

3. Making sex legitimate

In this section we explore one of the strongest themes that emerged from the focus groups of young people, namely the conditions, characteristics and circumstances that make sex legitimate – put crudely, that distinguishes ‘good sex’ from ‘bad sex’. These focus-group discussions were structured around a number of contentious statements, which we generated in part through an analysis of young people’s questionnaire responses and in part through picking up on the themes that characterise discussion of teenage sexuality in popular discourse. The statements most relevant to this section focus on consent and the limits of choice, namely:

- You should only have sex if you love someone.
- If a girl says no to sex she doesn’t really mean it.
- The age of consent for sex should be lowered to 14.

Before embarking on an analysis of the different views that young people express on these questions, it is first worth considering *why* this is an area of heightened debate among young people. As we discussed in the introduction, sexual practices and norms have changed considerably over a generation. In the past, there was some certainty (if not total conformity) in relation to the factors that make sex morally legitimate – marriage and procreation. The arrival of accessible contraception opened up a space between sex and procreation, a space that was filled by a range of voices including those of feminists, medics, hedonists and others who argued that sex might be for pleasure, self-knowledge, even health. The progressive fall in the age of sexual initiation, alongside an increase in the age of marriage and childbearing, suggests that the traditional legitimisation of sex through the institution of marriage and the church is no longer as authoritative as in the past. Yet it is not clear that this single source of authority has been replaced. Rather, it appears that there is a range of competing discourses or ‘regimes’ which provide a framework for legitimating sex, and within which distinctions between good sex and bad sex can be made. So it may be that this is an area of debate precisely because a

number of different values regimes come into conflict. It may also be that there are some underlying tensions that can be contested in different ways within them.

So what are the values regimes that characterise young people’s discussions about when it is legitimate to have sex? We have identified the following from an analysis of our data:

- Romance: Sex as legitimised by love
- Play: Sex as legitimised by pleasure
- Security: Sex as legitimised by commitment
- Equity: Sex as legitimised by consent
- Legality: Sex as legitimised by the law
- Safety: Sex as legitimised by its consequences

Through an illustration of these themes we hope to show three things. First, that young people move easily between different values regimes in their discussions, suggesting that there is no single source of moral authority that shapes their views. Second, that these values regimes are positioned very differently with regard to wider structures of power, and that some are more ‘private/informal’ and others more ‘public/formal’. Third, that questions of gender difference are central to young people’s discussions, whatever values regime is invoked.

Romance: Sex as legitimised by love

Interviewer:	When do you think it’s the right thing to do – to have sex with somebody?
Donna:	When you’re over age and you’ve got a proper boyfriend that you know you can trust.
Interviewer:	You love him?
Donna & Sonia:	Yeah.
Interviewer:	Do you think love is important in that?
Donna & Sonia:	Yeah.
Interviewer:	And when you say ‘love’ what does that mean?
Donna:	Caring for each other and not going to go around saying, oh, guess what? And then finishing with them and you just get called.

aged 14 to 15, in London

I'm not gonna have sex unless it's for the right, the right moment that you really think you – really, really wanna get close to your boyfriend then – I think that's the right time.

Estelle, aged 14

Many of the young people in The Respect Study felt that there was a 'right time' for sex, and preferably with the 'right' person. They also thought, or at least hoped, that they would instinctively recognise this time, and person. Perhaps this is part of the romanticism of sexual relationships, which is fuelled in much of the media where the hero and heroine finally fall happily into each other's arms, and hence into bed. In real life, of course, this situation may turn out quite differently, or creates more problems than it solves. This kind of romanticism was reflected in one of the statements discussed by the young people in their groups, which contended that: 'You should only have sex if you love someone'. It produced a variety of responses, but in general, the young people tended to agree rather than disagree with this assertion. This was accentuated by the younger age groups, by young women, and those young people living in Northern Ireland where the influence of both Catholic and Protestant religions tended to teach 'no sex before marriage', even if this was often transgressed. Some of those in the study, from ethnic groups such as Turkish and Asian, were also more strictly regulated in this respect by the moral codes of their religions, and their responses were shaped by these expectations.

This statement produced a gendered response, with young women emphasising love as being a more important criterion than the young men. This has also been found in other studies, such as the research on young women's and young men's negotiation of sexual relationships (Women Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP) and Men, Risk and AIDS Project (MRAP), Holland and others 1998). Adopting different languages of sex and love is a crucial mechanism in the constitution of gender within heterosexuality. Holland and others noted that metaphors of battle and conquest dominate the way young men talk about their experiences in the male peer group. Within this, they conspire to 'take sex' from women. This language of 'robbery' stands in opposition to a more feminine language of sex as love and commitment. For men, falling in love puts them in danger of being trapped by a woman. For 16-year-old Paul, love meant something lasting for the rest of life, and this can be quite scary for many young men to contemplate.

Paul: Being in love? – you want to stay with them for the rest of your life just – becomes part of you.

Interviewer: Right, so anything – you don't have to feel that to have sex with somebody?

Paul: Not really, no.

For many of the young women in The Respect Study, one of the legitimating reasons to have sex was to be in love. If you loved him, and you thought he might be 'the one' for you, then it could be all right to embark on a sexual relationship. If it was a casual relationship, such as a one-night stand, or sex done just for the pleasure of the moment, this was, for most young women, not quite right. Donna and Sonia (quoted above), both stressed the importance of love in any sexual relationship, and differentiated between sex and making love, as did Lola.

Sex is just sex, but making love is love, in 'it? It's two different things – to me it's two different things.

Lola, aged 14

Love and romance are an acceptable part of a young woman's vocabulary but for young men it can be more complicated. While it is very possible for them to feel emotion, fall in love, and respect women, they may not feel able to publicly admit this to friends (apart, perhaps, from a close male confidante). Young men use humour and teasing as a way of policing their own behaviour. They are subject to male peer pressure and may be contending with several contradictions in how they can or wish to be seen. At one level, they want to have sex and be seen as a stud by their group of mates, and if this means they have to declare love to a young woman (whether or not they mean it), so be it. But at another level, showing or declaring love is also risky for their image, and could result in them being teased for being soft. This was exemplified by a small group of Northern Irish young men who were discussing these kinds of issues shortly before St Valentine's Day. Whether or not they had girlfriends, or fancied anyone, they felt it was not done for them to show any overt romanticism. But they also acknowledged that it was partly a function of their age in feeling vulnerable to being made fun of by their peers, and they recognised that adults can be more romantic because they have 'learned not to care'. Young women do not have such a conflict; they can be romantic and yet not be seen as 'soppy'. Therefore using and being comfortable with such a romantic discourse is something that is gendered, it is partly a function of age and experience and, to some extent, has to be learned.

