



## Sexual Wellbeing and Pleasure

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The World Health Organization defines sexual health as: *'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled'*<sup>1</sup>.

FPA believes:

1. All people are sexual beings.
2. Sexual health is important to individuals, relationships and societal wellbeing.
3. Sexual behaviour should never result in exploitation, oppression, physical, emotional or psychological harm.
4. Everyone should have access to accurate, high quality sexual health information, education and services.
5. Everyone should be able to exercise his or her reproductive rights.
6. All sexualities should be respected and accepted.
7. Everyone should have the ability and responsibility to manage their own sexual health.
8. Self-esteem, confidence and communication skills are very important to healthy relationships.

Sex and sexuality are central parts of people's lives and it is vital that everyone is able to access the information, education and services they need to make informed choices about their sexual health and their relationships, including choosing whether and when to have sex and who to have sex with. Discussions around sexual health often only focus on prevention of infection and unplanned pregnancy which are necessary but can be negative if they exclude acknowledgement or discussion of sexual pleasure. Sexuality is not merely a vehicle for reproduction and people should be able to enjoy their sexuality independent of reproduction.

FPA believes that sexual behaviour should never result in exploitation, oppression or physical, emotional or psychological harm. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that the sexual activity they engage in is freely and fully consensual. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that their activities do not

harm someone else. FPA wants to help establish a society in which everyone can enjoy their sexual health free from prejudice and harm.

Sexual pleasure is an important part of most people's relationships. Research suggests that the pursuit of pleasure is one of the primary reasons people have sex<sup>2</sup>. Sex is different for everyone; different people enjoy different things and what people find pleasurable will change over time. How people feel about sex and the choices they make can be affected by a variety of individual physical, emotional and external factors. For this reason, FPA is committed to encouraging a positive, open and holistic approach to sex, sexuality, sexual health and sexual pleasure by providing information, training and other services which openly discuss all aspects of sexuality and sexual health and wellbeing.

FPA recognises that some people may feel that their sexuality is marginalised or ignored. This may be the case for older people or people with physical impairments or learning disabilities as well as people with long term illnesses. In many cases, people's sexual health needs are not considered when they receive health or social care, for example when they enter residential care or go into hospital. In addition, media portrayals of sexuality can be exclusively focused on young people and non-disabled people. FPA is committed to promoting greater recognition and acceptance of the variety of ways people express their sexuality. Equally, FPA encourages recognition and acceptance of everyone's right to express and enjoy their sexuality regardless of ability, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion or culture.

Some people may have physical or psychological sexual dysfunctions which have a significant impact on them, their enjoyment of their sexuality and their relationships and it is important that they are able to access appropriate support and services where this is the case<sup>3</sup>.

Information can play an important role in enabling people to maintain their sexual wellbeing and to enjoy their sexuality. If people are aware of when they are putting themselves at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies and how to avoid this they can make informed choices. Using a suitable method of contraception can help people feel more confident which can improve the chances of enjoyment. While we understand that information alone is not sufficient to ensure people enjoy the sexual activity they choose to engage in, FPA believes information about sexual wellbeing and sexual pleasure needs to be more widely available through a variety of sources to ensure that people are able to make informed choices about how they protect their sexual health and how they enjoy their sexuality, understanding that these two factors are not mutually exclusive.

FPA recognises that misconceptions and unrealistic expectations about sex can have a detrimental impact on people's relationships and their sexual pleasure. People can be influenced by the portrayals of sex in the media, in films and on

television which can lead them to have concerns about whether they are 'normal' or to have unrealistic views about relationships and sexuality. For example, some young people are concerned that they have to look a certain way in order to be seen as attractive because of the images they see in magazines or are concerned about their own sexual activity because of the way sex is portrayed in pornography. Currently many public notions of sexual pleasure focus on penetrative heterosexual sex ignoring not only other sexual orientations but also pleasure which can be derived through various other activities. FPA encourages the media and professionals including doctors, nurses and teachers to communicate honestly and positively about sexual wellbeing and pleasure, including discussing the realities and complexities of sexual relationships.

