

# **ACCESS OF ADOLESCENTS TO INFORMATION REGARDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

QUALITATIVE SURVEY

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Supported by:





**Access of adolescents to information regarding sexual and reproductive health**  
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**Publisher:**

Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre  
Arse Teodorovića 3, Novi Sad, Serbia  
Tel. +381 21 423021 / 423024  
[www.nshc.org.rs](http://www.nshc.org.rs)  
[nshc@eunet.rs](mailto:nshc@eunet.rs)

**Author:**

Danijela Korać-Mandić

**Research Associates:**

Sergej Kanazir  
Mira Novaković Ilin

**Design:**

Štamparija Stojkov

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# FOREWORD

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Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC) has been involved in promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents through providing information, workshop activities with adolescents and training of peer educators since 2006. The Centre's activities were also focused on long-term field work with marginalized groups for the purpose of preventing adverse forms of behaviour and promotion of voluntary confidential counselling and HIV tests.

The NSHC approach in working with young people is based on examples of good practice from Sweden and all-encompassing approach that has been successfully implemented in matters concerning education of the young on sexual and reproductive health. In addition to topics related to anatomy and reproductive function the attention in working with young people is devoted to other important fields such as growing up and building up of identity throughout the adolescence, social norms and behaviour from the aspect of sexuality, gender issues, sexual and gender based violence, reproductive rights of young people as part of general human rights, etc. We are guided by the principle that young people have the right to information and all-encompassing education on sexual and reproductive health, under the motto that knowledge is power. The objective of sex education is to act as a support to young people in the years of growing up and maturing so that they can build up their own system of values and self-respect that will enable them to make accountable decisions and act in responsible manner.

NSHC carried out a qualitative survey in the period from June to November of 2019 in an attempt to reveal how young people aged 15 to 16 search and find information about sexual and reproductive health. The previously conducted surveys on reproductive health of young people revealed that the main sources of information were the peers, media (television, radio), parents and school; the role of the Internet was not mentioned in the surveys. The initial assumptions were that nowadays the adolescents primarily focus on Internet as the source of information on sensitive issues. We were interested to reveal as to what extent young people consider the „online“ sources comprehensible, relevant and reliable taking into consideration that they are easily accessible to young people in Serbia. The appearance of social networks and media influenced the manner in which young people communicate with their peers and the world, which made us wonder as to the kind of role played by Facebook, Instagram and YouTube in this matter. We also wanted to learn more about the attitudes of parents in matters concerning sex education, which is why we included a brief poll on these subjects in our survey.

We are grateful to all young people who took part in this survey and provided valuable insights into their experiences, opinions and attitudes. At the same time, we extend our gratitude to parents that supported this survey by providing consent for participation as well as those who provided answers to questions from our survey. We owe a great deal of gratitude to personnel employed in schools and pupils' dormitories who devoted their time and organised focus groups, provided working space and thus significantly contributed to successful conducting of this survey.

The survey was carried out within the project „Access of adolescents to information regarding sexual and reproductive health – qualitative survey“ the main objective of which was to contribute to promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Serbia. In addition to the research activities, the NSHC website on sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people „Važno je da znaš“ („It is important that you know“) ([www.vaznojedaznas.org](http://www.vaznojedaznas.org)) was also refreshed and upgraded.

The conducting of survey was supported by **UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund** within a broader project „Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls II“ that is being executed in partnership between UNICEF, UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP and the Government of the Republic of Serbia, headed by the Coordinating body for gender equality. The general objective of the project „Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls II“ is the development of social and institutional environment that should contribute to zero tolerance and elimination of violence against women in Serbia. The joint activities of the UN agencies and government bodies contribute to resolving of the issue of family violence and violence in partner relations, strengthen the support to women, girls and their families and build up a society with zero tolerance to violence. The project is executed with generous support from the Government of Sweden.

# INTRODUCTION

The education on sexual and reproductive health is still not a part of an educational system in Serbia. At the beginning of 2000s, several initiatives were launched to introduce sexual education in schools in order to respond to the needs of protection of reproductive health of young people in accordance with the recognised needs: the surveys in our country pointed out that ever lower age of adolescents entering into sexual relations brought with it a higher risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Young people lacked information, knowledge and skills in that field.

The provision of information and education of young people on sexual and reproductive health is an important factor in the process of building up of personal value system and self-respect. The process of making accountable decisions about oneself and future prospects is based on it. The ultimate objective is to prevent numerous adverse effects of ignorance and prejudices, but at the same time contribute to the development of tolerant and respect based relations between genders and people in general.

Sex education should be a natural part of growing up within a family and an integral part of school syllabus according to the World Health Organization. Sex education was integrated in school syllabuses of numerous Western European countries long time ago, while the Central and Eastern European countries began to introduce sex education into schools<sup>1</sup> since the 1990s. Due to its key role in education of children and young people the school is considered „the most important link in the chain of relevance for sex education“ having in mind frequently passive relation of parents towards sexuality of their children as well as that the highest share of young population from different social groups go through the education system<sup>2</sup>.

Media often report about poor state of reproductive health of the population, particularly the young population. The problems, low level of knowledge and risk prone behaviour of young people are described in the National programme of preservation and improvement of sexual and reproductive health of the citizens of Serbia<sup>3</sup>. The expert opinions and general population's attitudes bring us to a conclusion that there is a common consent when it comes to introducing sex education in Serbia. However, the rare attempts to introduce sex education have proven themselves as unsuccessful.

The Provincial Secretariat for Sport and Youth launched the initiative to introduce extracurricular activity „Health education on reproductive health“ in schools back in 2012, which made a significant leap forward in this field. The expert team in the fields of psychology, youth work and medicine (specialists of gynaecology, urology, epidemiology and social medicine) was contracted to elaborate a syllabus and a manual. The expert group of the World Health Organisation in the

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1 Mirjana Rašević, Seksualna edukacija u evropskim državama (Sex education in European countries), <https://doi.org/10.2298/ZMSDN1867335R>

2 Ibid

3 Available at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/uredba/2017/120/2/reg>

field of sex education and Republic Family Planning Centre provided their support in the process. The end result of mutual co-operation was an all-encompassing educational programme suited to the needs of young people. The accompanying manual „Health education on reproductive health“ integrated chapters on anatomy and physiology of reproductive organs, human sexuality and reproduction, inter-human relations and relationships, communication skills, family planning, hazardous behaviours and health, gender issues, reproductive rights and other topics.

The programme was implemented throughout three subsequent school years among second grade pupils of secondary schools in Vojvodina. The educators were senior students of the Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Philosophy- Department for Psychology at the University of Novi Sad. The workshops were organised in ten secondary schools throughout the school year of 2013/2014; the number of schools rose to 66 during the subsequent school year, while during the school year of 2015/2016 the numbers spiked to 72 secondary schools from 33 cities and municipalities in Vojvodina. The project encompassed more than 12,000 pupils.<sup>4</sup> The surveys on attitudes and knowledge of pupils about reproductive health as well attitudes of parents whose children were involved in the programme were carried out in co-operation with the Institute of Public Health of Vojvodina. The results confirmed that this educational programme was useful and well accepted. However, the syllabus titled „Health education on reproductive health“ was not incorporated in educational system of Serbia despite positive results and the initiative filed in front of the Ministry of Education and the project did not continue during the following school year.

The reactions of conservative public that criticized the introduction of such subject in schools, in particular certain sensitive topics that were discussed at workshops, were presented in the media. Similar reactions were also caused by the „Educational package for teaching about sexual violence against children“, as a manual intended for teachers in elementary and secondary schools. The education package was elaborated by experts in the field of education and protection of children and women against violence in co-operation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development in 2016, whereas a large share of its contents has already been tested in preschool institutions, elementary and secondary schools. The objective of implementation of this manual is prevention of sexual violence, while it contains topics related to education of children and young people about sexuality so as for them to be able to recognise the occurrence of violence. After the announcement that the implementation of the „Educational package“ will commence in the educational institutions the media published the criticisms regarding the contents of the educational package and age at which its implementation is planned. The entire initiative was halted soon after that.

Public reaction drew the attention to the need to talk more about reproductive health of young people and related risks in the media and to inform general public in more details about the purpose of such programmes and their benefits.

In addition, the issue of the need to introduce education on sexual and reproductive health into educational system remains unresolved. The topics related to reproductive health are taught in

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4 A.Kapamadžija, M.Zotović, S.Ukropina, D.Dobanovački i L.Turo, Health education on reproductive health – second edition, Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth of AP Vojvodina



different subjects within the current educational system: „The responsible relation towards health, including the reproductive one, is developed through syllabuses adapted to the needs of the pupils' age - science and social studies, physical and health education, biology, civic education, health and sports, as well as through other activities such as class teacher classes, lectures and workshops ran by health workers and experts in this field“<sup>5</sup>.

Meanwhile, as polemics about this issue wage on, the surveys on reproductive health of young people indicate that there is a justifiable need for a different approach, starting up with accepting reality in this field. The health survey of Serbian population<sup>6</sup> from 2013 show that 33.1% of young people in Serbia aged from 15 to 19 entered into sexual relation, with significantly higher rate among boys in comparison to girls (39.9% to 25.7%). The percentage of young people that entered into sexual relation increased by 4.1% in comparison to previous survey from 2006. The median age when the young people enter into sexual relations remain unchanged at 17 years of age, with an exception that younger girls enter into sexual relation at somewhat older age in comparison to boys (18 years of age in comparison to 17 years of age). The survey has revealed a trend that the age limit of entering into sexual relations is moving downwards, from 18 years of age to 16 years of age, while approximately 2% of young people enter into sexual relations before 15 years of age.

The surveys on how young people from our region acquire knowledge on topics related to sexual and reproductive health are scarce in number. An older study conducted among female adolescents from Belgrade via an online survey from 2001, indicated that the most frequent source of information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases were their **peers** (37%), **parents** (22%) and **media** (21.6%), and somewhat less frequent **schools** (10%), while as little as 1.7% female adolescents acquired relevant information from health employees (Sedlecki, 2001). The survey carried out in Republika Srpska from 2009 among 683 adolescents aged from 12 to 15 indicated that more than a half of the surveyed acquired information about reproductive health from **television or from newspapers**, followed by **parents** (28.3% of boys aged 12 and 13.2% of boys aged 15) and at lectures in **school** (12.2%). The survey indicated that over one half of the surveyed would ask their parents for advices concerning problems from their sex life, while every fourth one from his/her **peers**, and only 2.8% would ask their teachers for advice. The adolescents involved in the survey i.e. as many as 79.1% of them considered that it would be useful for them to have a subject of sex education included in school syllabus<sup>7</sup>.

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5 Does sex education deserve its place in school syllabus? <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3342839/da-li-je-seksualnom-obrazovanju-mesto-u-skoli.html>

6 Available at: <http://www.batut.org.rs/download/publikacije/IstrazivanjeZdravljaStanovnistvaRS2013.pdf>

7 D. Telebak, O. Perazić, N. Babić, V. Paleksić, M. Marković, Awareness and attitudes of adolescents related to reproductive health in Republika Srpska [https://www.academia.edu/23108291/INFORMISANOST\\_I\\_STAVOVI\\_ADOLESCENATA\\_U\\_POGLEDU\\_REPRODUKTIVNOG\\_ZDRAVLJA\\_U\\_REPUBLICI\\_SRPSKOJ](https://www.academia.edu/23108291/INFORMISANOST_I_STAVOVI_ADOLESCENATA_U_POGLEDU_REPRODUKTIVNOG_ZDRAVLJA_U_REPUBLICI_SRPSKOJ)

# NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

**National Youth Strategy 2015– 2025<sup>8</sup>** is based on strategic determination of the state to engage itself in working with young people and for the young people. The National Strategy is based on nine strategic objectives that, among other things, define „health and welfare of women and men“. The prescribed objectives recognise that young people enter into sexual relations at a very early age both physically and psychologically unprepared placing them at the very top of unfavourable list among European youth in terms of number of those diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. The Strategy calls for education in the field of reproductive health through the work of counselling centres for young people, support to programmes of peer education of young people for the purpose of improving reproductive health and at the same time support to programmes of parents' and pupils' education in the field of reproductive health.