The traditional distinctions made between men's and women's reasons for being initially attracted to the opposite sex still appeared to hold: women go more for personality and generally positive feelings about a man, while men are more focused

on physical appearance. The group of 15- to 16-year-old young people in Northern Ireland quoted below, endorsed this view and reflected what appears to be young men's greater desire for sex, and women's for emotional attachment.

- Interviewer: Do you think you should love somebody – it makes it important?
- Adele: You must have to feel something.
- Simon: Horny.
- Adele: Everybody must feel something towards them in order to be attracted.
- Glen: Good body.

While 'good' sex for young women can include sex based on love, for young men at this age, what is 'good' for them is perhaps more based on their performance, rather than their feelings. Sex and love are obviously not exclusive, but they certainly do not always come together. In a group where most were critical of sex without love, one young woman suggested that the one could lead to the other: 'You would have sex when you were in love but then it might start off as sex and then you might be making love in the end, mightn't you?'

One of the attractions of love as a way of legitimising sex is that it is associated with the status of adulthood and with maturity. The extent to which it is realistic for young people to be able to handle the powerful emotions involved and the potential for others to exploit such emotions is commented on by Aileen, who considered that at this stage in their lives young people do not really know what love is.

'Cause they might be only, what, fifteen and you love someone then? Know what I'd say to him 'No chance' ... And some people don't know what love is when they're our age too.

Aileen, aged 14

Play: Sex as legitimised by pleasure

The media is very sexualised, and usually portrays sex as something almost irresistible and ultimately very pleasurable. Yet in real life it was harder for young people to legitimate having sex simply for pleasure, without the fear that this might label them as immoral. This was the contradiction in endorsing a set of sexual values around fun and pleasure. It is another gendered view, that young men find it easier to support than young women. As Sue Lees showed in her research, young women are constantly monitoring whether they might be labelled as 'slags' if they seem too

keen on sex or go with 'too many' men, while young men get away with being a 'stud', or simply 'horny' (Lees 1986, 1993). Apart from gender, in some locations where religious values were strong, such as Northern Ireland, there was more moral disapproval of having sex simply for pleasure. For example, 14- and 15-year-olds Aideen and Roma, were somewhat shocked at the idea that some people do have sex for enjoyment.

- Aideen: ... but I think that just some people enjoy it. [giggles]
I'm being serious, like some people do.
- Roma: Nah, but still, it's not right. You don't go round having
sex with everyone just 'cause you like it!
- Aideen: It's like a hobby; it's just like somebody doing netball –

In another group of Irish young people, 15-year-old Cheryl was one of several who disagreed that love was necessary to have sex, but thought that people needed at least to have some positive feelings about the person they had sex with.

'cos sex is something like ... I dunno, it's just sort of ... you don't have to
LOVE someone ... Well it would need to be someone that you LIKED
anyway ... someone that you like and someone that you sort of felt
something about them.

Cheryl

While many young women wish to make love the necessary condition for sex, some young men make the distinction between the sort of women they would have sex with, and those who they would fall in love with and possibly marry. This could happen in any culture, but in our study was most apparent among young people from backgrounds where the religion or culture does not condone women having sex outside marriage, so the ideal is to marry a virgin. Men, however, do not want to limit their own sexual experience before marriage, so may look to find a woman who is willing to have sex with them but who they are likely to reject as marriage material. This is an age-old double standard which leaves the woman concerned in a very weak position; and feeling even more undermined if she only lost her virginity in the belief that the man would stay with her permanently or, preferably, marry her.

Kerby, aged 16, also described a double standard. He strongly asserted that girls have the same sexual desires as young men, nevertheless, he equally strongly contended that it was okay for boys to sleep with girls, but it was clear that he would still denigrate any girl who sleeps with several people, wears a certain style of clothes, or who in some way he viewed as 'slack'.

Boys think, well, if this girl's slack with four or seven boys she's nasty, but I think boys and girls are the same. They've both got the same emotions. Both get the same feelings – if they wanna do it, they gotta do it. I'm not saying so they're not nasty for that, but some, certain girls, the way they do it though. The way they present themselves. They are slack women. All them short, short skirts. There's no need for them short skirts ... I always put them in categories. Easy or not easy. When a girl's easy I have no respect for them at all. Treat them differently from a girl that ain't. I talk to them different ... Once a girl's just given away, giving herself to you, take it, I know all boys'll take it.

Kerby

This kind of double standard can make having sex for pleasure a risky business for young women. If they have 'too many' sexual relationships it can affect how they are viewed by their male peers (such as we saw with Kerby), and sometimes how their female peers view them too. They consequently gain 'a reputation', as discussed in the next section. What may feel good to experience, may be seen through the moral lens as 'bad'.

Sex as legitimised by pleasure was something seen as much more the prerogative of young men, because they did not have to worry about pregnancy.

Interviewer:	You think boys do it for enjoyment?
Orla:	Aye, it's all they ever talk about.
Interviewer:	So why is it enjoyable for boys and not for girls?
Ella:	Because boys know they're not going to get pregnant.

16-year-olds in Northern Ireland

Alcohol and sex make a familiar combination at any age, and getting drunk is often part of a pleasurable night out for both sexes. It is a particular 'risky' situation – recognised by both young men and women – that invokes several competing values regimes of pleasure, romance, pressure and safety. And it can lead to people doing things they may later regret, like having sex. For some of the young people in The Respect Study, it seemed that having too much to drink was quite a common explanation for a young person having sex (and this is true for older people too) but it is not a legitimising reason. It is accepted that sex 'under the influence' can and does happen, but this is still classified under 'bad sex'. It often means just a one-off event, which is not morally justified, may well not involve any pleasure for the young woman, and may mean both parties have problems in remembering exactly what happened. They thought that girls get bolder and a bit reckless after drinking,

and may use this, or getting stoned on drugs, as a subsequent ‘excuse’ for having had sex.

We like drinking ourselves and everything so we’ve got the excuse – ‘oh, I was wrecked out me face, I was this, I was that’ – but they all get stoned and everything as well so they use that as an excuse.

Kerry, aged 14

Some 14- to 15-year-old young women also observed that boys became sexually bolder after they had been drinking, and suggested that this generally starts happening when they reach the age of about 14 years old.

