitudes which still cripple the lives of young gay men and women and sustain and nourish attitudes that are unhealthy, even poisonous.

Steven (21-30)

I came out at the age of 13, whilst at comprehensive school. It caused rather a commotion at the time. There were meetings with my headmaster, social services, the police, probation service, my parents and sometimes even me! Although in retrospect they all seemed to be struggling somewhat with my situation, in that first month they all said they were there to help me. I never saw them again. During the next three and a half years I was subjected to continual bullying from other pupils, often ending up in physical violence. Although each recorded incident

of violence was dealt with by the teachers, the root cause was never addressed. Unfortunately, I feel nothing has changed since then.

Julie (21-30)

Having tried to commit suicide twice under the age of 17, it breaks my heart to think there are those going through the education system right now, feeling alienated, confused and at odds with what they're fed as "the norm". It **has** to change. To think that there are those going through what I went through... It's wrong. It hurts. Homosexuality just "is", it cannot "be encouraged". I will do **anything** to help change these ridiculous pathetic laws.

Maggie (21-30)

I went to a catholic high school in West Lancashire. In the third year we were to have a talk from a gay man. The governors prevented it happening as it might encourage us to be gay. I had already had my first relationship with a woman. I had no support from anyone during my first relationship with a woman or when it ended. I was not able to talk to anyone about it. I bitterly regret that my adolescence was filled with fear and isolation, a waste of "the best years" of my life.

Anonymous (21-30)

Part of my schools sex "education" involved a talk on STDs etc. by a local doctor. The talk was totally geared towards heterosexual people. At the end the doctor told the class to "stay away from homosexuals", as they are "bad" people and will give you AIDS, hepatitis, and various other STD's.

I felt really angry, and isolated after hearing this statement. I wanted to question it but I did not have the courage. For weeks beforehand I had been contemplating "coming out" or talking about my feelings to my teacher. I decided not to because of the talk. A few years later, while at university I discovered, 2 of my former classmates were gay, a gay woman and a gay man. Both of them felt anger/confusion at the doctors remarks. The existence of lesbians wasn't even mentioned.

Michael (17)

I am 17 years old and gay. It is wrong that others should look down on gays. I have been beaten by other guys (queer bashing) I know other guys 16 to 20 that are gay and are afraid to tell anyone. One of my friends committed suicide at 18 because of being bullied.

Anonymous (21-30)

I had a very sheltered, but happy, childhood in a very small town in the north of England. I had no idea what a homosexual was, and when I had my first homosexual experience, I was more than confused and had no-one to talk to. I have not become any different in my adult life. I am not a confused, screwed-up 20-something basket case. But I do know people who are. I admitted to myself that I was homosexual at around 15 years old. But if I had known that there were other people like me it would have made things a lot easier.

Chris (21-30)

I went through hell and suicidal depression as a teenager. I thought I was the only one. It angers me that such a small minority of single minded hypocrites can damage so large a number of people.

Jon (21-30)

I was very unhappy at school and was bullied as people suspected that I was gay. The only time that gay people were mentioned in sex education was when someone asked why I was a poof. The biology teacher explained that people were poofs because they were missing a chromosome - very helpful! I feel that the fear that I lived in at school took a heavy toll in terms of my educational achievements and also psychological development. Happily I am now a well adjusted person and am not frightened to be who I am.

Richard (41-50)

I received no sex education, and no positive information about homosexuality. As a result, my sexual development, and I feel, a lot of the rest of my life, has been severely stunted. From the age of about 5, I knew I had feelings towards men - hence I feel the argument about boys who would otherwise be straight being "seduced" into a gay lifestyle is quite ridiculous. However, because of the lack of any information or positive contact with homosexuality, I did nothing about my sexuality until the age of 30, when the pressures had built so much that something had to give. At times I certainly felt suicidal about it. As a result of lack of positive information or contacts, my early sexual experiences were all casual (mainly abroad) and included unsafe practices that I might have avoided if I'd had access to more unbiased information. Ignorance does not protect anyone.

Stuart (21-30)

Without support from an early age, or understanding from the world around me, my early life as a young homosexual was confused, difficult and largely unfulfilled. I feel that if the age of consent was lowered, more support groups and a better understanding would prevail, making the life of young homosexuals much happier, more fulfilling and more stable.