**Public Health Strategy in the Republic of Serbia 2018-2026<sup>9</sup>** within its common objective „Improvement of health and reduction of health inequality“, and sub-objective „Improvement of general health of citizens of the Republic of Serbia in the fields of leading public health significance“ quotes the implementation and monitoring of the *National programme of preservation and improvement of sexual and reproductive health of citizens of the Republic of Serbia*, as well as extends its support to the *Strategy of birth incentives*. The extension of knowledge and behaviour of population in relation to preservation and improvement of health and reduction of risk factors, as well as continuous improvement of implementation of health educational work in pre-school institutions, elementary and secondary schools were put in focus within the development of promotional health activities in the community.

**Youth Health Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia<sup>10</sup>** from 2006 singles out ever higher sexual activity among young people, particularly younger adolescents and accompanying health risks. The Strategy points out the insufficient level of informedness among young people about health, as well as that health education is absent from the school system and that other sectors apart from health (social protection, education, sources of information etc.) are not utilized in protection of youth health. The recommendations are based on the development of safe and supporting environment for the development and health of young people through, inter-alia, strengthening of community capacities in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes of prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of young people, as well as fulfilment of safer and healthier family, school and work environment for young people.

The **Strategy for Education Development in Serbia by 2020<sup>11</sup>** prescribes that the mission of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system is to provide basic foundations for life and development of

8 Document available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/dokument/45678/strategije.php>

9 Document available at: <http://otvorenavlada.rs/strategija-javnog-zdravlja-u-republici-srbiji-2018-2026-godine/>

10 Document available at: <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2006/104/1>

11 Document available at: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/STRATEGIJA-OBRAZOVANJA.pdf>

each individual, society and country based on knowledge. One of the four objectives of long-term development of education is achieving and preserving relevance of education by harmonising the educational system structure with immediate and developmental needs of individuals, economic, social, cultural, research, and educational, public, administrative and other systems. The Strategy emphasizes that „the pupils leave the elementary schools without sufficiently developed basic competencies that they need and as such are important for continuation of education and better managing in private and public life. In addition to insufficiently developed functional, mathematic and scientific literacy the elementary school pupils do not develop artistic and cultural, nor basic cultural needs and habits through their education that are important for forming of value attitudes that being the prerequisite for living and working in contemporary society as well as private and social life of every citizen“. The Strategy also points out that the health-sports support to development of children is at a very low level as well as that the pedagogical role of school in elementary education has been neglected.

The term „reproductive health“ is mentioned only in one instance in the Strategy of Education in the section referred to secondary schools: „The ministries competent for health, social policy and youth should together in co-operation with the schools organize (...) activities directed towards promoting healthy life styles in local self-government (combat against abuse of psychoactive substances, tobacco and alcohol, care of reproductive health of young people)“. The terms „health education“ and „sex education“ are not mentioned in the Strategy. The Strategy calls for the development of elementary school as a public service through co-operation with other institutions and organisations that serve as resources for pedagogical-educational work: „The connections with informal forms of education should be made for the purpose of elaborating education and pedagogical work as well as raising the interest and motivation of pupils for learning and working“.

# SURVEY RESULTS

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## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the survey is to acquire insight into manners in which the adolescents in Serbia inform themselves and become aware of sexual and reproductive health. We used this framework to survey:

- The sources of information most often used by young people aged 15 to 16;
- Experiences and opinions of young people on available sources of information, their quality, reliability and degree of relevance;
- Knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of young people from the aspect of sexuality and reproductive health;
- Recommendations of young people with regards to this field.

In addition, we were interested to determine the attitudes of adults, foremost parents with regards to sex education so as to get a clearer picture on the environment that affects young people.

The field part of the survey was organised during July and August of 2019 and it encompassed elaboration of two poll questionnaires (one for focus group participants and the second one for online poll intended for parents) as well as the Guide for focus groups.

The questionnaire for focus group participants was elaborated in a manner that enables anonymous collection of demographic data on respondents (gender, age, place of residence) and responses to questions related to the environment where young people acquire knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, their mode of behaviour in search for information and attitudes regarding these subjects. The questionnaire was completed by respondents at the beginning of each focus group.

The questionnaire intended for parents contained ten questions related to attitudes about sex education and opinion on who should be entrusted to provide this type of education as well as which topics should be encompassed by the syllabus and current state of affairs in this field.

The Guide for focus groups was elaborated for the purpose of providing the educators with guidelines in their conversation with young people and was made up of introductory part and questions for every segment with accompanying sub-questions. The introductory part contained information about the survey and projects, objectives of the focus group and manner in which the results shall be utilized, guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity of participants, data on duration of focus groups, manner of data monitoring and work schedule. The main topics of interest foreseen by the Guide included: the introductory part with presentation and clarification of the manner of work, questions about the first choice of information for young people, coupled with considerations about different sources of information (Internet, peers, parents, school and other sources),



and recommendations about the manner in which providing information and education of young people should be elaborated. The audio recording of conversations throughout the work of focus groups was taken upon receiving compliance for the purpose of subsequent drafting of reports and taking quotes from the focus groups; audio recordings were completely erased.

The information about the project and call for participation in the survey were forwarded to secondary schools at the beginning of September (School of Medicine, Technical School, school of mechanical engineering, Grammar schools) and pupils' dormitories in Novi Sad, Kula, Ruski Krstur, Surdulica and Vladičin Han, accompanied by a letter for parents that contained information concerning the survey and a statement on compliance for participation of underage child in the survey. The parents were asked to provide their informed consent, which was a prerequisite for participation of children in the survey.

One secondary school and one dormitory withdrew their co-operation during the preparatory period after having read in the letter that the terms of reference concern sexual and reproductive health with the clarification that there was a reasonable doubt that parents could be upset over the use of the word „sexual“. This decision caused a change of plans and a part of the focus groups was transferred to other schools.

A total of 20 focus groups attended by 186 adolescents (47% girls and 53% boys) were organised during the months of September and October of 2019. The average age of respondents was 15.2 years; the majority of respondents were 15 years old (49), 16 years old (20) and 14 years old (17), while the two respondents were 17 and 18 years old. The respondents' parents previously provided an informed consent for participation of their children in the survey. The separate focus groups were organized for girls and boys, in separate rooms, while the managers of focus groups were of the same gender as the participants so as for the conversation to be as open as possible.

The focus groups were attended by 56% of young people from 12 cities and municipalities as well as 44% of young people from 47 sub-urban settlements and villages<sup>12</sup>. The majority of respondents were pupils of the first and second grade of secondary school.

The selection of venues for focus groups was made in an effort to encompass young people that live in the city as well in rural areas, as well as in the northern and southern part of the country, that reside in their parent's home and dormitories throughout the secondary education and those that attend grammar schools as well as secondary vocational schools.

The parents' interviewing was carried out online from August 5<sup>th</sup> to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, via a Facebook application Polls for Pages. The poll was promoted on Facebook and Instagram so as to reach the highest number of parents (persons aged from 25 to 54 with common interests in terms of parenting and education). Out of 4,042 persons that viewed the invitation to fill out the poll, a total of 448 opened up the poll and 180 of them responded to all or most of the questions. We do not possess data on gender of the respondents because the application was not set up to gather this type of data.

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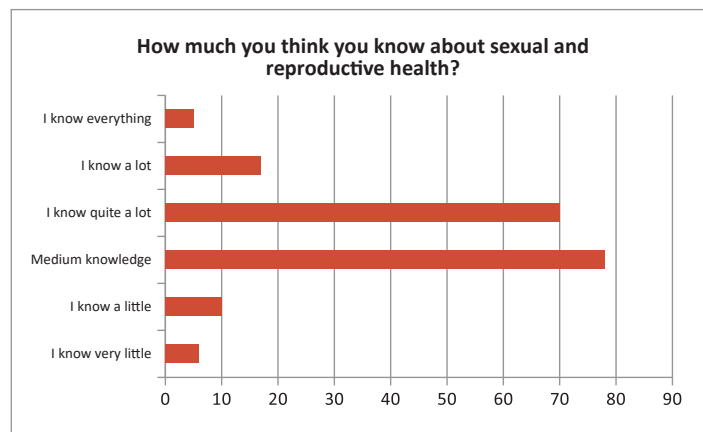
12 Novi Sad, Vrbas, Sremski Karlovci, Kula, Titel, Apatin, Beočin, Bačka Palanka, Temerin, Vladičin Han, Surdulica, Vranje, Ruski Krstur, Sivac, Kruščić, Kljajićevo, Crvenka, Bačko Dobro Polje, Ratkovo, Zmajevo, Maglić, Kisač, Futog, Budisava, Sirig, Bačko Gradište, Nova Gajdobra, Beška, Rumenska, Karavukovo, Čenej, Pivnice, Ugljevik, Selenča, Kucura, Ravno Selo, Adaševci, Mladenovo, Banoštor, Ledinci, Dumbovo, Čurug, Kovilj, Mošorin, Begeč, Zagužane, Dugojnica, Suvojnica, Žitorađe, Polom, Jelašnica, Prekodolce, Stubal, Balinovce, Džep, Letovište, Repince, Manjak and Bresnica

# ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

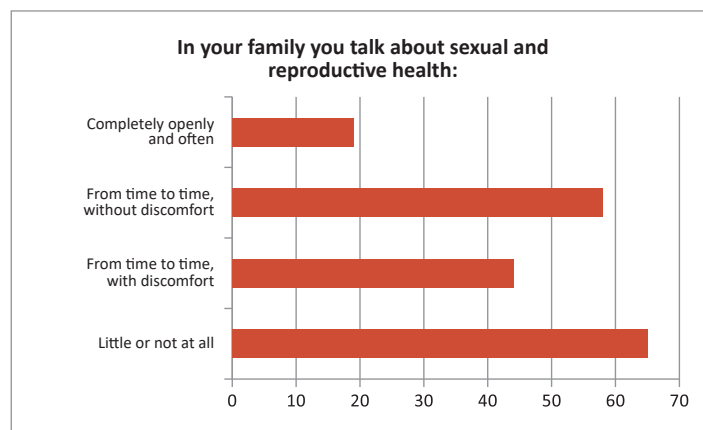
## 1. RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRES AND FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

### 1.1 Results of the questionnaire

Young people graded their self-awareness about sexual and reproductive health on the scale from 1 to 6 with an average grade of **3.52**. The assessment values do not differ to a large extent: young people living in villages graded their knowledge with 3.37, while young people living in cities graded their knowledge with 3.62; the boys graded their self-awareness with 3.62, while the girls graded themselves with 3.44. The most frequent response was „3 – Medium knowledge“ (74/186) or „4 – I know quite a lot“ (67/186), while 16 respondents graded their knowledge with 1 or 2. Five respondents (boys) answered that they are familiar with everything about this subject.

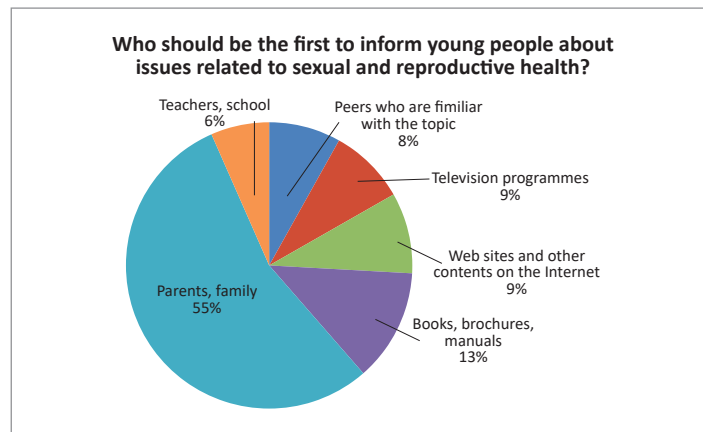


The topic of sexual and reproductive health is being mentioned seldom, not at all or from time to time with discomfort in families of majority of respondents (58.6%). One third of respondents report that this topic is mentioned from time to time and without discomfort in their families, while every tenth respondent mentions that this topic is discussed often and in a relaxed atmosphere.

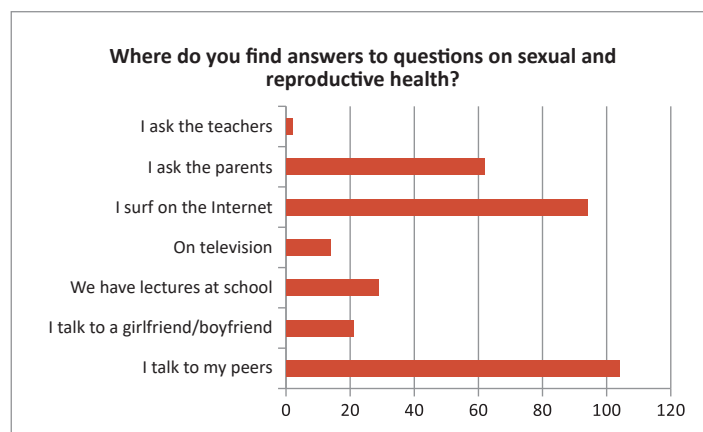


More than a half of young people choose their parents and family (58% among which there is a slightly higher number of girls in comparison to boys) when being asked as to who should first inform young people on issues related to sexual and reproductive health. All other sources were rated significantly lower in grade of importance according to the opinion of young people, including the Internet (9%) and peers (8%).