Kerry: As soon as they all start drinking, that’s it – they’re right up there and then they think they can do anything.

Rosie: Do anything, yeah.

Kerry: And then they drink and deny the fact that they’ve done anything.

Rosie: They can just say ‘Oh it wasn’t my fault, I was pissed.’

Drink may provide the ‘Dutch courage’ to have sex at all, and may be a fairly common prelude for unintentional sex for people of any age, but is often an occurrence that is looked back on with some regret, especially by young women, and particularly if it constituted their first experience of sex. For them, this initial sexual encounter may not involve pleasure at all (Holland and others 1998), and some Northern Irish young women were not anticipating pleasure whenever it happened, like 16-year-old Ella and Maureen.

Interviewer: Do you expect sex to be something that’s nice or something that’s horrible?

Ella: No. Horrible.

Maureen: It’s something I don’t want to think about, as long as I can. [giggles]

Security: Sex as legitimised by commitment

I think, yeah, Christianity – no sex before marriage. I’m sure there’s so many people who are real faithful to Christianity but they do have sex before they’ve been married. I think that’s too restricted really.

Elliott, aged 13

- Lorraine: I think (religion is) good in a way – because it stops all teenage pregnancy and –
- Yasmin: That's if you respect your religion.
- 14- to 15-year-olds*

Moral and religious views differ from culture to culture, and although there was not a great ethnic diversity in the young people comprising The Respect Study, there were strong religious beliefs underlying those from the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland, as well as those from other cultures such as South Asian, East Asian and African-Caribbean. Relevant for many of these beliefs is the negative significance of having 'sex outside marriage'. Marriage implies a commitment beyond a belief in 'love', a belief or a commitment to cultural customs or expectations.

'Sex outside marriage' was one of the items that the young people had to judge in the questionnaire, and it produced a mixed and similar response from both sexes. Young men's and women's responses tended to be polarised, with 44 per cent saying that this was rarely or never wrong, and 34 per cent asserting that it was always or usually wrong. These responses were clearly affected by other factors, such as religious or ethnic backgrounds and beliefs, and hence also location. For example, those in Northern Ireland, especially young women, were more in favour of sex within marriage, and marriage in general, than many others in different parts of England (Sharpe 2001). But some young women in Northern Ireland held mixed views on keeping sex within marriage, and while some agree with marriage, others, such as 16-year-old Orla, thought that this was unrealistic and a husband would leave you anyway, as it is so easy to get a divorce.

- Interviewer: Do you think sex should only be within marriage?
- Ella: Aye.
- Orla: Not really because if the girl going to have a baby she's left to bring it up herself. He could just clear off anyway. I wouldn't. So, if you're married you can easily get a divorce.

As we have seen, some young people tend to morally disapprove of having sex simply for pleasure. It was 15-year-old Roma, from Northern Ireland (quoted earlier), who considered that you should not treat sex in the same way as you might a hobby like netball! But for others, the prohibition on sex was more than a sense of social morality; it was something formed by the moral codes of their family's religion. Fourteen-year-old Yasmin, for example, was Turkish, her family was Muslim, and

although they did not follow a very strict religious practice, she was expected to have a marriage approved by her parents and their religion, if not actually arranged. She suggested that some religions, such as her own, pronounce that you cannot have sex until you are married and, despite having had a number of secret boyfriends herself, she believed that this restriction might be a good thing and could help to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Her relationships had not been sexual and she was determined to keep it that way until she got married.

- Lola: Say if you went home and your mum found out you was pregnant what would happen to you?
- Yasmin: She'd beat me (laughs) ... I wouldn't be allowed to have the baby. I don't know – I don't know, I've never had to do that, you know? – I can tell her anything but if I went home and told her I was pregnant I don't know what – it's best to do
- Interviewer: Do you worry about things like getting pregnant?
- Yasmin: No, 'cos I wouldn't do it yet –

Yasmin's attitude and constancy in saying 'No' to sex means that she will be seen more favourably as a potential marriage partner by young men from her culture. Where sex before marriage is viewed with disapproval (particularly for women), this fuels young men's division of women into those they would have sex with (but not marry) and those who they would marry. Although there are more love marriages nowadays in such cultures living in Britain, and even some cohabitation, the strict moral codes are still generally upheld in most families and the community. This was also the case in some Catholic families in Northern Ireland.

Sex was also seen as legitimate if located within a long-term relationship. The extent to which such commitment was dependent on marriage (or an intention to marry) varied among the sample. In Northern Ireland, strictures against premarital sex are eroding and the etiquette of sexual experimentation was the site of some interest. As Roma commented, if a couple is 'looking towards marriage', then sex would be expected. But as she then went on to acknowledge that even if a long term couple were not contemplating marriage, some sexual activity is going to be on the cards simply because of the time scale of the relationship.

If you don't want to get married you're going to have to do something if you've been going with him for ages and ages.

Roma

Northern Irish Orla considered that any young woman should know what her prospective husband is like. She thought that men change when you move in with them and argued for living with someone before you marry.

Aye. I think that it's far better if you live with somebody but it's [worse] if you go with somebody for ages and then you're going to get married and then they always change when you move in with them ... you have to know what they're like and what their habits are.

Orla, aged 16

What is most striking about the young people's responses cited here is the value that they attribute to security within a sexual relationship. Marriage here appears to be valued primarily because it protects the female party from a negative sexual reputation and provides some security in the event of pregnancy. Significantly, these young people do not talk in terms of sin, or the sanctity of marriage. Rather, they value the institution of marriage for the commitment it represents, even though some question the reliability of the security it offers.

Equity: Sex as legitimised by consent

Whether or not boys and young men are keener on having sex, and girls and young women are generally keener on love and romance, it is certainly the case that sex seems to occupy more of young men's conversation than it does young women's. This can produce a kind of pressuring from young men to young women that can distort any consequent mutual consent for sex. Thus the gendering of these kinds of views placed young women in the position of fearing or experiencing possible sexual exploitation by men, while many young men simply saw sex and love as different and both were acceptable. For example, 15-year-old Abbey was concerned that she would only want to have sex 'if you know that person's going to respect you and not just use you'. She was suspicious of men's motives in their declarations of love, and suggested: 'They may say they love you just to have sex with you.' These suspicions were confirmed by some 16-year-old young people.

Interviewer:	Would it be all right to pretend – to tell somebody you loved them and have sex with them?
Glen:	Happens every day.
Adele:	That's what fellas do.
Robert:	It happens all the time.