Gavin (31-40)

I had no help from society, school, or parents in coming to terms with my sexuality. As a result of pressure to conform and the prejudice of society backed up by unjust law, I married, had a child and reached 30 before breaking through to my true feelings. I cannot regret having brought a wonderful child into the world but I resent the pain and suffering endured by me, by those around me and potentially in the future by my son. Equal treatment in law will help break down prejudice and help avoid future generations repeating my mistakes.

Mark (31-40)

My first sexual experience was aged 29 and I feel that much of this was due to constant repression from an early age - some education at school might have helped and allowed me to come to terms with my sexuality a lot sooner.

Sebastian (23)

Ten years ago when I was 13 I began to have sex with my boyfriend who I met at boarding school. At 15 we were caught by a teacher. We were sent for psychiatric assessment, found to be "unstable" and were both sent to a secure wing until a decision was made. At 16 we both left care and lived together. Social services decided they would keep us observed until 18 years of age but we never received counselling on safe sex or any other aspects of gay life. We were together for 10 years. He died last November in an accident.

Peter (31-40)

Because of lacking sex education and bigotry in school I only discovered my sexuality aged 24.

Lionel (21-30)

The best thing I ever did was to leave school. The sense of isolation and loneliness

I felt there is something I'll never forget. All I and many others like me needed was some kind of "link" to break the chain of the ubiquitous heterosexual message. There was no positive mention of homosexuality in any shape or form at school. People think that by forcing outdated attitudes upon us we will all become straight. Being gay or lesbian is not open for discussion - we are what we are, end of story. All that suppression of our existence in schools leads to is an increase in the suicide rate, an increase in failed marriages (when one partner realises his or her homosexuality) an increase in homophobia and a nation of adults who are brainwashed into ignorance from childhood.

I would not like anybody to go through what I did at school.

Jason (21-30)

In sex education class the teacher looked round the room and said that as there weren't any homosexuals in the class (actual words: "nobody looks homosexual") there was no need to discuss it!!

Anonymous (21-30)

I believe that my lack of sex education and the ridiculous age of consent are at least partially to blame for my habit of cottaging which began at the age of 17. When I was 18 I was caught by the Police and I now have a criminal record. Perhaps if homosexuality had been presented as a valid lifestyle rather than not being presented at all I would have come out sooner and never become a criminal.

Claire (21-30)

As someone just about to enter the teaching profession I am extremely concerned about the lack of inclusive sex education. I come from a very open family and had reasonable sex education at school, but from a totally heterosexual viewpoint with maybe a couple of mentions of the fact that 10% of

the population is gay. I feel that the lack of discussion of gay sex meant that I did not feel able to say I was bisexual until I was 21, while I had heterosexual sex at age 15. For me it was good to discover another side to my self and make sense of my infatuations with certain women, but for someone who feels exclusively gay those years must be a frightening time.

Guy (31-40)

On 2 separate occasions I've come across boys of around 16 desperate for sexual contact which they were obviously sure they wanted. My attempts to talk to them about their sexuality and tell them the facts about safer sex were constantly in jeopardy because of the legal position: How do you help when if you do, you are afraid of the consequences of a loving act. Because of the lack of places I could legitimately go my first sex was in a porno booth - not exactly conducive to self esteem!

Anonymous (31-40)

Sex education was "straight" sex only. Our headmaster made it clear during assembly that any sex between boys that was discovered would be treated by calling the police, the boys' parents and a psychiatrist and the boy would be "cured". Looking back I think I would be classified as clinically depressed between the ages of 12-17 as I felt my sexuality was a psychiatric problem and a secret. If I had been told that homosexuality was another variation that was OK then I'm sure I would have developed as a person in a more balanced way.

Steve (26)

I spent seven years from when I was 13 to when I was 21 desperately trying to understand why I was different. I was not aware of homosexuality and certainly was not given any education on sexuality or on sex in general. Fortunately now at the age of 26 I am still alive despite trying to commit

suicide on and off for a period of 7 years, by which point I had educated myself and come to terms with my sexuality.

Robert (41-50)

I spent 30 years of my life lonely miserable and suffering from low self esteem due to the message relentlessly rammed home by straight society that feeling attracted to people of the same sex was abnormal and perverted. Thanks to my 'coming out' in 1982 I now have a pride in myself as a normal, healthy caring human being. I want to live in a society where I can walk down the street holding my lover's hand without feeling embarrassed or scared! I also want to live in a world where young people can learn that consensual sex between adults of whatever sex is a gift of nature that no-one has a right to deny them.