Young people also place most of their trust in parents and family as sources of information (68.8% among which there is a slightly higher number of girls in comparison to boys). The Internet is trusted by 19.3% young people out of which two thirds are boys, while the teachers and school are trusted by 13.4% of respondents. The lowest level of trust was placed to the peers (8%), boyfriend/girlfriend (4%) and television (8%).



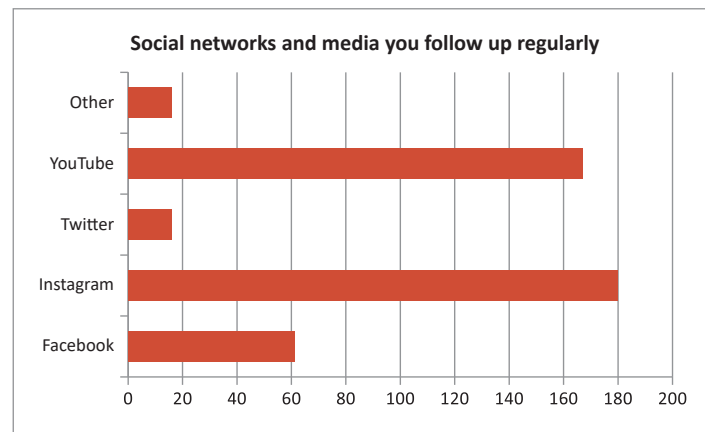
However, when it comes to the **use of sources of information, the peers** come to the first place, followed by the **Internet**, and lastly by **parents**. All other sources (school and teachers, television, person with which they are involved in a relationship) have a significantly lower level of importance. Young people utilize the most the sources of information in which they place low level of trust but that are most easily available.



All the participants of focus groups use Internet and the majority of them have an account on a social network, mostly on Instagram. Only 8.6% of respondents do not possess an account on social networks. A total of 96.8% of respondents access the Internet most often via a smartphone, whereas 15.6% use their PC to access the Internet.

More than a half of young people (54.8%) can follow up, comprehend and use the Internet contents in English language, while an additional quarter (24.2%) has limited comprehension of English language and thus contents on the Internet.

Instagram is being used almost on a regular basis by almost all young people (96.8%), a total of 89.8% follows YouTube channels, over a third of them use Facebook, while the lowest number of them use Twitter.



Young people are also fond of using the Snapchat application for multimedia message forwarding; Discord platform and channel of communication for video games and other topics; Reddit that makes a selection of contents from social networks and serves for their ranking and discussion; as well as the Deezer application for listening to music.

## 1.2 Focus groups results

A total of 20 focus groups were organised with participation of 186 young people with an average age of 15.2 years. The pupils in focus groups were divided per gender so separate talks were held with boys and girls; the managers of focus groups were of the same gender as the participants.

At the beginning of focus groups' work, young people were introvert, not talkative and displayed a certain dose of discomfort after having been explained the topic of conversation. The present state of affairs lead the managers to open up a conversation by explaining the meaning of the term focus groups and for which purposes it is being organised, followed by consideration of the meaning of terms „sexual“ and „reproductive“ and subsequent provision of broader context within which the conversation shall develop further. Young people were explained that this topic refers to love and the concept of falling in love, communication between young people, attitudes and behaviour of boys and girls, kinds of available information, sources of information etc.

Young people gradually began to open up and showed more interest to share their opinion through further course of conversation. Young people from smaller cities and villages displayed higher level of closedness and resistance to openly discuss these issues, in comparison to young people coming from larger cities. However, each group had individuals that were more open for conversation and eager to respond to questions. Further course of survey has shown that these young people mostly talk about these issues in an open manner within their own families and



show lower level of personal embarrassment when talking about these topics. As the work of the focus group progressed so did the initial closedness begin to loosen up and level of interest for conversation increased. The participants even felt a certain dose of sorrow over the fact that focus group is coming to an end („Only now I feel like talking about it!“).

The focus group has shown that young people talk seldom about these issues with the adults and that was the reason for some communication issues. The participants found it difficult to find adequate words and expressions related sexuality in order to express their feelings. The participants strived to use polite words, such as for example „intimate relationship“, „relationship“ or „it“. A certain number of participants even found it difficult to pronounce polite words related to sexuality, which at certain moments affected the dynamics of conversation and made it too general. The participants rarely mentioned specific examples of topics of interest or terms that they were looking up on the Internet.

The survey has also shown that young people often provided answers that they deemed satisfactory for the adult persons. The participants spoke more often about what something should be like rather than true state of affairs. The participants shared some attitudes that were similar or identical to attitudes of the adults (parents). The gender stereotypes were often mentioned as a common feature between different attitudes. The notion of gender and gender roles, as well as concept of gender equality are not sufficiently clear to young people and many of them perceive this issue as combat for women's rights and „women issues“.

Boys displayed a great need to talk about sexual and reproductive health. They consider this as one of the most important topics. They were fond of the idea of open communication and an opportunity for them to be heard and understood by someone who was once of their age and went through the same things they are going through at the moment. The most important thing for boys was to have confidence in a person with whom they are talking as well as not to be ridiculed over something that they know or do not know. At the same time boys were assured that they need to extended knowledge regarding topics that are not familiar to them as well as emphasized the importance for these topics to be talked about.

On the other hand, girls were more enclosed and were less keen to show interest in topics related to sexual and reproductive health. They frequently hesitated to give any statement and were talking in whispers or decided to keep to themselves. The common attitude of girls was that they were not interested in those topics, as well as that they were being intimidated, confused and disturbed in a certain manner by exposure to these topics. Girls anticipated that the field of sexuality is accompanied by different forms of risks and hazards, as well as that one of the risks lies in them merely confessing of being interested in this topic. The above-mentioned attitudes were a prerequisite for dominant resistance and hesitation among the girls to talk about these topics because they considered it was not the time yet for such discussions.

### **1.2.1 How much do the young people know?**

Boys most frequently replied when being asked about the meaning of terms „sexual“ and „reproductive“ that it had something to do with sexual relations and protection, with sexually transmitted

diseases and ways to prevent them, with reproductive organs of males and females and ways to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Girls clarified these terms as topics related to reproduction, protection during intercourse, prevention of unwanted pregnancy, health of reproductive organs, sexual and other diseases, as well as with feelings that are expressed in a physical manner as something that is innate.

Boys were scared of an idea of their girlfriend becoming pregnant and it was this fear that motivated them to seek information regarding protection against unwanted pregnancy. However, in their own words, everybody knows of condoms but they rarely choose to use them. They displayed little or no knowledge about the facts concerning menstrual cycle. For example, majority of them did not know which the „fertile“ days during the cycle are and how do they occur and at the same time considered that pregnancy cannot take place during the „non-fertile“ days. They also mentioned that they do not want to take care about these facts and that the girls should be the ones to think about protection against pregnancy.

*„Very little (use of condoms); they buy them, but do not use them. Perhaps only at the beginning and never again.“*

*„We do not discuss about sexually transmitted diseases or about condoms. I believe that they are being used, I don't know, but they are very expensive – as much as one snack.“*

Girls mostly did not know the answer when being asked what „contraception“ means, but rather guessed it was the matter of some kind of protection against something unwanted , against sexually transmitted diseases, viruses and pregnancy. They connect the term contraception with pills and protection, but they are uncertain as to against what. They mainly could not explain the menstrual cycle mean. They doubt if what they know is correct and true.

*„Contraception... Wait just a second... I knew what it was, but I simply forgot. “*

*„I know about the pills... Perhaps, the protection against something unwanted?“*

*„I don't know anything, but for real! (laughter)“*

*„I never truly understood that (how does pregnancy occur). These were just some terms we learnt by heart for the exam and that was it.“*

*„We know very little... if we were to look at the whole knowledge, we know a very small portion of it and there is still a lot that can be learned .“*

*„It seems as if everybody knows something, but actually nobody knows anything.“*

*„Our knowledge is sufficient for our age. (How do you know?) I spoke with my mother.“*

### **1.2.2 How interested are they?**

Boys answered without hesitation when being asked whether they are interested in topics related to sexuality and reproductive health that they are very interested in everything connected with this

matter. They stated there is almost no boy that would disagree with that. They consider this topic is much more often discussed among them than among girls. They consider themselves more open for discussion, which is in their belief the only normal attitude towards this subject. Boys listed the most interesting topics as follows: how to make love, how to form a family and be a good father, how to avoid sexually transmitted infections, what is the best time to enter into a sexual relationship.

*„To be honest, we are most interested to learn about sexual relations.“*

*„We are interested to know how the girls feel, how that functions with them. “*

*„Whether it is a good thing to use a condom, whether it should be done and how does the whole thing work? Some of us are ashamed to buy a condom, so when we go into a store and want to buy them; everybody knows why we are buying them. We are 15-16 old, and when we go into a store and see a woman working there, we immediately think what if this woman knows my mother and tells her- that son of yours is buying condoms!“*

According to boys, girls are equally interested in this topic but in a different manner: they are more interested in feelings and falling in love. Boys believe that the girls know a lot about sexuality, particularly the topics that are less familiar to boys, even though they would never admit it as they display indifference, discomfort or disgust. They believe that girls have an even higher awareness about these topics as they are more thorough in looking up for information, asking questions and looking for answers. Besides, girls have menstruation which is why they have the need to know more about this topic. However, there was also an opinion that the girls are maybe not that much interested in sexuality because they do not talk about that openly.

*„We are interested in everything (topic of sexuality), and if somebody is not interested than he is not sane!“*

*„We are interested in it 2100%, we start getting curious about the topic back in the seventh grade already.“*

*„The girls like to eavesdrop when boys are talking about this topic.“*

*„I believe that they know as much as we do. Practically everybody knows his/her part ...“*

*„A girlfriend of mine told me that they are thinking a great deal about this topic, much more than us, they are interested in everything and wait till you hear their stories!...“*

*„The girls are definitely more perverse than boys; I saw this on an Instagram page that I follow up. For example, you write on Instagram „ask me whatever you want“ after which variety of things will be added mostly by girls.“*

*„The girls are thinking differently, they are much more mature than us. Whereas this topic is the only thing on our minds, they refrain themselves, control themselves, and we cannot stop thinking about it.“*

Unlike boys, the girls mainly claim that the topics of sexual and reproductive health are not subject of their interest and that it is too early for them to develop such interests and that they still do

not need to inform themselves about this topic, which is why they have not looked up for them. The conversation with them shows that they are bit worried and upset by these topics and that the curiosity is in the second plan. There is also an impression they are ashamed to say they are interested in these topics, which is why they are ashamed and hesitant. There have been very few girls in focus groups that expressed their interest in these topics. The topic of interest mentioned by the girls are as follows: what is the best time for a girl and a boy to enter into intimate relations and how they should approach a boy they like; whether the use of pills can have adverse effects on the hormones and consequently disable them from having children, and whether a woman can have children following an abortion.

*„I have never looked up anything about this topic, I am not truly interested.“*

*„Somehow I am not affected by this topic, not that I am too interested. I do not have the time and somehow I do not want it, I am not interested in it at the moment .“*

*„I do not want to know, I don't think I don't feel anything.“*

*„I do not surf, neither do I talk with my parents. I have great deal of respect towards my parents and I am not interested in this topic.“*

*„Well, I am interested a great deal about it. That is why I want to know, I am interested in this topic. I know quite a lot for my age. My mother was the best source of information as we talk openly about everything. I should not feel ashamed neither should I hide anything .“*

*„I would never do it at this age, I do not have the need for it because I am still too small, but I would like to know more about it.“*

### **1.2.3 Gender roles**

Many attitudes shared by young people during the focus groups were extremely coloured by gender stereotypes. Boys, for example, believe that the girls are more emotional than the boys, while boys should not express their feelings but rather keep „cool“ all the time. They believe that men have considerably more expressed sexual urge in comparison to women and are more interested in physical appearances, whereas women are on a lookout for a romantic ideal relationship. They exhibit greater freedom to discuss about sexuality because they are thinking more about it and are feeling less ashamed in comparison to girls. They consider the girls shyer although they are more mature and advanced than themselves. The boys perceive an exemplary man to be smart and educated that treats girls in a protective manner and does not exploit them. The exemplary man shows no weaknesses, he is faithful, attentive and family oriented. The girl should be pretty, well mannered, more mature than man, smart and faithful.