It is these kinds of statements and knowledge that fuel young women's general agreement that all that young men want is sex. A young woman may be mistaken or misled in the belief that her young man really wants sex because he loves her. In a group of 14- to 15-year-olds, Lola and Lorraine suggested that the test for love is if the boy stays with you after he's asked for sex and you have refused him.

- Lola: When they want to have sex with you – then you know when they love you, you tell them no and they – then you know they love you.
- Interviewer: What – if they accept that you don't want it?
- Lorraine: Yea, but if you wanted to have sex and you feel it's the right moment the way to test them is to say 'No' and see how they react – if they say 'oh, that's all right', then you say, all right then, let's have sex (laughs) – that's if you're ready for it though.

Sometimes consenting to sex turns out to be a mistake and this can be the result of pressure coming from other young people. Peer pressure in some form emerged as an important aspect of early sexual activity. When discussing sexual pressure in the focus groups, the young people seemed to take this as meaning two forms: a physical or verbal pressure between two individuals (usually male pressurising female) to have sex, which may even lead to rape; or a general pressure from peers on an individual to lose their virginity (to 'do it'). Part of the attraction of sex is it being a step on the road to adult status, the markers of which, as we have discussed, have become increasingly dispersed over the teenage years. For young men, this was expressed more in terms of the expectations from their male friends to have done something sexual, and to talk (or boast) about their own sexual performance (Holland and others 1993, 1998). In the questionnaire, the judgement by the young people about whether pressurising someone to have sex was wrong showed that the majority, not surprisingly, condemned this activity. Of the young people, 71 per cent considered it to be 'always wrong', and only a total of 14 per cent thought that it was 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never' wrong. Amidst this general consensus, gender was again in evidence, with the young women being significantly more disapproving than the young men (81 per cent: 62 per cent thought it was 'always wrong'; and 3 per cent: 10 per cent that it was 'rarely/never wrong').

A group of 13- to 14-year-old young men from London, and Paul from the North of England, also discussed this issue and acknowledged the peer pressures involved.

- Lee: I think you should do it when you're ready to do it –
 Elliot: Absolutely, that's true –
 Gus: – yea, when you're ready.
 Taylor: – when you think you're ready – no-one should force you to do it –
 Gus: Yea, there's a lot of peer pressure – Yea, some people – some friends will tend to go 'you gotta do it man'.
 Elliot: You're a VIRGIN!

13- to 14-year-olds in London

Lots of people just do it for attention. Like just going round sleeping with everyone. Everyone just thinks it's big round here and just agree with it and so everyone just does it. Boys and girls – they both say it. I'm not saying they expect it but round here most people think it's right.

Paul, aged 16

Young women are susceptible to both kinds of pressure, not only from their boyfriends wanting sex, but some also experience pressures from some of their female peers to lose their virginity, who may deride them if they do not.

- Sonia: The under-age people only do it because you're getting called – like you're boring and everything so they're getting ...
 Tanya: Pressure.
 Sonia: Yea, and they just go and do it.
 Tanya: Yea they do it to fit in with their friends and that.

14- to 15-year-olds from the North of England

As part of the continuing expectations on men to be the sexual initiators, there is an expectation that women will be expected to put up some level of resistance, especially if they think this lack of acquiescence confirms them as not being 'easy'. This may become part of a ritual in sexual negotiations. But gender relations have been gradually changing over the years, and there was some acknowledgement that girls may not be prepared to put up with such pressure, as 16-year-old Lorna observed.

Girls are getting a lot more, erm, most girls, ninety-nine per cent of them, getting a lot more – 'I don't want to, I'm not going to. Enough' I've been pressured, not pressured, but put in that situation ... twice. I just said 'I don't want to,' so he said, 'That's fine.' Boys don't pressure girls anymore.

It's not worth it, they get too much hassle. Don't know why they bother, to be quite honest.

Lorna

In one group of 14- to 15-year-olds, Estelle suggested that 'sometimes it might be the other way round because sometimes boys are a bit shy'. Nevertheless, the general belief still seemed to rest on the assumption that young men take the initiative, and hence the possibility that the pressure is on young women. This was enhanced by the cliché, denied by most women, but endorsed by many men that 'If a girl says "No" she doesn't really mean it.' This was one of the contentious statements discussed in several of the focus groups and this gender distinction was quite clear, as Estelle and Kerby illustrated.

I just think that when a girl's not ready she'll say that she's not ready, she won't actually say she's not ready and mean that she's ready.

Estelle, aged 14

(Girls) need sex as much as we do. That's the way I see it. Like girls going like – like you get the proper tight girls, like 'oh no, I don't wanna have sex', but you know they want it as well, because they got the same feelings that you got. They want it as well, so what they going all stupid for?

Kerby, aged 16

But not all young men ascribed to this view.

If you are a proper like person, well, not like proper person, but if you like understand what she's saying then you will respect her wishes that she's not sure so you just have to wait till she is sure.

Nam, aged 15

Despite this assertion, Nam participated in a male group discussion of this statement in which the group generally endorsed the belief that a young woman might not necessarily mean what she says.

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|-------|---|
| Kofi: | Some people they like to tease, you know – some people they say, like <i>[in a put-on voice]</i> 'No, I don't want it'. |
| Raja: | Yea, like if they say it like that they do mean it. |
| Kofi: | If they she says <i>[in another put-on voice]</i> 'NO, I don't want it' – |
| Raja: | – and then you run – |
| Kofi: | – you'd know – If she said 'No', then she means it. |
| Nam: | She'd say 'No, later', and I'd say 'When?' |

- Kofi: But some people say it in other ways, and they don't hear that. Some people like see it in other ways – they go saying 'No', but then they're only joking – and then they rape them in the end.
- Clive: Yea – if she says it in a funny way.
- Kofi: Then you're not sure. But if she says no way anytime, that's it – I put my trousers back on and go home.
- Interviewer: So, what's saying 'No' in a funny way?
- Clive: 'NOOoooo'
- 14- to 15-year-olds*

Although young women are not meant, in young men's eyes, to 'want it', young men can be clearly confused by apparent 'sexual signals' being sent by young women in the way they dress.

- Kofi: It doesn't matter what a girl is wearing, 'cos she could be wearing something that is so revealing, but still say 'No', and that. Because she is wearing that, you could think that she is only joking, but if she says 'No' then she says 'No', and you don't. There ain't nothing more to think about.
- Raja: To me it does because – if she wears stuff like that she wants guys to look at her.
- Kofi: But that's just looking in it, it's not doing.
- Raja: To me it is, anyway.