Lee (19)

The only homosexual sex education pupils got at our school was when a brave lad "came out" as gay in a sex education class. The teacher went bright red with embarrassment and told the lad concerned to visit the headmaster. When he visited him, he was told that he had "upset" the class and that he should keep his comments to himself. I am 19 and feel very strongly that the age of consent should be lowered. I would be interested in campaigning for this cause, then hopefully in the future teachers could not dismiss the issue of homosexuality and could face up to the real world.

John (41-50)

Lack of positive information about homosexuality in my teens caused me to ignore my true feelings for several years while I tried to be heterosexual. I did not know that long lasting gay relationships were possible; I thought gay sex was only practised in toilets or saunas! Luckily I finally found out when I was 22 that there was much more to it than that but I blame

the education system for my ignorance and several wasted years which were not particularly happy.

James (41-50)

I always knew I was gay but a total lack of information or education at school and church left me assuming that I had little option but to marry and have a family. After 16 years of marriage, and with 3 children, I lost my job, home, family and church membership due to a relationship which, had the other person been female, would have caused only the mildest reprimand.

With the right education and information I would not have married and thereby caused such distress to my wife and children.

Now happily employed and a volunteer with the local lesbian and gay switchboard, and a member of the Metropolitan Community Church, I try to offer that information and education which I was denied.

William (31-40)

When I started fancying boys in my class whilst everyone else was after the girls from the school down the road, I felt alone and completely isolated, freakish and disgusting. I felt at any moment I would somehow be spotted by my classmates and brutally punished - a punishment which I would have thought well-deserved. I eventually poured my heart out to Marje Proops in the Daily Mirror! She replied via a friend's address (who kept his promise not to ask why I should need to receive post via him). I couldn't **believe** that she'd had letters like mine before and that I even had a chance of leading a happy life! **One sentence** during sex education could have saved me so much suffering.

Brian (41-50)

I was brought up in a normal family situation and all my brothers and sisters are heterosexual. I played around with a school chum. I then spent my teens trying to be heterosexual (primarily out of fear and prejudice). This was unsuccessful - I could not be "converted" so how can it be assumed that we can be converted either way? I did not attempt gay sex again until I was 23.

Ross (21-30)

A former lover, who was only 19 when we were together, told me that when he was 15 he had suffered from NSU for nearly a year. He wouldn't tell anyone about it because he thought he was being punished for his feelings about men. If he had had even a rudimentary idea of what was really wrong or the slightest affirmation of the validity of his sexuality, he would have been spared a lot of pain and doubt.

Amanda (21-30)

My sex education consisted of being shown various forms of contraception and being told how these were used. There was no discussion of the emotional side of sex and sexuality (for any sexuality).

David (19)

I was about 12 when I realised I was gay. But to be honest I'd always felt different - but I didn't know why. From 12 up to the age of 18 I didn't do anything about my sexuality, I just hoped it would go away - which of course it didn't.

Those years were lonely, desperate years. I tried to make myself fancy girls, but I just couldn't do it. I tried to kill myself twice. Family, friends, society - there was no one there to help me, to say "it's alright to be gay." In fact they were saying the opposite.

Last January I met someone I liked and we became lovers. We have helped each other to accept our sexualities and to enjoy life.

For once in my life I am happy.

Josh is 21 and I am 19. The law has not stopped me from having sex with him, but it angers me. That when I express my love for him we are breaking the law - that he could go to prison - it makes me so mad.

I don't think heterosexuals realise the damage that the law does. They think you can just ignore it and get on with life. But you can't.

Paul (21-30)

When I was 16 I fell in love with my best friend who was also 16. After some months, when he had argued with his mum she told our headmaster about the relationship. The headmaster summoned us to two separate offices where we were grilled about what had happened. He had some of my love letters to Martin, so I "admitted" and defended being in love. The headmaster forbade us to speak to each other again, saying that if we did he'd expel us. He gave me three days to tell my mum, who was and is a committed and dogmatic Roman Catholic. My life at home and school became unbearable, and not long after that I ran away permanently. Ten years later, I still don't feel I've pulled my life back together.

Cal (21-30)

... All throughout my schooling I put up with homophobia. This caused me great difficulties in my schooling as I was always having some jerk calling me queer or some other comment. Of course I fought back but it was me that always got caught not the naff shites that put me through hell.

When I left school I went back about 3 months later to say hi and one of the department heads openly said that all the teachers knew I went through shit because I was gay, but didn't do anything about it cause I'd never been beaten up due to it. Well I was, but I didn't have the guts to

report it. And they say schooldays are the best years of your life, what crap.