*„Men are more introvert, while women are stronger. If a man cries, this is perceived as not OK. Should someone see a man crying then it is all over for him.“*

*„It is always important to display a somewhat rougher side...“*

*„There is a common belief that men are dominant and that women are sex toys.“*



*„I believe that the girls focus much less on this aspect of physical attractiveness than we do, they want to have somebody who is full of understanding and attentive rather than just good looking.“*

*„A woman is made to talk while a man is made to work .“*

*„When us men see a good looking girl we are prepared to skip all those first steps that imply getting to know each other, emotions and similar, while on the other hand girls find all these steps to be of great importance . When girls notice a good looking man they take into consideration his attitude, time to disclose their feelings, form an emotional bond and only afterwards allow something to happen.“*

*„Love and falling in love are topics for women, for example, I fancy this boy... They are more emotional.“*

*„Girls look at series where everything is idealised, than come us who are not like that and after a certain period of time we get accustomed to one another. They are interested in the same topics as we are but perhaps at somewhat later age.“*

*„Boys cry as well but not in public. When you feel like crying you have to keep it for yourself and that is it.“*

The girls believe that they mature at earlier age compared to boys and as such are considered as more responsible and earnest, while the boys are immature. Girls also claim in relation to sexual maturation that they are the ones that get menstruations instead of the boys, which is why their knowledge about this topic is limited. They think that boys are more interested in sexuality and feel less ashamed to talk about this topic, while at same time they interpret their bragging as confirmation of their immaturity. When a girl gets a bad reputation, her female peers consider it partly had to do with the type of behaviour displayed by the girl herself („She must have done something to deserve this bad reputation“), and partly due to double standards being applied for boys and girls.

*„If they asked me about the appropriate age to enter into (sexual relations), I would answer the minimum of 17 or 18 years, or would even go so far as to say the later the better. The above-mentioned age limit refers to girls, whereas men are immature until the age of 40.“*

*„The girl comes out to be a w...e because she slept with a boy although it was her first time, it is not like she had relations with 300 of them before that. The boys become popular when they change 30 girls per month.“*

*„ It is not fair. It is a shame when a girl does it, but when a man does it... Gossips will always follow the girl and fabricated stories... I literally can't go out in the city with my friend, because people will talk.“*

*„We always get hurt more somehow. It can lead to unwanted pregnancy... while they do not take care of it. They perceive it as a play, something they are going to do and say goodbye.“*

*„If a girl knows more (about this topic), she is perceived as ill mannered, not normal, sick ...“*

*„The girls are more serious, while the boys display are also interested but less seriously. The girls are more likely to research on diseases, while they are interested only to learn about sex, what it is. We take care about everything .“*

*„Boys talk about these matters in an open manner, while when I mention something about that they act surprised !? Why should a girl know something about it!? And then again, they show me those things...“*

*„My personal opinion is that a girl should always have condoms by herself. Because, you cannot always rely on him. I believe that girls should not condemn the other girl when they see that she carries condoms, while if a boy was to see it, he would be surprised and ask what she plans to do with them ...“*

*„The girl needs to be obedient. When a girl gets married she is told by her parents to listen to her husband and his parents as well as to be obedient in marriage, this sentence will always be there. The fear from violence against women is always present because the woman believes that no one will trust her because he is a man and she is just a woman.“*

The boys consider that they should not discuss about love and feelings and particularly not to display them in public. The boys are the ones that display signs of discomfort and reluctance to talk about these topics despite being aware of the fact that this „rule“ has been imposed upon them by the environment. Nevertheless, the majority of them do not bring this issue in question and accept to behave like that. The boys consider the talk about their feelings to be as highly confidential and reserved only for best friends and persons of trust.

*„I cannot talk about this with everybody (feelings). Only with best friends .“*

*„Nooo, we never post statuses (on Instagram), that is ridiculous. It is a private thing and why should anybody out there know anything about it... It is alright to share it with your best friend, but it is not like all those who follow you up on Internet should know it, no way...“*

*„If some guy would talk about love and falling in love, he would get a response- why are you so pathetic, you choose not to socialize with your friends... God forbid if someone cries over a girlfriend !“*

*„If a girl ditches me and brings me to cry, or even worse if somebody sees it, I might as well dig a grave because it would mean I am a wimp or retarded and many of them would add that I have no idea about what love truly is ...“*

*„We consider it alright to be tough and display no emotions as it is something that is expected from us. Unfortunately, we succumb under this pattern. However, we consider that we are somewhat different in comparison to girls when it comes to emotions and that we are more stable in this matter and keep it to ourselves .“*

*„When I fancy a girl, I will not exaggerate with emotions but rather be moderate in that.“*

*„Some of them even drink alcohol, which is nowadays perceived as in, something that should be done... this is not in accordance with them, they are women, it is not nice to see them dragging along the floor, while for men it is acceptable. It is normal for men, we are used to seeing them drinking but we are not used to seeing women drink and it is very ugly to see something like that.“*

When it comes to establishing the family the girls are certain they will have children because it something that is implied for them. They do not understand and are critical about women who do not fit into this rule.

*„Yes, naturally I am planning to have children! The purpose of our existence on Earth is to reproduce.“*

*„The girls used to get married at 17 or 18 years of age in the older times. Now they are getting married at the age of 40, when they are not even fit to be a mother any more, while there are some 13 year-old girls that manage to realize themselves as mothers. I will have children at the age of 24, 27 and 29. Two boys and a girl. Let them be happy and alive.“*

#### **1.2.4 Where do young people look for information?**

The boys and girls provided similar answers in all focus groups when asked which source of information they refer to most when looking for information about sexuality and reproductive health. They put Internet and parents on the first place, followed by their peers and somewhat older friends and lastly all other sources of information - lectures, school, a boyfriend or girlfriend, older friends, a physician, a psychologist at school and others. They almost did not mention television, radio, book, newspapers and magazines as sources of information. Boys mention their fathers, older brothers and other male members of the family as sources of information, while girls mention their mothers and older sisters. At the same time boys mentioned more frequently more experienced peers and friends as sources of information in comparison to girls.

#### **Internet**

The Internet is most frequently mentioned as primary source of information where young people seek for answers to their questions. It is available to them at any time through „smart phones“ and is being used by everybody. Internet surfing represents a fast and easy way to search for information about something they feel ashamed to ask anybody else („We can inform ourselves without anybody knowing who we are“). The majority of young people surf the Internet through contents in English language and they say they can find a great deal of information.

Young people register themselves often to be older than they truly are, namely that they are of legal age when opening an account on the Internet. This simple move enables them to bypass protection measures against exposing minors to various contents on the Internet and thus open up access to all contents published on the Internet. The girls mention that they opened up their first accounts when they were in the fifth or sixth grade of elementary school mostly on Facebook even though they use it rarely nowadays.

The boys mention that they watch YouTube channels (the popular „Youtubers“ are Muđa, Janko, Baka Prase and others), video clips and various sites displaying pornographic contents. The girls deny to a large extent the use of Internet to look up these topics, and if they surf the Internet they do not use it to watch video clips and similar contents but rather carry out their search through Google.

The popular „Youtubers“ followed up by hundreds of thousands of young people have an important influence on adolescents, while their video notifications often refer to sexual intercourse, provide

comments on female sexual attributes and contain a great deal of profanities. The songs that You-tubers record and place on their channels often contain sexually explicit text. The entire podcasts often generate hundreds of thousands, and sometimes over more than million views. The focus groups showed that young people imitate the manner in which their role models from the Internet talk and behave, they wear their T-shirts, etc.

Social networks and message exchange applications are very popular among young people. The majority of them have Instagram accounts; the girls use it because they like to have large number of followers, and the boys are logged onto it as well but probably do not spend the same amount of time on this network compared to girls. Other popular applications are Snapchat, Messenger, Discord, Reddit and Deezer. They use Facebook much less because they consider it as an old, obsolete social network being used by their parents' generation.

*„We follow up the Youtubers... For example, they talk about their first sexual experience.“*

*„We mostly watch clips.“*

*„Everybody is using Internet and watches Youtubers, particularly the small children. The Baka Prase ... it sounds harmless in a way, but it definitely is not. It is often filled with discussions about these topics, sex... A half million (followers) is of our age while others are younger, and he swears and all, and children repeat it afterwards.“*

*„I write the topic on the Internet that I am interested in, for example what it means when a girl says to me „I am late with my days“.“*

*„Nobody uses Facebook, it is like a dinosaurs, perhaps some small percentage uses Messenger.“*

*„Snapchat is most often used by girls, and when we post our pictures we get called gays for using this beautification app .“*

*„Boys search the Internet, but not in a good way. They do not search for consequences but look at what fun that is, how to get it so... they can have nice time themselves as soon as possible and it is not relevant for the girls. Maybe they are watching more how not to get embarrassed and not how harmful that it, how to protect themselves - they simply disregard it.“*

Young people mention that they take with certain dose of reserve the information available on the Internet because not every piece of information found there is true. They believe that everybody can post what they want on the Internet and that they should not believe in everything they find there. They trust in „well-known websites“ such as Wikipedia, websites of large companies and those that have a large number of reviews.

*„The most accurate description is that go to Wikipedia rather than to some less known website.“*

*„You should never fully trust everything that you find on the Internet, it is not as if we fell from Mars.“*

*„Internet is the worst source of information because it contains all sorts of things both truthful and false.“*



Many people mentioned that they are afraid to use Google because they find the search results to be distressing and cause anxiety. The most frequent search results are related to various diseases and conditions related to terms entered into the browser.

*„I type in what, how, why, what for... about the subject of interest and then I look up for it on the websites. I find an answer to my query but I get scarred from what I read, which is why I do not particularly fancy to look up for answers on the Internet because it immediately refers you to visit the physician . Once you read it, you get immediately scared because it could be a great deal of things. The information is mostly of medical nature.“*

*„I am sometimes satisfied with answers that I get online, and sometimes it leaves me with even greater feeling of confusion. I was sick and I typed into something, and it turned out to be a lethal disease.“*

*„I Google up very often for information about sexually transmitted diseases because nowadays people use protection very rarely, I do not even know for it is used for, but I am simply interested in it.“*

*„I just want to get specific answers and I end up with websites advertising certain clinics and hospitals. It is filled with some terms from Latin language that makes the whole thing so complicated as if it was written only for scholars. I often end up with search results from Zadruga and similar.“*

*„I rarely go on the browser, I have done it once and never again. I may try out again in couple of year's time. I am not sure, the matter resembles to me as I were to strip myself naked in front of somebody, I cannot do it, I feel uncomfortable ...“*

*„Google sometimes refers me to websites intended for those over 18 years of age.“*

Young people are aware of the fact that majority of contents they find on the Internet, especially on pornographic sites, are not in harmony with reality and that they do not provide an accurate perception about how sexual intercourses and human behaviour look like in real life.

*„The good side of the Internet is that it can provide us with a clear picture, while the bad side is showing us an ideal picture which is not like that in reality. We would like to see what sexual intercourse looks like with a person we love, but this is something you will not see on the Internet.“*

*„I believe that everything we see on the Internet does not depict a real picture. It is all their job and does not show what we truly want to see, it is not a true relationship between two people, and it is merely somebody's business. We are aware of it but we simply watch all contents of this type on the Internet, at least us men.“*

*„It is not the same thing when you ask your parents and when you find it on the Internet. The parent tells you one thing, but the Internet something completely different. For example: I ask my mother if it is an appropriate thing for me to have intercourse with my boyfriend, she replies that I am still too young for that because I am too young, while on the Internet I discover that girls of my age or a bit older than me loose their virginity at this age and have intercourse with the most trusted individual.“*

*„On YouTube... some people are able to retell the whole story in a nice manner, at which age we should do it and everything else. Recommendation? Sanja Stanković spoke on several occasions how we should feel ourselves to know that we are confident in ourselves. She spoke about health but she focussed more on how we should feel when we feel it is time for that.“*

## **Parents**

The parents are one of the most important sources of information about sexual and reproductive health according to the opinion of young people. The parents are most often quoted by girls. The observed attitude of young people towards their parents is an expression of their confidence in their parents that wish only the best for them and belief that they are older and more experienced, that they have accurate and reliable responses and that they will always provide them with the best advice. Young people spoke more about what should a conversation with their parents look like, rather than truly engage in a conversation with them. Although they know their parents support them and they trust them, they say that conversations with their parents were casual and reduced to jokes.