Many young people are aware of, or have actually experienced, sexual pressures. This did not make them any easier to resist, especially if the pressure was coming from someone they thought might be the 'right one' for them. In terms of young people's morality, it is not 'good' sex, but it represents a traditional gender distinction whereby young men still think that the sexual initiative lies in their hands and, for a variety of reasons, they will use it. Although sex may be legitimised in their view by mutual consent, the gendered process of sexual negotiation means that sexual pressure may be inadvertently (as well as deliberately) exerted.

Legality: Sex as legitimised by the law

- Interviewer: Why do you think the law is there?
- Seamus: To try and stop people from doing it.

- Kirsty: To protect people.
- Interviewer: To protect people – in what way?
- Kirsty: From getting pregnant when they're under age.
And then there's other things like AIDS and all that there.
- Rosa: It gives them a better education – the pupils and all.
- Pauline: And time to live their life too.
- 13- to 14-year-olds*

For most young people the 'right time' for sex is not related to the law on sexual age of consent.⁴ Yet, regardless of the existence of a legal age limit, the young people in The Respect Study had no hesitation in making moral judgements on having sex at an early age. In the questionnaire, they were asked to judge whether they thought 'Sexual intercourse under the age of 16' was wrong. Half of them considered this to be 'always/usually wrong', and proportionally more of the young women (59 per cent) than the young men (44 per cent) took this view. There was, however, a significant group of them who thought that under-age sex was 'rarely' or 'never wrong' (25 per cent), and this comprised 32 per cent of the young men and 18 per cent of the young women. It is likely that the gender difference here was related both to young men's generally greater involvement in sex or at least the idea of sex (and certainly this was assumed by both sexes), and also young women's fears and concerns about possible pregnancy.

Under-age sex emerged as a salient dilemma in The Respect Study. The young people were asked in the questionnaire to describe a dilemma typical for their age. This was defined for them as 'a situation in which it is difficult to decide what is the right thing to do'. Two-thirds of them gave at least one dilemma, and many raised several. Overall, the most common themes reported in young people's dilemmas were drugs, under-age sex (19 per cent), smoking and alcohol. Social or peer pressure seems to underpin many of their dilemmas, including this one. Under-age sex seems to become an increasing concern with increasing age, as seen in the responses of the 11-year-olds through to the 16-year-olds. This was particularly the case amongst young women. Overall, 23 per cent of young women and 14 per cent of young men were concerned with

⁴ This age is 16 years in England for heterosexual young people, but 17 years in Northern Ireland, which was the home of a significant number of the young people in this study. For gay men, the age of consent is now 16, in line with the law on heterosexual sex. The average age of first sex in the United Kingdom is around 17, but a significant number of young people experience sexual intercourse under the legal age of consent of 16. The age at which young people first have sex in Britain has been steadily falling, and a significant minority will have sexual intercourse before they are legally entitled to do so (Johnson and others 1993; Wellings, 2001).

under-age sex in their cited dilemmas. In certain urban locations, for example North Park school, a deprived Northern England school, under-age sex (and pregnancy) were the most frequently mentioned dilemmas. Once more this was enhanced for young women (31 per cent: 15 per cent). In South Park, an inner city school in the South of England, under-age sex was also the most cited dilemma but here it was of equal concern to both sexes. Both sites were characterised by being predominantly working class, in whose culture early sexual experience and pregnancy have been nothing unusual and may be accepted, if not desired.

The law on sexual offences was introduced in the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, in order to protect young women from predatory men, by prohibiting men having intercourse with a woman aged under 16. It has recently been reformed to remove the gender bias within existing formulations of consent (although the law of consent itself is not changing). In their group discussions around the age of consent law, the young people illustrated the gap between law and policy, and everyday life. The proposal contained in the focus group statement that: 'The age of consent for heterosexual sex should be lowered from 16 to 14', generally caused some confusion.

Young people took different approaches to this law and whether they felt it should be changed or not. Miles, aged 13, from a well-off area in the Home Counties, was not alone in his assumption that when young people reach the legal age for sex, they would instantly go out and have it.

I think it's sort of like a bit stupid at the moment because like 16 is like – you get all these 16-year-olds O.K., on their sixteenth birthday, who like, have sex and then in the next nine months, before they're 17, they have a baby and then they haven't even finished school yet, they'd just be like in the lower sixth, and then they've sort of got this baby on their hands and they haven't even like, could not even have a first boyfriend or a husband, like, they'd have to either quit school or put it up for adoption which is ... sort of like immature.

Miles

Several others similarly talked as though young people would simply start having sex as soon as they hit the legal age of 16. For this reason they disagreed with lowering it to the age of 14.

Some people, they're sixteen, when they turn sixteen, well, they just go out and sleep with anybody, they shouldn't do that. You shouldn't sleep with

somebody who you're with for a while 'cos you don't know if they've got AIDS or anything.

Jodie, aged 13

Therefore changing the legal age of consent was not seen as a good idea because young people would go and have sex merely because they were legally eligible to do so and it would thus lead to more teenage pregnancies. This is perhaps underestimating the sensibility of their own peers, although it is reasonable to suppose that the younger the people start having sex, the less likely it will be that they have the maturity to enjoy and take responsibility for sex.

With this risk in mind, some saw the law as a kind of 'protection' against pregnancy, because they saw 14 as far too young to have a baby.

Francis: The law could be nine – it's not going to change things.

Jacqueline: It is something to hide behind if they wanted, they've got the excuse, haven't they.

Keith: But if you're ready you're ready, aren't you?

Jacqueline: It's a protective for them.

15-year-olds

Evelyn, from London, also thought lowering the age of consent would result in younger people having babies, but took her disapproval a step further in pointing out the unlikelihood of there being a father around.

'Cos if you're older you're more likely to stay with the person you had sex with and to look after the baby with you, but the young guy they just like leave you – they don't really want to be tied down.

Evelyn, aged 14

Another aspect was raised by some of the young people in the study who considered that reducing the age of consent might further increase the pressure on girls to have sex. Thirteen-year-old Sarah was one of these.

Some people – if it was lowered to fourteen then like girls – 'cos like if it was like lowered to fourteen then next year I could have it and it's just stupid – because everybody will be like that, oh, I'm fourteen now I can go and have sex with anybody I want to ... You might not want it yet and some boy might say, oh, you're fourteen now, you can have sex and everything.

Sarah

The age of consent law brings in complex social and personal issues, as well as legal ones.