Anonymous (21-30)

My first relationship, which lasted six months, was with a guy who was 26 - I was 18 at the time.

He was fully aware of the law and that sometimes caused a bit of friction between us. I once had to stand in the pouring rain while he booked a hotel room with two **single** beds. That's one of the things I will always remember about our short relationship.

David (21-30)

The only time homosexuality came up during sex education classes at school was once when I was 12 or 13. All the boys in my class were discussing the issues with a counsellor from the local authority. We could ask any questions we wanted. Some boy asked about VD from homosexual sex. The counsellor was caught off guard - she knew little about the subject. Another boy asked if gay sex was "alright". She began talking about homosexuals. "What shall we call them ... poofs - we'll call them poofs." My heart sank. One word from her at that stage would have made me a lot happier over the next four years.

Dave (51-60)

I was married in 1966 and had three children in order to be "normal". I tried very hard being very defensive and scared of being found out. What a farce. I am now attending a support group and one of my biggest surprises was to meet young men of twenty-some who are still getting married in order to placate family and friends. That is why in formative years it is important that teenagers have the opportunity to come to terms with their sexuality free from persecution. I sometimes feel very sad that I have not lived my life honestly.

Anonymous (31-40)

The need for increased gay sex education is immense. Growing up in a small town I felt I was the only gay person around and I had no idea how to contact other gay people. My life before I moved to a large city at the age of 18 was therefore very miserable and lonely, almost suicidal sometimes.

Derek (31-40)

Over the years as a teacher I have had a number of teenage boys talk to me in confidence about their homosexuality or being unsure of their sexuality. I would like to think that I have helped them deal with the difficulties of being a teenager. I live in constant fear of it being discovered that I am gay because I would instantly lose my job. One girl at my previous school admitted to a teacher that she was a lesbian. This teacher told the head and he insisted that the girl should see a psychiatrist. Luckily the girl had enlightened parents who told the school what to do with their psychiatrist.

Gordon (31-40)

I feel strongly that education and society should accept homosexuality as an option that is not morally wrong. I have always felt myself to be gay but because of the attitudes of my peers, sneering and abusing me throughout my school life, and the lack of having someone telling me that that major part of me, my sexuality was OK, I had major problems adjusting in later life. I now feel happy with myself and my sexuality but deeply regret having missed out on dating, flirting, and really rehearsing relationships the way heterosexual teenagers are encouraged to do.

Graham (31-40)

I was aware from a very early age that I was attracted to people of my own sex, but because of the stigma attached to gay relationships, I found myself being persuaded to conform to what this country

considers the norm and even while waiting on the church steps before my marriage in 1974, I knew what I was about to do was far more wrong morally than any gay act that I had been involved in. I, like so many others, hadn't the guts to stand up and be counted and to retract from a marriage vow I knew I could never keep!

The hurt and upset that that act caused my then wife and our respective families, far outweighs the hurt that would have been, and was, caused by my coming out and telling everyone the truth, which I was certain of long before I was sixteen. At 18 I met someone of the same sex and know to this day I and we could have been happy together in a relationship, but again I hadn't the courage to go through with it! Happily, now many years on from those traumatic days, when after an extremely upsetting, not to mention long and expensive divorce case, followed by six very long and lonely years on my own, heavily in debt from the divorce and trying to maintain a mortgage and hold down a good job, I have now lived in a monogamous gay relationship for eight wonderful years with the full support of both sets of parents and family and work colleagues who all accept us as two people who are in love and want to share their lives "til death us do part", never as two men who are doing something wrong or illegal.

Had I had the courage to be honest in my very early years, all the hurt and upset, not to mention a nervous breakdown and more than one suicide attempt could have been prevented from ever happening.

Don't the powers that be realise two simple facts, one, the more you tell someone not to do something, the more they are likely to protest and do it all the more, and two, homosexuality is a fact of life, just because they ban it, it won't go away or prevent gay people from being gay?

Marc (23)

I was 17, in 1987, when I attempted suicide. I'd always known I was gay, right from being a kid, and up to this point I thought that living a gay life, as I know it now, was impossible. It just didn't happen. Sex education was inadequate and there was no gay element to it at all. Had there been I know that I would have been able to come out to my parents - well my mum! - and my family sooner. I know that I would have found my place in the gay community sooner, I know I wouldn't have lived such a painful teenhood and I know I wouldn't have tried to end that pain by trying to kill myself.