*„The conversation with parents is always a kind of joke and superficial.“*

*„It mostly resembles to a joke because this is the easiest way. It does not truly inform us a great deal about anything, but it still counts as a conversation about these topics...“*

Boys talk more easily with their fathers, elder brothers and male members of the family. The boys find conversation with their mothers extremely uncomfortable. Girls mostly talk more easily with their mothers, sisters and other female members of the family but they also mentioned that they have a close relationship with their father or elder brother as well as that they talk with them more often and consider them as trustworthy.

Young people that had positive experiences with their parents with regards to this subject openly discussed about it during the focus group convinced that their parents are best source of information. The attitudes shared by them were almost the duplicate of common attitudes of society towards sex education with a dominant attitude that they are still too young and that they should not display too much interest in these topics.

*„The parents always provide more specific and more comprehensive answers compared to peers, while what we hear from peers is a somewhat semi-information while the ones we get from parents are more reliable and accurate.“*

*„We know for them (parents) that they would never lie to us, they have much more experience than us and we tend to believe everything they say to us.“*

*„Parents teach us from an early age it is shameful to talk about these things and then when we get older, it is the only thing that we have on our mind.“*

*„We talk about it mostly when something happens. They often tell us we should respect the girls and forbid us from sending pictures of girls and ourselves to somebody else, we talk about this because it is an ongoing matter .“*

*„My parents are strict but when we are discussing about serious subjects then they loosen up a little bit. My dad says that he is my best friend, he often asks me if there is a particular girl that I fancy, after which my mother adds that I should be attentive with a girl, etc.“*

*„The parents' approach is important. I would not now that I could tell everything to my mother, if she had not told me, if she had not based her approach towards me in that manner. I find it easier to talk to my mother, she just told me - be smart, do not rush things, I will always be there for you and help you in any manner.“*

*„I tell everything to my mother and I place my trust in her. The subjects like... first crush, I asked her for advice when I fell in love, she knew everything and she was always there for me.“*

*„In my family, my mother opens up the conversation herself because she is well informed and open about the entire subject.“*

*„My father was the one that often started up discussion on this subject in my family. He always opens up a conversation by telling me how I should treat girls. I should never perceive them just as objects, but rather as human beings just like as myself.“*

*„I am always quite open with my mother about this topic and we talk in an open manner about it, I tell her about all my problems because she understands me and always gives me an advice. She never gets angry no matter what my questions sound like.“*

*„I am not ashamed to talk about it with my mother. My mother went through the same thing, she got pregnant at an early age with my sister, she knows how to advice me on matters I should be careful about.“*

*„I only talk about it with my granny. As soon as she finds out I have a boyfriend she calls me up to tell me „Do not do it without protection !“ (laughter), I tell her – I am 16 years old and I do not plan to do it at the moment, she agrees with me and offers to guide me through it!“*

*„I talk with my father openly about that, he gives me tips about men. He says that most of them are pricks. I mean, you could find exemplary young men among them, but nowadays most of them turn out to be pricks. Their behaviour and conversations...“*

Young people mention that information they receive from their parents are limited to certain topics and that they cannot talk to their parents about everything that occupies their mind. They mention that parents are not particularly tuned into current events, that they are old-fashioned, which is why they are finding it difficult to ask them about certain matters. The conversation often narrows down to messages and advices that adults give to their children that are not accompanied by explanation as to how to make this happen in practice. The true example for this are messages about protection and that they should take care of themselves, but nobody goes into details. The boys usually start up conversation with their parents when they have a proper cause, for example

if they say they have a date with a girl and parents start making jokes about that. The boys usually start up a conversation with their parents when they have a proper motive, for example if they say that they plan to take out a girl for a night out, which triggers a humorous response from their parents. They praise this spontaneous and humorous manner of communication as a positive one because it reduces the feeling of discomfort. The conversations of boys with their parents are often marked by incitement and encouragement to enter into relationships with girls; the boys are expected to show interest in that.

*„When we ask them we get information of interest to us. However, we do not talk about it because it is shameful. When the children are small, they should not be interested in that at all.,,*

*„We talk about it sometimes. They ask me if I have a girlfriend or if I have kissed her, or if she has kissed me, etc.,,*

***„My father says to me – if you do not have a girlfriend you will not get any money for going out, what do you need it for ...,,***

*„A father is a man and has a similar way of thinking as us, while mothers think we are very young, regardless of our age. A father is considered as a role model; I tell a lie to my mother from time to time, but never to my father ...“*

***„My father tells me – you should first get married and then have children.“***

*„My mother always opens up a conversation with a joke and mentions that she will buy me a box of something when I go on a field-trip. I get very uncomfortable, I blush all over my face, and she does not care .“*

*„The parents bought a box of condoms to my friend and told him where they left them and if he wanted to learn he was free to try them out.“*

***„They think we are too little for that, but afterwards they say that we are too late.“***

***„Perhaps, they think we should learn about it for ourselves?“***

*„They say that is not as if a stork is going to bring me a child.“*

Young people that do not talk at all about these topics with their parents were present in all focus groups. The reason was the closedness of parents with regards to these topics accompanied by the feeling of shame and discomfort. Some parents display anger and concern when children ask them about such topics, because they interpret it as a sign that their child has become sexually active. The girls were particularly faced with obstacles, some even with punishment if they tried to talk with parents. At the same time, young people say it would mean a great deal for them if they could talk openly with their parents.

*„I find it impossible, for example, to talk with my parents because I am embarrassed, my entire body feels discomfort. It is not a natural to talk about it with our parents and there is some shame.“*

*„I would have appreciated a great deal if I were able to talk about it with my parents since an early age .“*

„My mother tells me - you are too little for those things. And when I tell it to my father he acts as if he cannot talk about it at the moment, goes to a different room and we have never talked about it.“

„I remember when my brother asked my mother and she replied to him that he had the Internet and he should inform himself about that there.“

„My father told me - you must not have a boyfriend until I the age of 18. He was serious.“

„If I ask them something, they immediately think that has happened. Nothing happened, I just want to inform myself up front! I want to educate myself and get informed in advance, as simple as that.“

„My mother blocks that immediately. I look up for the answer to the question on the Internet and with my friends, I have nowhere else to do that. They will take my phone away, impose curfew, etc.“

„My father tells me that I should feel free to ask if I need anything, but I have never done it. He has never even asked me seriously if I have a girlfriend “.

„I will get punished because she is very annoyed by this topic, or she is ashamed. I would like the most if I could talk about that with my mother but she closes up somehow and leaves me with no chance for conversation. I know that will be her reaction if I start up something, which is why I have not addressed my mother about for two years at all.“

„I am mostly not the one to ask them. The parents always tell me – use condom no matter what you do.“

„My mother tells me I do not need that and that everything will happen in time, you will find out, but I do not know how am I supposed to find out when I have nowhere to do it, literally? They do not talk about that at school either, just a little bit on the Internet, I hear a bit from my friends and elder sister, but I am aware I know something and I know nothing of other things. My mother has never been the source of information. I tell most to my elder sister. With my father it all comes down to making jokes.“

„Somehow now, as I am older, they think I know...“

„When I asked my mother if it would be possible for her to buy me some tampons instead of sanitary pads, she was shocked and started yelling, something like, you should not use those as you are still a virgin, but at the end she found out it is allowed to use them.“

„When something is very, very forbidden a child buries it deep within itself and it gets unhealthy over the years.“

„And then afterwards some parents wonder why someone makes a child at the age of 15...“

„I would like it very much if my mother talked with me like that, but I do not even dare asking because I find it silly, and she...“

„**Perhaps, they do not even want us to know.** They may be thinking we are not ready and mature to know, or we are still too young... or perhaps they are not close enough with their children.“



*„They should be talking with us as much as possible.“*

***„The parents believe a child is not interested in that. They are not aware of quantity of information we have.“***

*„Some parents find it uncomfortable to start up this topic in front of children because they did not talk about that with their parents either.“*

*„I believe that there would not be any discomfort with regard to these topics if our parents had the opportunity to break those taboos earlier.“*

*„My mother told me she wore skirt for first time when she was 20, my grandfather did not allow her. I put on shorts once and my grandfather started to yell at me after which my mother told me about that.“*

## Peers

The peers are an important resource for exchange of information and learning about the norms of a peer group. The peers are there to enable more open conversation about those topics, to share experiences as well as to get and provide support. At the same time, confidential conversations with peers can be risky in case of breach of mutual trust. The peers can also be the source of pressure and repression for those that do not fit into expected, desirable manner of behaviour.

Young people are aware that they cannot expect to discover any new knowledge and experience they search from their peers, because they suspect their peers know equally little. Therefore, they take with reserve what they hear from their peers as they are aware there is a lot of exaggeration and unconfirmed data there. There is often some kind of competition and proving of own manhood among the boys. The company of boys highly values when somebody has more than one girlfriend and if somebody already had certain experiences with them. At the same time those showing emotions and deviating from the rules the boys should adhere are ridiculed. The peer group exerts sometimes too powerful pressure on the boys and they are aware of it.

*„When we go out to a party, the first question being is if you managed to hook up with someone followed up by stories on who did what. We believe in it sometimes, while sometimes we do not... **somebody may even have a video** ...it also depends on who is telling the story.“*

*„There are 6 or 7 of us in crew and each of us has had a girlfriend by now, managed to seduce someone, but there are two of them who have never done it. One of those two, allegedly seduced a character (a girl) during some village „slava“ (saint patron’s day), and now who knows what he did, how he managed to seduce her... afterwards, I asked the girl what happened and she told me that none of it happened. He just wanted to make it seem as if he had the some experience and that he managed to do something. We all know that he is lying, but nobody wants to tell him anything.“*

*„I will tell you what happened to me, I was going out with this girl last year, and we were walking around in the city centre and she said to me- I want us to do it tonight. I asked her what, and she said something like she wanted to do it that evening. I told her I did not want to do it, after which*

*she sort of started crying and I told her that to come to my place the next day when we actually done it."*

*„When you tell that you love somebody it turns out you are a wimp, dork ...“*

*„When you talk about having many chicks, you are saying it just because of one reason, namely for you to be perceived as cool, there is no other reason.“*

*„If you tell that a certain girl is beautiful, then you are a henpecked person, but if you say that you would like to have sex with her you will be considered a cool guy.“*

The boys largely inform themselves through the peers, but it all comes down to exchange of experiences if somebody managed „to do something“. Although the boys talk among themselves, they do not have enough confidence to tell their peers everything they are interested in. The majority of boys mentioned having at least one very good female friend with whom they can talk in confidence, but that there are probably things they choose to keep for themselves.

*„We do not talk to everyone because it is being transmitted further; it very often happens that someone who does not love you passes the information further and it even reaches the girl you like and there is always someone who wants something bad to you.“*

*„We're talking about experience because it's more interesting to us; we're not talking about preventative things, but rather about what's happening to us.“*

The girls are more closed in contact with their peers, stating that they do not trust a lot their female friends and that they would not confide in them. The risk that they will tell that to someone is too great. They talk to the boys; some have good friends they can talk to about everything. In particular, they consider them a good source of information if they want to find out „how men think.“ They are aware that boys brag about their relationships and confirm that such boys are popular with girls.