- Kay: It's like putting an age on loving – that you're not allowed to love if you're under fourteen.
- Naomi: 'Cos you can't control your feelings by a law, can you?
- 14- to 15-year-olds*

Another reason why young people thought it was quite irrelevant to change the law on consent related to the points made earlier about the 'right time' for sex. Most young people agreed that they and others did not accept the authority of the law on this, and observed that 'most people don't go by the law'. While many found themselves supporting the age of 16, and a few even suggesting that it be raised to 18, they were at pains to clarify that, for them, it was not the law in itself that made sex legitimate but a range of other more individual and personal factors. Some challenged the imposition of public rules on an area of such private intimacy, but they were not happy about dispensing with laws and rules altogether, however ambivalent they may have been about restrictions from authority. This was especially the case for the young women.

I don't think the girls' age should be lowered to fourteen – I think that's a bit young 'cos I mean you might be physically ready but you might not be emotionally ready for what's going to happen – like you might not be able to deal with things that come afterwards.

Jade, aged 14

I think if you lower the age to fourteen they go: 'Oh, yea, that's great, you know, oh, yea, 'cos I can be like everybody – I can be like my sister ... ' and everything, but because they do it, sometimes girls feel cheap and dirty about it afterwards 'cos they just thought, 'Oh, great,' but it's not as good as they thought it would be.

Marion, aged 13

A group of 14- to 15-year-olds living around a rural village were more of the opinion that there was no real need for a law at all, provided you knew all the risks.

- Andrew: As long as you know what you're doing – all the facts.
- Helena: You know the risks.
- Andrew: You can't really do anything after that.
- Keith: Should be your own choice.

In the same light, Elliott thought that adequate sex and relationships education would deal with this situation.

I think like – I quite agree 'cos there's still a lot of responsible kids round

here and if we have a good sex and relationships education in schools then people will know of the advantages of sex and the disadvantages, if you get what I mean, so if we're taught properly I think we could have it at fourteen – around like you could start like having sex in Year 8 or something, or Year 9 – something like that –

Elliott, aged 13

There was some polarisation of views reflecting agency and lack of agency. Whereas Keith (above) for example, thought it was individual choice, for some of the young people there seemed to be a sense of fatalism or inevitability about when people like themselves had sex which made any law redundant. This implies an absence of agency, which is worrying, although they also asserted that they would know what they were doing.

If you're going to do it you're going to do it – government or your parents can't stop you really – but I think the age is okay, I mean in some countries it's as young as twelve and it's pretty ridiculous that.

Steven, aged 14

I don't think it's like really wrong to do it at fourteen – we're going to do it anyway.

Joe, aged 13

If these young people found the idea of trying to regulate the time people had sex as impossible, and endorsed the notion that they would inevitably have sex when they chose, and, with a bit of luck, at the 'right time', it is no wonder that they took a dim view of enforcing the age of consent laws.

You can't really say it's illegal because they can't go round everywhere getting all people who've done it under sixteen – and putting them in prison or anything.

Carla, aged 14

Some suggested that parents may have more legitimate authority than the law, but the young people's responses suggested that sexual agency was a very personal and private realm in which they did not expect the state or parents to be in a position to intervene in their own decisions.

No one is gonna force me – it's up to me – nobody can force me what to do – tell me what to do.

Gus, aged 13

This obviously makes the age of consent a difficult law to implement, as Keith observed.

It's sort of like in law, but it's sort of not there, is it? It's not sort of like a crime or drugs or whatever.

Keith, aged 15

The young people also pointed to the apparent discrepancies and unfairness of the law in that, for example, a 17-year-old young woman could have sex with a 14-year-old boy and not be potentially prosecuted for it. But despite not wanting such legal intervention, the young people did not argue for the abolition of the age of consent in fact, if anything, some were more in favour of raising it from 16 to 18. This was often in the context of discussing the issue of sexual abuse of children by adults.

But while some young women felt they would be made vulnerable through lowering the age of consent, some young men suggested that sex could make them vulnerable too, whether it involved pressure or not, if it turned into an accusation of rape. They were concerned that a young woman could consent to sex and then think better of it and declare that she had been forced to have sex, that is, she had been raped. One group of 12- to 13-year-old boys from the rural school talked about this, and discussed the possibility of a girl changing her mind after the event to say that she was raped, especially if she had got pregnant as a consequence.

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Joe: | It's up to the girl though, in' it? 'Cos if you have sex and they know it now, it's like rape or something. |
| Guy: | Not if they say that they want it. |
| Paul: | No, 'cos – then they get pregnant – they could say they didn't want it. |
| Guy: | Yea, I know. |
| Liam: | They can get money for it, can't they? |
| Joe: | Yea, and you get arrested for it. |

The various criteria for sexual readiness can be understood as the factors that make a sexual relationship personally and socially legitimate. Trust and freedom from pressure are crucial, as are the maintenance of self-respect and a respectable sexual reputation. At the heart of the current law on the heterosexual age of consent are very strong messages about gender and sexual agency, which stand in contradiction to the way in which many young people would like to think about themselves. There is a clear tension here between legal and lay notions of consent, the former speaking in terms of protection, and the latter in terms of rights. What was clear from their discussions was that, although they expressed the desire to be respected and trusted,

they also recognised the importance of publicly negotiated rules in the form of the law. And, while they may ignore these rules, they also engage with them in the creation of their sexual cultures. It appears that for young people, it is less important that sex is legal or protected than for it to be ‘timely’, a delicate state of social and interpersonal acceptability.

I don’t think it makes a difference because if they feel ready then they’re going to do it. It’s not like anyone can keep watch over them and say – they can’t really stop it ...

Heather, aged 14

Safety: Sex as legitimised by its consequences

But I shouldn’t think that anyone who’s actually like young and has a child actually planned to have the child – if you plan it then you must be able to support it, if you can’t support it then you obviously haven’t planned it.

Richard, aged 16

One of the ways in which sex was moralised by young people was in relation to its consequences. Thus it was not so much the sexual experience itself that was important (be that in terms of pleasure or love) but the consequences of that experience that classified it as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sex. Thus one way in which sex takes on a moral meaning for young people is within a values regime of ‘safety’: they may risk their reputation, they may contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI), or they may become pregnant and have to face the subsequent decision to keep the child or have an abortion. Of these risks, young men only really face the possibility of an STI, as their reputation is usually left unharmed by a sexual encounter, and pregnancy and abortion may involve their minds, but not their bodies. Here the young people in The Respect Study discuss these issues: sexual reputation and pregnancy.