Confidence and self-esteem have a huge impact on sexual wellbeing and pleasure. FPA believes that, if people are confident they are more likely to make their own decisions about and discuss using contraception with their partners. They are also more likely to feel comfortable discussing what they enjoy with their partners and feel able to say no to things they do not enjoy. However, FPA is aware that very few people feel able to talk about sexual pleasure and what they do and do not enjoy, even with their regular partners. Some people can be very physically intimate with a partner but not have the same level of intimacy in their verbal communication. This lack of confidence can have an impact on their enjoyment of their sexual relationship and on their sexual wellbeing. FPA wants to encourage more confident communication about sexual wellbeing and pleasure, including within relationships.

There needs to be recognition that even within relationships where partners feel fully confident to talk about what they find pleasurable, sex will not necessarily be as pleasurable every time because of the variety of factors which can affect how people feel. We recognise that messages about sexual pleasure can often obscure the reality of relationships and add to the pressure people feel about whether their own sexual activity is normal. FPA is committed to being an accurate and honest source of information about sexual wellbeing and pleasure and we also encourage other organisations, including the NHS, to ensure that high quality information and support is widely available.

FPA recognises that there can sometimes be strong cultural and social messages that sex is not something people, particularly women, should enjoy. This can lead to prejudice around people's sexuality and can prevent some people from making safe choices about their sexual wellbeing by creating an impression that it is not something they have a say in or should talk about. FPA believes notions of sexual pleasure should be more openly acknowledged as integral to wellbeing to try to overcome some of these messages. This includes highlighting the fact that discussing sexual wellbeing and pleasure can improve people's health and wellbeing overall.

FPA believes comprehensive sex and relationships education (SRE) for young people should equip them to enjoy sex and relationships that are based on qualities such as mutual respect, trust, negotiation and enjoyment; this includes discussing sexual pleasure. It is important that SRE enables young people to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to make informed choices about sex and relationships. Limiting discussions in SRE to preventing infections and pregnancies gives young people a skewed and unrealistic view of sexual wellbeing as something which is separate from sexual pleasure. This can lead to them taking risks with their sexual health in pursuit of what they perceive to be more enjoyable experiences. Talking more openly about sexual pleasure with young people can also help to protect them from abuse and exploitation. If they understand that sex is something which should be consensual and pleasurable they are more likely to be able to identify and respond to abuse. Young people live in a sexualised society in which they receive mixed messages about human sexuality and behaviour, which can be detrimental to their wellbeing. FPA is committed to combating these mixed messages through providing accurate information for young people. We also urge the Government and teacher training organisations to include training on SRE in initial teacher training and in-service training and to ensure that this includes strategies to enable teachers to lead discussions around sexual pleasure in an appropriate way, including being positive about sex, even when discussing risks.

There are opportunities for health professionals to discuss issues around sexual pleasure with people who seek sexual health advice, for example when people access STI testing or contraceptive advice. However, very few professionals act on these opportunities. In part this may be because of their own concerns about discussing sexual pleasure but may also be due to a lack of knowledge about how to respond to people who say they are not enjoying their sexual activity. FPA recognises that there is a need for more sexual health training for professionals and we urge providers of undergraduate and postgraduate training for health professionals to ensure that a holistic approach to sexual wellbeing, including sexual pleasure is included in their training programmes and that these are widely available to health professionals. Professionals will require training to enable them to develop the skills and confidence to broach sexual wellbeing and pleasure in an appropriate way. FPA believes this is crucial to ensuring that notions of enjoyment and sexual pleasure are seen as an integral part of people's sexual wellbeing and something professionals consider when individuals access services.

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**References:**

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, *Defining Sexual Health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health 28-31 January 2002* (Geneva: WHO, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Philpott A, Knerr W and Boydell V, 'Pleasure and prevention: when good sex is safer sex', *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol 14, number 28 (2006), 23-31

<sup>3</sup> See the FPA policy statement on sexual dysfunction