*„Female friends - no way! Because one day there will come a time when we will quarrel about something and she will tell everyone. “*

*„We talk very little. Such a time has come that we do not trust our female friends or anything. I think they will turn it around, talk about it. “*

*„Not much can be learned from peers, maybe just from the girls who have gone through that, and there are quite a few of us at our age.“*

*„I heard, I heard ... everyone heard something from someone and in the end it is nothing concrete or true ... it may be true but in most cases we cannot rely on it. Mostly boys start this topic. “*

*„It's good to talk to peers, but not to trust them too much. Check. For example, something deeper - as they tried, I heard ... this is not to be believed. “*

*„The boys sometimes spit on girls, she doesn't know it, or she did it ... for example, we girls keep it to ourselves. But, the boys are more detailed in that world. “*

*„Sometimes a seventh-grade boy comes and a third-grade girl, and when other girls see it, they imitate them because they feel like they're late. They look at being accepted by society, and when something is for the first time, it's always because of acceptance, that that the guys will accept them.“*

*„I hang out quite a lot with older and experienced people and I trust them and more to the guys. And then I mostly ask them. Just yesterday I wrote a message ... I can't go into Google, I don't know what I'm going to read there, and then I asked them. “*

*„They don't know anything about it and they pretend to be smart, especially boys.“*

*„Nobody can know who didn't have that relationship. They may know what a chocolate banana looks like, but if you haven't tried it, you can't talk about it. “*

*„Here's how I came up with information on how children are made. I was convinced that a woman gets pregnant when she is kissed. I was in the fifth grade and then my friend came and started explaining to me, and I said - well, that's enough! “*

*„We didn't know that in the fifth grade, we thought - you kiss and get pregnant, and now everybody knows that - those in the second or third grade, the boys are all talking. The Internet has become too ... everyone can see it on the Internet. “*

*„It's bad when we have too much information, but it's bad when we don't know anything at this age.“*

*„We wouldn't have known about it if it hadn't been for the kids ... for example, the girls who had a lot of boyfriends, then I found out, they kind of drag you in. If there were no such children, we would not know anything. As much as our parents think we are good children and have not yet learned, there are always those children who... and to avoid being teased you Google that and find out... “*

## **School**

Most young people do not consider school and teachers an important source of information because they say that there is almost no discussion of these topics at school. The only exceptions are the seventh grade elementary school biology classes and the occasional lectures they have had. Within this framework, young people have not received enough information, they remember very little.

*„Nothing can be learned from teachers on this subject, nobody talks about it.“*

*„On the blackboard we had drawings to see what the genitals look like, and that was it. He talks, we listen. “*

*„The role of the school and the teacher is none, literally none. We had just a little bit in biology, a few things regarding reproduction. “*

*„In the seventh grade we had something at a biology class, what is sexual intercourse, falling in love ...”*

*„Everything (at classes) is presented very superficially: mom and dad meet each other and suddenly the baby, no one tells us how that baby came about, how it happens, only the reproduction is mentioned and that's it.”*

*„We had a lecture here, with a video beam; the teacher had a presentation, pictures. We had some education in the use of protection. How was it? Unforgettable. “*

*„We don't talk about it at school, we did something in biology in elementary school for about one lesson, when we were told that the male and female genital organs match like a screw and a nut, and what should be done to avoid getting pregnant and that's it. We had the opportunity to bring questions that we are interested in for the following lesson. The questions were mostly brought by girls then, and we were embarrassed. “*

*„Just what the professor was explaining to us; we know more than that! That's it - they talk, we sit and listen, there's no interaction. “*

Young people think that teachers do not know about these topics and are not interested in them. However, the exceptions to the rule were mentioned - some biology teachers and class teachers invested more efforts to explain these topics and talk with children. There are also examples of teachers giving stereotypical messages and advice on reproductive health to young people. The boys also stated that they were uncomfortable asking questions if the interviewee was a female teacher and not a male teacher.

*„There is one teacher, he always tells us - you girls take care, watch who you are with, choose, and you boys can do everything, go ahead ...”*

*„One professor used to say that because of contraceptive pills, homosexuals are born when a woman drinks too many of these contraceptive pills.”*

*„A religious teacher told us about Adam and Eve, they kissed and the God blew and that's how the baby came into being.”*

*„We had several classes, that is, we had some education, but it was very unpleasant to talk to the female teacher about it. We were OK while it was a male teacher, but when the female teacher came, who was young, it was horrible ...”*

*„If we mention sex, we get expelled out of the classroom.”*

*„We had an older teacher and there wasn't much talk about that.”*

*„I don't think that (sexual and reproductive health education) is in their job description, and that was why we couldn't find out anything.”*

*„In elementary school, we had a class teacher ... even if I asked him about that, I don't think he would know what to tell us. I simply don't trust that kind of teacher. “*

*„School? They are not so dedicated, they talk about their subject, rarely any professor would deal with something outside his/her subject ... He doesn't like even to be asked about his own subject! “*

*„Our class teacher was a biology teacher, so we talked to him about everything. He asks what we are interested in and then we start the discussion. He spoke of protection methods.”*

*„We had doctor's lectures. When that day is... International AIDS Day or whatever. “*

*„Not much has been explained (about the condom), just mentioned. And they mentioned some pills that girls use, some on the day after, the day before, I have no idea ... honestly I would never drink it because I heard that it could disrupt hormones, I would rather use protection. “*

*„I know that two generations before me had lectures on this, and now we have nothing. Only in biology those 15 minutes. “*

*„We had some presentations about it, and our class teacher said she thought those topics should not be discussed at all.”*

*„Our biology teacher separated the boys from the girls, and then we talked to her openly. And I guess the boys, too. “*

*„We have no lectures at all, nothing about that. Only in biology, that's the only thing, but in biology we don't talk about that, we only learn to be examined, and then it's forgotten. “*

*„Only in elementary school. Biology. Our class teacher taught us that, but she didn't want to talk, she spoke more using some expert words that we didn't understand and then we didn't weren't even questioned about that lesson. “*

### **Television, radio, newspapers and magazines**

Television and traditional media are hardly present as an important source of information in the lives of young people. They state that they do not watch television at all and they do not read newspapers. However, despite of that they are still in daily contact with the contents being broadcast from these media: scenes from reality shows are shared on the internet, while they are confronted with images and captions from tabloids every time, for example, when they drive on public transport where someone reads that, or when they shop at the store where the daily press is displayed. Television is watched by their household members, so they too find themselves in a situation to watch something. Everybody had experience when a movie featuring a love scene was on television. They remember the inconvenience of having parents and other family members there, asking them to close their eyes and not to watch the love scenes, changing channels, or sending children to another room.

*„I don't watch television and I don't read newspapers, the media writes lies.”*

*„When I accidentally enter the newspaper on the phone, they offer me starlets; I am not interested in that.”*



*„Earlier when we were little, when TV commercials are broadcast, I just wait for them to pass and afterwards no one mentions anything about it. These are generally unpleasant situations, but sometimes we joke about it. It's good as long as the parents don't talk anything about that. “*

*„In a teenage magazine, I read it in the seventh-eighth grade, in one section younger and older girls ask the doctor and he answers. And that's where I found out some information. It's not bad when someone asks. “*

*„We don't watch reality programmes. Only the clips when they fight against each other. I scream (of laughter) because it's so funny. “*

*„We're shown on television that a girl was with an older man. When they show that to us on TV, we think it's normal, because they wouldn't show abnormal things. “*

*„It (reality show) is not only on TV any more, it's on social media too. It's shared, some funny clip, yes, but watching the reality – no way. “*

*„We may not watch television, but it's online.”*

*„None of us read the newspapers. But we are always in touch with that, in the store, for example, or on the bus when a grandmother reads, I can read everything if I travel for 15 minutes. “*

*„Like social networks, newspapers are also all around us. On the phone, in the media ...”*

*„For example, a grandmother read that a certain Milojko married a girl, and he was a grandfather. When I saw it, I couldn't believe it. “*

## **Books**

Few young people have mentioned books as a source of information on sexual and reproductive health. When asked directly about that, it turned out that most had the opportunity to read books for children about puberty or other children's books that contained information about growing up and maturing. The girls mention „The Book for Every Girl”, „1000 Why 1000 Because”, encyclopaedias, and the boys mention „The Book of Puberty”, „The Book for Every Boy”, and other titles. They remember their parents bought that to them or they got books for their birthday.

*„We had one book in the house that I was not allowed to take until the eighth grade. I don't know what its name was, maybe a 'Boys' Guide.'*

*„I had the book 'Sex for Beginners' and everything was in it we learned from the seventh grade biology.”*

*„We used to buy some books through school and I bought one at that time, but I don't remember its name, and it's related to this topic.”*

*„In the sixth grade, I got a book, '100 Questions and Answers for Boys'.”*

*„My friend had a book about that; I think its name was ‘The Boys’ Handbook’. He showed me when he got it from his mom for his birthday and it was funny to us then. “*

*„Books? We are not reading. I will certainly not take the book to read about that. “*

*„I think it is good for a parent to buy a book for his/her child, because it is the most basic and yet very instructive before the menstruation, it is appropriate to that age, nicely explained. I recommend it to everyone. “*

*„A book for every girl’ was useful to us, but it has now been overcome.”*

*„I think I got the book for my birthday. I know that I found how children were born in that book when my mom got pregnant.”*

*„A book for smart girls,’ I read it at the age of 9, and I found out to some extent what that really was. I knew it was something bad, not much talked about. I knew I could not say the word ‘sex’, that it is not spoken about and that it is a part of our personal lives and taboo topic. “*

### **1.2.5 Exposure to pornographic contents**

According to the focus group participants, they had the first contact with sexually explicit contents as early as at elementary school age when they wanted to play games online or watch a film. Various commercials featuring photographs and drawings of sexual scenes „pop up” on screen when sites are opened for watching films or playing games. In addition, there are numerous sexualized contents in music videos, commercials, social networks and media. Later, children discover websites and videos with pornographic content.

*„Most often on social networks (we see pornography). We watch the film and commercial comes out because these are illegal sites - Filmovizija, Yes Movie, Popcorn, at the beginning and in the middle of the film! “*

*„We have already got used to it, when we click on a film that comes out and then I just close it pressing x, x, x. Always one and the same ad.”*

*„It’s funny to me first, and then I figure out - what is this? It’s disgusting to me and I don’t want to watch it. “*

*„To me, the worst thing is that they have games like that, that can attract children, for example, she is not dressed, she is mostly naked ... there are games, series and films of that kind and they are attracted to them from an early age ...”*

*„It bothers us, yes. It’s unpleasant. I get embarrassed when I watch that with other girls and boys, my friends, when we get out and the sounds start... or with mom and dad when we watch, or with younger brother and sister. “*

All the girls in the focus groups have had the opportunity to see pornography and this happened while they were in elementary school, about seventh or eighth grade. Here, too, there were various

advertisements on the internet. They say it caused them curiosity and confusion. Also, some of them have experienced that their parents get angry when they see that, because they suspect that they have searched for the contents themselves on the internet.

*„It was weird to me, to find that on my phone, who made it, put it, what's going on, what do I have to do with it? ... It worried me a little.“*

*„The first impression was - why would anyone do that? It bothers me now because it is more about sex rather than lovemaking, an act of trust and love. “*

*„Why are these ads coming out to me, why not a new book, a new song, but just that? And then, since the Internet is EVERYTHING today, literally everything, it is uncomfortable for some, but the impression remains somewhere it is something IMPORTANT. Since it often comes out, and when something appears often it is something big. “*

*„Parents always think it's our fault - Wow! What are you looking at?! Well mom, these are commercials, it has to be there, and then she asks me - why don't you remove that? Well it just turned up, they don't understand it ... Nooooo, it's not my fault, I'm not looking at it, and I'm clicking to close it! “*

*„I used to play a game in the elementary school, and the computer had some viruses, and my grandmother came in, and it was a chaos. I got the punishment! Grandma, it's not my fault ... and my dad told her that the computer had viruses ... ads are popping out... but grandma, when she saw it, says like, I won't tell you, but the punishment ... I still explain it today, after five years, but she doesn't accept, she has her own theory ... “*

*„It wasn't until commercials started popping up to my mom that she realized it wasn't my fault.“*

The attitude of young people towards pornographic contents is quite mature, at least among those who have been open about it. It is clear to them that pornography is an exaggerated portrayal of human sexuality and that things are not like that in real life. However, what they see and what they are exposed to raises dilemmas and additional questions.

*„Sexual intercourses are intimate relationships. That should be something between you. We, when we are this young, get into a relationship but do not immediately have sex. But they do it immediately in a reality programme. I wonder if that would be the case in real life. “*

*„It's not about feelings, it's more just sex, and we need the part where it has to be with emotions, not just with anyone.“*

*„There is a risk that young people may understand that is what intimate relationships look like. That may look rough, as if the two hate each other, not make love. “*

*„Just reason, a good attitude towards that, and not everyone has it. Realistically, how can you fight against that? I can download films, but it's not just in films. **I don't think we can defend ourselves, but we can have some attitude towards that.** “*

### 1.2.6 What it should be like – recommendations of young people

Young people need to talk, but it is important that they trust that person. They stated that it was easier for them to discuss those topics with a person of the same gender.