Reputation

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Sonia: | Most people haven’t – we hang around in a big group and there’s only one girl in our group who hasn’t been – you know, kissed anyone and she always gets called but we don’t call her ‘cos we know what it’s like and – |
| Interviewer: | And what would you get called – what name would you get? |

- Sonia: Frigid. Or just – they don't usually say that any more,
they just say –
- Donna: You've not even been with anybody.
- 14- to 15-year-old young women from the North of England*

The first consequence of a young person having a sexual relationship is the possibility of gaining some kind of reputation. For a young man, this is generally a good thing – he's a stud, he has 'had a result', and he may waste no time in informing his male peers, perhaps embroidering the tale on the way. This was clearly the case in the research carried out in the early 1990s, when in a project on sexual negotiation (Holland and others 1998), young men recounted performance stories to their friends, and it was almost necessary for them to have had, or at least to say that they have had, some kind of sexual experience with a woman. For a young woman, the prospect of getting a reputation is a daunting one (Lees 1986, 1993; Holland and others 1998). It generally has negative connotations, whether or not she has had any sex at all. If she has sex, she is in danger of being called a slag, or easy, or a number of other labels. If she refuses to have sex, she may get a reputation as frigid or tight, although there is some hope that she may gain respect for saying 'No' to sex. In the context of our concepts of 'good' and 'bad' sex, sex that endangers a young woman's reputation can be viewed as 'bad sex' although she may not realise this until afterwards.

Reputation and 'calling' were mentioned frequently by the young people in The Respect Study, within the various topics under discussion. It came up for Jade, for example, in the context of possibly lowering the age of consent for sex to 14.

Like just say you was to have sex at like fourteen and then like the guy would – 'cos guys are just like that – they might not talk to you the next day and they like go around and tell all their friends and everything and you're really regretting it – you would have wished that you'd have waited until you were sixteen or something like that then you'd be able to deal with it.

Jade, aged 14

Whether 16 is the magic age for dealing with sex is questionable, but clearly young women, particularly within a school group culture, may be very vulnerable to such a labelling process. Other groups also talked about reputation and the double standard that this involved.

There's such a difference like. Because if WE sleep around we'll be called slags, – if THEY sleep about they get called macho, and one of the lads.

Cheryl, aged 15

For Charlotte, there also seemed to be a fine balance about how much you went about with lads or with other girls. Too much time with lads and you're a slag; too much time with girls and you're a lesbian.

And if you talk to the lads and you're seen with the lads – 'Oh, you are a tart, you are a slut,' but if you're seen with a lot of girls then, like, other people, when they never see you with, like hanging around with lads, say 'Oh you're a lesbian, you're this, you're that.'

Charlotte, aged 14

It is a 'no-win' situation for young women, since they may be called a 'slag', or get some sort of reputation, whatever course of action they take. This may then gain them a sexual reputation that is erroneous, but sticks nevertheless. Sandra, who was at school in a deprived urban area in the North of England, described the pressures on girls and young women who get fancied by the young men of the moment, whether it is the current 'nice' lad or the 'cock of the year', and the consequences.

If the dead nice lad of the year fancies you, that's good, because then other lads start fancying you ... it's good for the girls, but they expect things off yer – to go further with them and all that ... if it's like the cock of the year, or the nicest lad of the year, they ask yer, and they're thingy, it's hard to say 'No' to them because they'll go telling their mates that you've said 'No.' And then they'll tell their mates and it will get round the school that you just said 'No' to the lad, the nice lad. It is a good thing to do, but it's hard to say 'No' to them ... but some people admire it because you just – like even the quiet ones, they used to think, God, if she can say 'NO', we can ...

Sandra, aged 13

Kerby presented his version of the double standard that can operate when he described his view of, and behaviour towards, girls he respected, and those he considered 'slack'.

When girls are slack, they ain't got no, they don't get no respect, none at all ... you know, people start hassling: 'Oh come on, come on, come in the bedroom and let's do it' – and if they say, 'Oh, you're rubbish or whatnot,' in there, you've got respect for them because you know that if it was your sister or something you would hope she'd do the same thing. So you got to respect them for them not lowering theirself, or being slack. So girls get respect as well, I got a lotta respect for girls. Slack girls, I ain't got none for those ... but I don't really call girls slack, unless I talk to them first. Because

unless I talk to a girl, I can tell if she's slack or if she's not. But I don't think it's fair because they just get the same needs and wants that we do ...
Kerby, aged 16

Kerby's own reputation is not at all at risk, and he demonstrates just one of the many contradictions that surround sex for young people. He thought he could judge when a girl was 'slack' or not by just talking to her, and yet if she was a 'proper tight' girl and refused sex, he thought she couldn't be telling the truth because he said he believes that both sexes want sex equally. Again it seems as if young women are in a no-win situation with young men like Kerby. The young men in this research did not discuss the effect on a boy's reputation if he does not have sex, but this has been explored elsewhere. For example, one study illustrated how a young man could be seen as a 'wimp' if he did not have sex and this could invoke painful teasing from his peers (Holland and others 1993; Holland and others 1998).

Pregnancy

Sarah: – because my mum's saying to me if you don't keep your head on, she says, you'll be one – so I don't want to have a baby dead young 'cos it would –
 Jodie: 'Cos if you have a baby you've got to make sure you can support it.

12- to 13-year-olds

Pregnancy is an ever-present cloud on the sexual horizon. It seems bad enough for young women if they get a reputation, which can be applied whether or not any sexual activity has occurred, but if they become pregnant, this is an even more serious consequence. For younger people in particular, there seems to be a simple relationship between having sex and getting pregnant that belies the fact that they have probably had several sex and relationships education lessons informing and advising on how to prevent this through contraception and protection against STIs. Some of the focus group discussions also revealed some young people's erroneous beliefs about sex, and the possibility of reproduction. These included beliefs that young people cannot have sex until their bodies have developed properly, or that they cannot have sex until they can produce sperm, and that young women cannot get pregnant if they are having a period.

Pregnancy was a dilemma raised by 10 per cent of the young people in The Respect Study questionnaire. It was no surprise that this included more young women than

young men in all age groups, and only became an issue for young men in Year 10 (aged 14–15 years). But it figured differently in the various locations, for example a greater proportion (about 15 per cent) of young men living in a deprived urban area in the North of England gave pregnancy as a dilemma compared with 3 per cent of those living in the working-class inner city location in the south of England. This may be partly explained by the more sexually restrictive ethnic backgrounds of some of the London young people. As described in the previous section, under-age sex was commonly linked with pregnancy, and was of equal concern to both sexes. For them the simple reasoning was that the younger you have sex, the greater the likelihood of becoming a young mother. The general approach was to move straight from under-age sex to how hard it would be for a young woman to care for a baby, and how this would mess up her life and opportunities.