Keith (41-50)

Sex education was a one-off lesson by the biology teacher in the 4th year of my all-boys grammar school. One basic wall chart was unrolled and the nuts and bolts explained. Anonymous questions were answered dismissively.

I learnt a great deal more from cottage walls - not least that there **were** others like me - and from an incredible "walk in the park" with a pick up (neither of us had a place we could go to). He told me everything I needed to know - I'm eternally grateful for that long walk and chat.

Ralph (28)

I have known I am gay since my mid-teens. However even after leaving home to attend university I did not try to express myself sexually in any way. I knew if I became involved with anyone (before I was 21) they and I could get a long jail term. This has left me, even now, frightened of any sexual relationship.

Only now after wasting what could have been the happiest decade of my life am I coming to terms with myself and thinking about coming out.

Ray (21-30)

Had I known and understood when I was 16 what I know now, it would have saved a hell of a lot of heartache to myself and others. I know I am not the only one to have been confused about my sexuality at an early age. But with no real sex education, counselling or anyone to talk to, I tried to block these feelings from my mind. I got a job with a "macho" image - the army - and even got married for 5 years. However, you can't run and hide forever. I was exceedingly close to a mental breakdown, confessed my deceit to my wife and we are now "happily" separated. Naturally neither of us wish to tell family and friends the reason, as they would be about as confused as I was in younger days. I do not believe all this would have occurred if decent and sympathetic information had been available!

Alan (28)

At 18 I met the man I'm still together with after 10 years. When we met he was 26 and we were well aware of the dangers, especially after my parents' hostile reaction to the news that I was gay. However I couldn't have made a better decision than setting up home with him at 19.

Anonymous (31-40)

I used to believe all the old crap I heard about "going through a phase". At the age of 29 I finally sussed that this was no phase. Up to that time - looking back - I can see that trying to be straight, which I never was, was screwing me up. When, finally, I decided that I was going to be myself, things changed for the better all round. If I had been told at the age of 11 or 12 (onwards) that what I felt was normal and OK, I know that my adolescence would have been much happier. Keeping one's **self** secret becomes an art - one I was glad to lose!

Anonymous (21-30)

Being a school teacher and having to teach sex education, I feel completely frustrated by the fact that I cannot answer pupils' questions openly and honestly. I never mention homosexuality for fear of repercussions from parents, governors etc. If I did it would surely be in breach of clause 28. I have **many** friends in the same situation. I also feel guilty and depressed that I am continuing the ignorance of the existence of homosexuality and the surrounding issues.

Steve (31-40)

My first boyfriend was when I was 26 years of age, he was 16. I had had not opportunity to discuss my gayness with anyone, friends, family, etc. We had no sex education lessons at school. I was ashamed and determined to be a "bachelor". Then I met Tony. We lived together as "landlord and lodger" for 5 years and he was my first awakening and true love.

I lived in constant fear of exposure and had to stamp out all rumours each time they arose. I could be gay and happy! But only in my own bedroom. Unable to accept this, we discussed telling our friends. Firstly that I was gay, but without saying that we were a couple, after all I could have lost my job etc. Gradually I told a few friends who all accepted, even my family. Tony told his mother and brother that I (not him) was gay and they accepted this.

The strain on us was enormous and we kept having to separate for months as the pressures built up.

Eventually Tony told his brother that we were lovers, and I told my parents. But it became too much for us especially Tony who was terrified of his "naf" mates finding out.

He is now married and deeply unhappy, living abroad. Years later I am still gutted.

Were we right to come out? Was the education process and the whole system right to label us lepers?

I'm successful, with a thriving business, gay, bloody proud of it, but desperately lonely and still a little afraid.

Get rid of this bigoted, discriminatory law as soon as possible.

Anonymous (21-30)

I believe I'd have come out regardless of my sex education, but understanding lesbianism earlier would have saved me from years of self-hate, self-denial and confusion.

Anonymous (18)

All through secondary school I knew I was different from the others. I felt attracted to other boys and I really, really hated myself for that. I even tried suicide on more than one occasion. Childline was no help either, they said it was just an adolescent phase and I shouldn't worry about it. I put the phone down and took 50 paracetamol. A few months later, at 15, I left home. I put myself in a lot of danger but I just had to know for sure. I was very lucky. I met a really nice guy and he took me in. He taught me that it was okay to love another man and that being gay was not some despicable disease. Only now, three years on, am I at a stage where I can truly say I am content with my sexuality.