The boys state that it is necessary to start education as early as possible, as early as the fifth grade, because then their interest in these topics emerges. Education should last until the end of high school. They think that the boundaries for sexual intercourse have moved and that everything is happening much earlier. They would like the education to last longer and not end with just one lecture. Through continuous meetings and conversations, they expect to gain the confidence over time to talk about sensitive topics. They recommend talking with boys and girls separately, because they may be hindered to talk openly in the presence of girls. The girls also think it would be helpful to have someone they can turn to in confidence and who can give them reliable information. They like this kind of work (as in focus group), where they talk instead of listening to lectures. Both boys and girls need to express their thoughts and attitudes as well as hear what others think.

They believe that they do not have a sufficiently open relationship with their professors based on trust, so they do not see them as ideal educators. They expect educators who would deal with this topic to be younger, well informed about the topic and provide them with reliable information. It should be someone with experience, someone who knows a lot and who is an expert. They also showed an interest in becoming peer educators.

*„I would love to talk about it every day at school, not literally every day, but to talk ...”*

*„There should be education on this subject and it should start in elementary school. Education should be in a group only with boys, though we are also interested in the opinions of girls. “*

*„This (focus group) is very good to me because we are talking and there is a relaxed atmosphere among us.”*

*„I think it should be at school, not classes but some extracurricular activity.”*

***„We don't need basic information on whether to use a condom in a sexual intercourse, but we need a complete picture of everything. We know the basic things, but no one immerse deeper into the subject. “***

*„If there were girls here, neither we nor them would be relaxed, because you can never talk with them like with boys. They are interested in one, we in something else. “*

*„They come to our school regularly to inform us about first aid. In my opinion, this is much more important. They should come because of these things.”*

*„It may be better to contact someone we don't know because sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger about problems. You're thinking - I'll never see him again, never mind, I can say everything, he'll advise me. “*

*„Something like this, a lecture, a story. Maybe neither mom nor dad knows everything. “*

*„It is necessary because everyone engages into sexual intercourses now, those from the first grade. Both boys and girls. It's already late in the third. “*

*„To deal with this topic, let's go a little deeper into this topic. It's interesting and there's plenty to talk about. “*

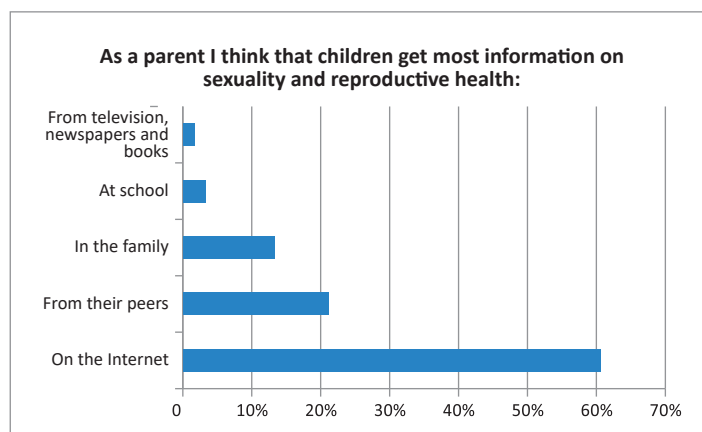
*„Maybe not everyone is open, so what matters most is what kind of approach to have. Someone's truly closed. You should be open about this topic and say what you know, and if you make a mistake, have the person correct you and tell you how to do it. “*

*„School, but let's have people who know that for sure and properly.”*

*„Someone who learnt this, who knows 100% accurate information, some of the professors, teachers, maybe some of the doctors.”*

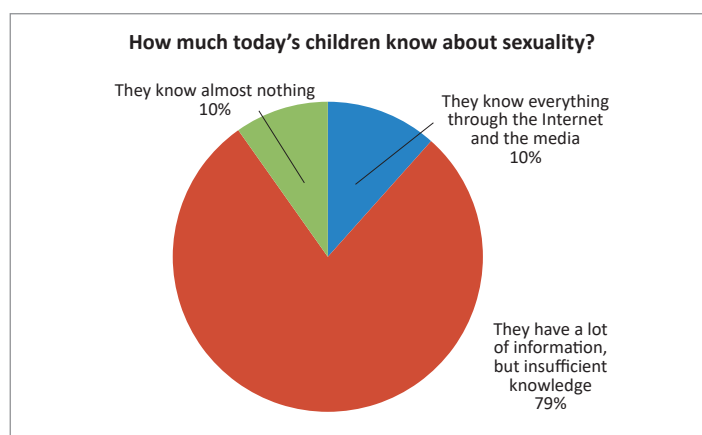
## 2. ATTITUDES OF PARENTS ON SEX EDUCATION

A survey aimed at parents was completed by 180 people. The majority of responses came from Serbia (93.9%) from 38 cities and towns<sup>13</sup>, while other responses came from cities abroad. Most responses (76/180) came from Belgrade.



Parents stated the Internet, followed by peers and family as the main source of information about sexuality and reproductive health for their children, while they least opted for school, television, newspapers and books. Only 13.3% of respondents consider family to be the place where children get the most information, although 60.7% think family should be the main source of sex education. Also, only 1.2% of respondents believe that sex education should happen online, although 60.6% estimate that the Internet is the main source of information for young people. Only 2.3% of the surveyed parents believe that peers should be a source of information, and as many believe that sex education is not necessary.

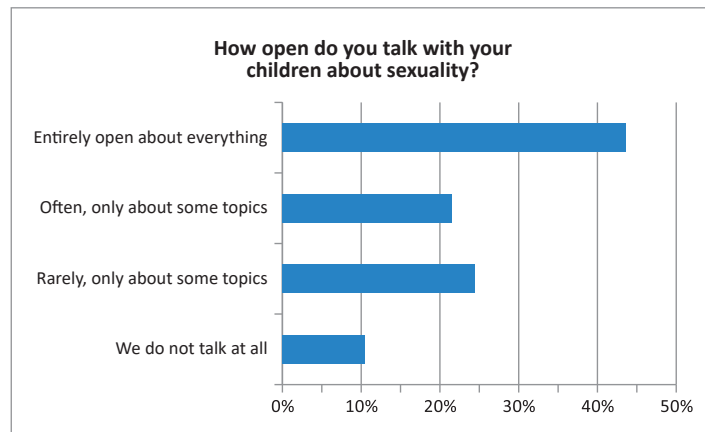
When it comes to assessing how much children know about these topics, nine out of ten surveyed believe that today's children have a lot of information but little knowledge on sexuality or that they know almost nothing about sexuality. In contrast, every tenth thinks that children know everything about sexuality through the media and the internet.



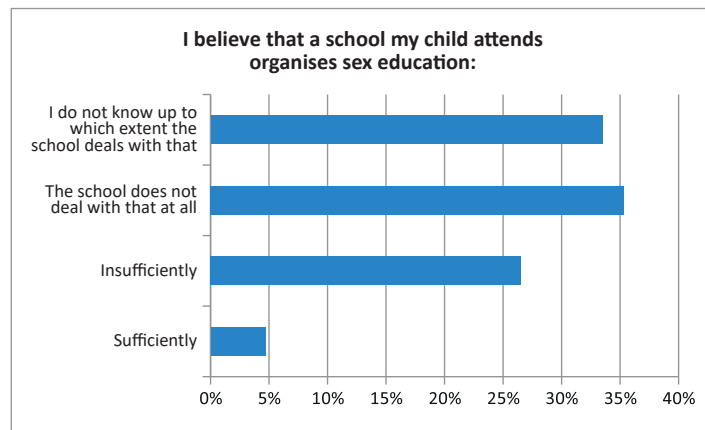
13 Mladenovac, Smederevska Palanka, Bošnjace (Lebane), Beograd, Novi Sad, Pančevo, Mladenovac, Čačak, Bajina Bašta, Sombor, Inđija, Čibukovac, Solac, Mure (Raška), Čonoplja, Subotica, Niš, Žabalj, Žagubica, Smederevo, Stara Pazova, Boljevac, Melenci, Kraljevo, Zrenjanin, Zemun, Obrenovac, Kragujevac, Ivanjica, Prokuplje, Leskovac, Jagodina, Valjevo, Guča, Vrbas, Gornji Milanovac, Bačka Palanka, Vranje



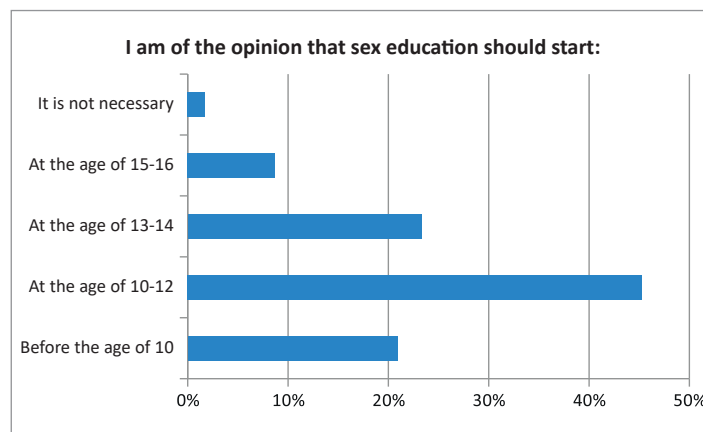
The majority of the surveyed parents (46%) stated that they talk with their children only about some topics, rarely or often. A similar number (43.6%) stated that they talk openly with children about everything, while every tenth does not talk about that at all. If we compare this data with only 13.3% of the families considering that the family is the place where young people learn the most about sexuality and reproductive health, it can be assumed that open conversation „about everything“ still rests only on topics that children and parents can discuss. There is a certain boundary between parents and children that does not allow too much intimate information to be shared.



In the opinion of parents, the school ranks second in importance for sex education, right after family. However, when asked to rate the extent to which their child’s school organizes sex education, only 4.7% said that they organized it enough, and more than a third of those surveyed said that the school did not deal with this topic at all. One third also does not know if and how many schools are involved in sex education.

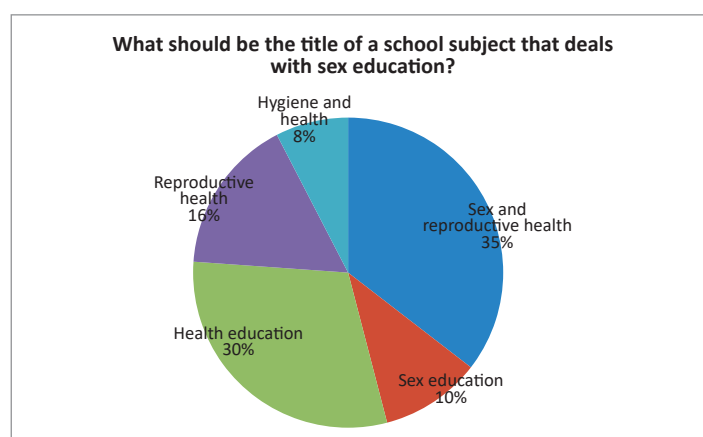


When asked when sex education should begin, the majority of respondents consider it to be between the age of 10 to 12, which corresponds to the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school; followed by ages 13 to 14 (seventh and eighth grades) and ages before 10. Only 8.7% of respondents believe that sex education should start at the age of 15 - 16, which corresponds to the first and second grades of secondary school. On the other hand, reproductive health workshops are often held at this age. The project titled „Health education on reproductive health“ that was implemented over three school years had second grade pupils in the target group.



The terms used in the field of sex education reflect the social norms and taboos that exist in this field. That is why in the survey we asked what should be the name of a school subject/course dealing with sex education. Of the five answers offered, four contained the term „health” in their title and two the word „sexual/sex”. We wanted to check how much the parents are „bothered” by the term „sexual/sex” in the potential title of the subject/course, and how desirable it is for the title of the subject/course to include the word „health.”