Young people, and young women in particular, often hold the romantic belief that love can and does conquer all, even unplanned pregnancies but, while this might happen in books and films, sadly this is not always the case in real life. Fifteen-year-olds Melanie and Cheryl discussed the salutary experience of Melanie’s sister.

Melanie:

She *did* love him and he loved her and he was really nice. But then when he found out she was pregnant he didn’t want nothing to do with her.

Cheryl:

Well then, that there just completely defeats the purpose because you just say right, you strongly agree that they should love each other, but your sister and ...

Melanie:

But she did love him.

Cheryl:

Aye, and he loved her too and he walks away from her. So she doesn’t – so if you had sex with someone that you loved and he loved you back you’re still not going to know if he will stick by you or not.

Safe sex

The risk of pregnancy is of course very true, but only if the young people concerned did not practise safe sex. For most, ‘safe sex’ meant using contraception, more than protection against sexually transmitted infection. ‘Unsafe sex’ was one item on the list of activities that they had to judge in the questionnaire. Half of the young people responded that unsafe sex was ‘always’ or ‘usually wrong’ – 45 per cent of young men and 58 per cent of young women – and a quarter of them accepted that it was ‘sometimes wrong’. But a surprising 19 per cent (24 per cent of the young men and 13 per cent of the young women) claimed that it was ‘rarely’ or ‘never wrong’. The

young women were more disapproving than young men of the kinds of activities that might put them at risk. And fourteen-year-old Jade was critical and somewhat unsympathetic to any young woman who did not acquaint herself with information on safe sex before she embarked on sexual activities.

There's this girl that got pregnant – she was eleven when she got pregnant, I think – she's thirteen now and she's got a baby and she didn't even know anything about contraception but she still had sex and I think that – I mean I feel sorry for her in a way but like being lumbered with a baby at so young but she should have known better. If she didn't know about it, she shouldn't have done it, I don't think.

Jade, aged 14

Discussion about these issues could get rather heated, and in one Northern Irish group of young women, Aileen and Hayley argued strongly about whether young women were aware of the consequences if they had sex and became pregnant.

Hayley: Aileen, forget about being raped right and that there right. If you're going to have a baby you have to think of the consequences, you can't have a baby and then after nine months think about 'Ah I can't do this and, I can't afford to keep it on.' You should have thought about that.

Aileen: Some people don't get a chance to think, some people don't even know they're pregnant, what about the people – do you ever read magazines or watch Rikki Lake, or watch TV – there's two wee girls –

Hayley: Aileen, everybody knows what they're doing –

Aileen: Hayley – NAW, THEY DON'T!

Hayley: They do.

Aileen: Some people have sex, and they be made pregnant and they don't know they're made pregnant. I remember reading about a girl she was that pregnant she was sitting in the bed one night and she took an urge to push and she pushed and she had a wain – now does that mean she should have thought about it first?

14- to 15-year-olds

Planning a sexual experience may be hard for some, but this may also be hindered if young people feel inhibited about buying condoms. Obtaining contraception can

prove an obstacle course for some. If they want to go on the pill or get free condoms, they need to either visit the doctor, or go to a sexual health clinic. Asked in one group if they knew where the nearest Brook Clinic was, no-one could provide the answer, and it is likely that this is the case for many young people. If the pill is not an option, and condoms are chosen which also protect from STIs, it is not always a comfortable experience for young people to buy them. Jane had observed one girl trying to buy condoms in a chemist shop.

I was in the chemist one day and there was this girl, and she was around my age – about fifteen – and she was really embarrassed, and this woman just looked at her as if to say – ‘You’re not old enough for (condoms).’ And she just wouldn’t ... she just stared her out as if to say – ‘Are you seriously going to buy them?’ And the wee girl was all embarrassed and she was all you know, shaking and all.

Jane, aged 15

Getting young people to ‘think about it first’ is easy to say, but using contraception and practising safer sex is less easy to implement.

Conclusion

The Respect Study young people’s discussion about what makes sex legitimate were characterised by inconsistency, contradiction and resistance, and moved between a range of values regimes. There were a variety of policy discourses underlying their debates, such as ‘public health pragmatism’ (agony aunts/uncles advice that safe sex is legitimate sex), and the ‘welfarism’ of concerns about early parenthood and missing out on education (as a form of social exclusion). Yet young people were also concerned to make sex morally and socially legitimate within their own terms. This is not usually within marriage, but more in a notion of agency, choice and control mediated by time, often discussed as being ‘ready’ for sex. This idea of readiness was flexible enough to accommodate individual and gender differences. So for one person, being ready might mean being informed and not under pressure, while for another it could mean being in a committed and stable relationship, confident and informed enough to practice safe sex. Thus, the concept of being ‘ready’ for sex is one that brings in physical and emotional maturity, as well as finding the appropriate person for a sexual relationship. These young people hoped or assumed that they would recognise the ‘right time’ and the ‘right person’.

There are contradictions in the values regimes associated with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex.

The different aspects do not fall neatly each side of the fence. 'Good' sex may involve love and romance, and being 'safe', or in what seems to be a long-term relationship; but this can turn bad if there is pregnancy, or the relationship splits up. The jury is out on whether sex can be legitimised simply for enjoyment, and certainly not as a kind of 'hobby', as one young woman described it. With all of the values regimes described above there are significant lines of difference around gender, with young men and women being situated very differently in terms of their ability to legitimise sex. Young women are more likely to seek to legitimise sex in terms of love, and young men in terms of pleasure. While both young men and women may appear to enter the value regimes of security and equity on an equal basis, in practice these regimes are underpinned by highly gendered notions of consent and commitment. The law itself reflects highly gendered assumptions about sexual agency, and sexual safety is also recognised to fall heavily on the shoulders of young women. It is not surprising then that young men and women expressed very different views about the factors that legitimise a sexual relationship, reflecting the contrasting ways in which they are positioned in relation to notions of sexual reputation, love and romance.

Young people are able to articulate their own personal sense of sexual legitimacy. If we draw together the positive attributes from each of the values regimes described above, 'good sex' is sex that is loving, not pressured, and with no 'negative' consequences. And as with many personal issues, young people do not want to be told what to do, but wish to make up their own minds.

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