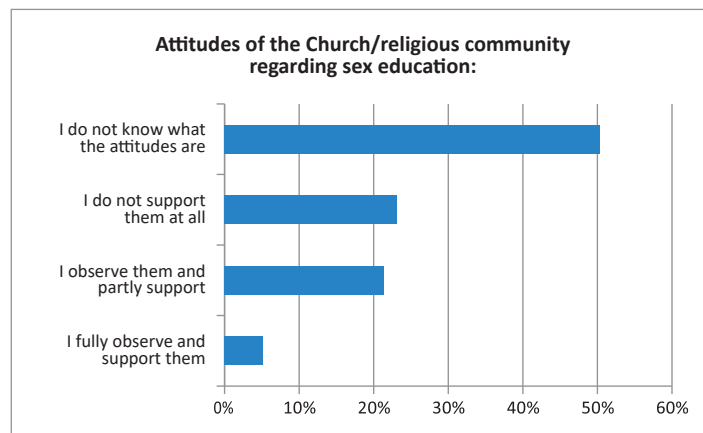
The largest number (65.7%) of the respondents opted for the titles „Sexual and reproductive health” and „Health education”, while every tenth respondent voted for the title „Sex education”. A total of 54.1% opted for titles that do not contain the word „sexual/sex”. Such responses could also be interpreted as the parents’ desire for the focus of this education to be on health, and also as a degree of hesitation in using the term „sexual/sex” in the context of children’s education.



When it comes to topics that sex education should cover, the majority (89.6% and 89%) chose the topics „Puberty, reproductive organs, how pregnancy occurs” and „Contraception and protection against sexually transmitted diseases”. Also, a larger number of respondents (66.5% and 65.9%) chose the topics „Personal relations, falling in love and love, self-esteem” and „Abortion, LGBT, safer sex, sexual violence”. The fewest choices (43.4% and 41.6%) were for the topics „Human reproductive rights” and „Sex, gender and gender related issues”.

More than a half of the respondents (56.4%) would agree that for their child to attend a sexual and reproductive health education programme organised by a non-governmental organisation if they

were previously familiar with the topics. A quarter (24.4%) said that without a dilemma they would agree, one in eight was not sure (13.4%), while 5.8% said „No“.



We were interested to know the extent to which parents' opinions on this topic are influenced by the views of their religious community. Half of those surveyed said they did not know what their views were, while a quarter said they did not support them at all. One fifth appreciates and partially supports the views of the religious community to which it belongs, while only 5.2% fully respects and supports these views.

When it comes to the Serbian Orthodox Church, some opinions and views on sex education can be read on the „Orthodox Parent“ website for parents and children. On the one hand, there is a disagreement with the introduction of a school subject on sex education because it is considered to „normalize sexual relations among teenagers“ rather than to promote abstinence until marriage. On the other hand, parents are instructed that they should have a „proper, healthy attitude towards the issues of love and sexuality“ and discuss it with their children. As the website states, „in contemporary conditions it is unreasonable to avoid these issues in everyday conversations (...).A child will encounter them anyway in everyday life: magazines at newsstands, billboard advertisements, passer-by conversations, etc. (...) Information should be given in a dosed manner, in accordance with the child's age. Never deceiving, but also not blaming the child for what it alone, because of its age, is unable to understand and feel. (...) Full information on the issues of the male and female organism and conception should be discovered in early adolescence“<sup>14</sup>.

14 <http://www.pravoslavniroditelj.org/kako-pravilno-razgovarati-sa-detetom-o-polnim-odnosima> (how to talk properly with a child about sexual intercourse)

# CONCLUSIONS

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A survey on adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health information was conducted as a qualitative study in five local communities in Serbia. Therefore, its results cannot be interpreted as representative of the entire adolescent population, but are indicative and reflect the views and opinions of 15-year-olds interviewed in Kula, Ruski Krstur, Novi Sad, Vladičin Han and Surdulica. We obtained additional data through an online survey the results of which were also not representative but provided insight into the opinions and attitudes of the parents surveyed.

The survey has shown that sexual and reproductive health related topics have been of interest to adolescents since the upper elementary school years. The boys show this interest more openly and point out that sexuality is one of the most important topics for them. The girls are more enclosed and hesitate to show interest; they guess that there are certain risks and dangers for them in this field, and one of the risks is the mere recognition that they are interested in these topics.

From an early elementary school age, children are confronted with sexually explicit content - pictures, recordings, captions. Sex scenes ads „pop up“ when sites for watching films and playing games open. On the Internet, young people are exposed daily to scenes from reality programmes, pictures and headlines from the tabloids, even though they do not watch television or read newspapers. The content listed above causes them to be curious, confused and uncomfortable.

Who do young people turn to when they have questions and concerns about sexual and reproductive health? The survey found that the main sources of information are the **peers, the Internet and parents**. All other sources - television, radio, books, newspapers and magazines - are hardly present in the daily lives of young people. An exception are the books for children with information about puberty that most have read at an earlier age.

**The Internet is the most accessible and widely used source of information.** All young people use it, most often via smartphone. They follow the popular „Youtubers“ on the Internet (Muđa, Janko, Baka Prase and others), exchange video clips and visit various sites, including pornographic ones. Many are scared to search the Internet through Google because search results upset and scare them. Most use message exchange and social networking applications; Instagram is currently the most popular. Young people search the Internet in English as well, because that is how they can find a lot more information. The main advantage of the Internet is that it is easy accessible and the main disadvantage is that young people **have little trust** in it because they cannot evaluate what is credible and what is not. Parents surveyed consider the Internet to be a major but not good source of information on sexual and reproductive health.

**Peers** are an important resource for sharing information and experiences for young people, but they can also be a source of peer pressure, and sometimes violence. Boys talk more freely with other boys, while they leave confidential topics only for the best male friends. Girls do not have much confidence in their female friends because they fear that the content of their conversations

may be passed on to others. They are especially careful that confidential information about them does not reach the social networks. Both are careful not to violate the unwritten rules of their peer group so as not to be ridiculed and condemned.

Young people **trust their parents and family most** and consider them a reliable source of information on sexual and reproductive health. They believe that their closest ones want the best for them and will give them good advice because they are knowledgeable and experienced enough in this field. Most parents surveyed were of the opinion that sex education should take place in the family in the first place. As opposed to that, the survey has shown that in the majority of adolescents' families, they talk about these topics rarely and little, and the conversation comes down to jokes and general advice. The parents themselves are aware of this. Young people emphasize that parental support is very necessary and important and should exist in every family.

Most young people do not consider **school and teachers** an important source of information on sexual and reproductive health. Most parents surveyed agree with this. The school is not a place where these topics are discussed, while most of the teachers are perceived as disinterested and ignorant. Young people, on the other hand, believe that sex and reproductive health education should be organized at school, but outside of regular curricula and continuously, by experienced professionals. Parents also believe that school should be the second source of sex education, right after the family, from the fifth and sixth grade of elementary school.

**Gender stereotypes** are highly present in the thinking and attitudes of boys and girls. One of the most frequently mentioned is that girls are more mature than boys and therefore more responsible, serious and diligent, and boys remain immature and irresponsible for a long time. Boys are more turned to fun and having good time, while girls are more concerned about the consequences. The environment encourages boys to have as much experience as possible, and instructs girls to look after and take care. The double standards are well-known to young people and they generally behave according to them.

Nine out of ten parents surveyed said today's children have a lot of information but **insufficient knowledge** or they know almost nothing about sexuality. Young people evaluate their own knowledge of sexual and reproductive health as mediocre, equally girls and boys, young people from the countryside and young people from the city. Talking to them indicates that they do not know the basic facts about reproduction and that they are not sure what contraception is. Young people believe it useful to get verified and accurate information about what they do not know, but are interested in and what they need at that age.

The following main **conclusions** can be drawn from the above:

- Love and sexuality are among the **central topics that occupy adolescents**. Young people's curiosity and interest in these topics begins well before they become sexually active. Adults may misinterpret their questions as a „warning sign“ and a hint that they plan to engage in sexual intercourse early. This misunderstanding in communication can discourage young people from asking questions and adults from giving information and support on time.

- Young people **do not have access to adequate support** in understanding this important area of life. There is little talk about these topics at school. The peers are equally ignorant and confused. Parents tend to think that children are too young to be interested in these topics. Despite the abundance of readily available information on the Internet, young people lack guidance and explanation in understanding various contents.
- **Trust** is an important factor in education of young people about sexual and reproductive health. Often, the sources of information available are not those that young people trust: they consider peers to know not much and exaggerate, they consider the Internet an unreliable source, they suspect that parents do not know everything, and perceive teachers as ignorant and unmotivated. In an abundance of information, young people often remain confused because they cannot judge for themselves whether something is correct, true and good for them. Distrust in the available sources of information contributes to closeness, prejudice and even greater ignorance.
- Young people grow up **under pressure** from peers, family and society to act in accordance with their gender roles. For boys, this means openly showing interest in girls, having early sexual intercourse and gaining as much experience as possible, and for girls a „ban“ on being interested in these topics and a burden of responsibility to protect themselves against the unwanted consequences. In the field of sexual and reproductive health, these unwritten rules put both girls and boys at risk.
- There are **double standards and rigid norms** in our society when it comes to youth sexuality. On the one hand, there is a society's „concern“ that children are not exposed to sexual and reproductive health education too early and a tendency to avoid many topics in this field as too sensitive. On the other hand, young people's interest in these topics exists as part of the normal process of growing up. Children and young people have been exposed to numerous sexually explicit contents from the media and the Internet from an early age, but they are made aware that these topics are not to be discussed. Young people are confused by the conflicting messages; they are expected to somehow manage on their own and avoid the many pitfalls and risks of ignorance and prejudice. The lack of will to introduce sex education into the education system and the „moral panic“ that has accompanied the rare attempts to change it in the media so far are a picture of the superficial and irresponsible attitude of our society towards this important area for young people.
- **Parents lack support** to better understand the adolescents' developmental trajectory, sexual and reproductive health education goals, and their own role in the process. Because of this, some remain completely closed to discussing these topics, and some who would like to be helpful to their children do not know what an attitude they should take and how to initiate a conversation on that topic.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the results of this survey, the following **recommendations** can be made to all the relevant stakeholders involved in the upbringing, education, health and promotion of the status of young people in society:

- Young people should be given **access to comprehensive, verified and accurate information** on sexual and reproductive health. Comprehensiveness implies all the important topics that fall within the field of sexual and reproductive health. Access to information should be provided through the channels of communication used by young people - first and foremost is the Internet that everyone uses, namely social networks and media, applications and other.
- The peers have an important role in informing young people, so this resource should be enhanced through **education of peer educators**. Interested young people, through training and additional support, can become a reliable source of information in their immediate environment - at school, local youth office or youth association. Peer educators can also bring closer and recommend educational content from the Internet and other resources to other young people.
- Information on sexual and reproductive health should be **tailored to the attention and interest of young people** using simple language and understandable terms; using shorter texts, pictures, animations and videos; interactive contents such as games and quizzes; contents marketed by popular „Youtubers“ (songs, statements, interviews), etc.
- In addition to dissemination of information, **professional support should be provided to young people** in properly understanding topics related to this field, reaching conclusions and forming the right attitudes. This support involves continuous work with young people to encourage and motivate them to think, exchange views, seek answers, and use additional resources. Sexual and reproductive health educators, whether teachers and professors, healthcare professionals, psychologists, associates from civil society organisations or other educated professionals, should play a key role in this process.
- It is necessary **to provide support to parents** to properly support their children in the field of sexual and reproductive health. Parents should be informed and educated about the process of child development into a young adult and their role in the process. It is important for young people to be accepted and supported by the family in an area of life that is intimate and sensitive. The closeness they feel to their parents is a valuable resource for discussing confidential issues. At the same time, it is important for parents to observe and respect the privacy of adolescents as an expression of their increasing independence in the growing up process.

- Because of their important role in the education and upbringing of young people, the teaching and professional staff of elementary and secondary schools have a unique opportunity to be the support to young people also in the field of sexual and reproductive health. **Support should therefore be given to school staff** to understand the content and objectives of educating young people about sexual and reproductive health and their role in the process. Messages related to feelings, romantic relationships, communication, gender roles, prevention of violence, respect for rights and other topics can be conveyed to young people through various subjects and activities at school. The prerequisite for this is the motivation and preparedness of the school staff.
- In providing the support to young people (in the form of education, counselling and other), support to parents and those who work with young people it is necessary to rely on **locally available resources**. Activities can be organized at school, during regular classes and extracurricular activities, or within the work of the parents' council; at local youth offices and youth clubs; in pupils' dormitories; associations and informal youth groups; organizations working with young people; in youth counselling centres in health centres; in psychological counselling, etc.
- Activities on **introducing sex education into the education and upbringing system** of the Republic of Serbia should be continued, relying on the results and positive experiences from pilot projects implemented in the previous period. In this field, the first important steps have already been taken on defining the curriculum, preparing the manual and educating the trainers, and therefore the activities in the forthcoming period should continue from the point that has been reached. The public should be properly informed about the long-term importance of information and education for young people in this field.



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