In 2005, fpa marks its 75th anniversary. As part of the reflection on our development and achievements since 1930, we commissioned some new qualitative and quantitative research to explore how people today perceive the changes that have occurred in the nature of families, relationships and sex over the course of our history. The findings have been illuminating, says report author Caroline Davey, not only reflecting back on how far we have come in the last 75 years but also highlighting the challenges still ahead for the next 75 years.
Executive summary

There is consensus across the generations that there have been a number of very significant and positive changes since the 1930s: there is now much greater equality between men and women, and more freedom and opportunity for young people to make their own choices in life. The moral and societal restrictions of 75 years ago have been replaced by an acceptance of a much wider range of relationships, family structures and behaviour.

The family remains important, but there is now a more fluid concept of what constitutes ‘the family’. Relationships between parents and children have become more open and equal, with greater discussion within the family about issues relating to sex and relationships. Overall there is strong support for the fact that there is now much more information available for young people about sex and relationships, which has helped to remove much of the fear of puberty and sexual relations which was so prevalent 75 years ago.

There is now much greater openness and tolerance around all aspects of sex, and people of all ages voice overwhelming support for the developments which have helped to promote greater equality between men and women in terms of sex. In particular, the availability of contraception and abortion are seen as important steps in enabling women to make their own choices about their lives. Overall, sex is perceived to have become more fun, and there is far greater emphasis on sexual pleasure and fulfilment. This is seen to have been particularly beneficial for women, who have become much more confident and in control of their sex lives.

However, there is still a need for further changes to ensure that everyone enjoys sexual health. People need to have better preparation at an early stage in order to develop successful relationships in later life; this includes better and more comprehensive sex and relationships education in schools, covering emotions, the realities of relationships, and the promotion of confidence and self-esteem. People must then learn to take greater responsibility for their own and their partners’ sexual and emotional health, both in terms of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections, and in terms of respecting and valuing their sexual partners.

Overall there is a strong belief that the changes and developments we have seen in family life, relationships and sex over the last 75 years have been overwhelmingly positive, but there is also recognition that there are areas which could - and should - be improved further to ensure that everyone is able to benefit from sexual health, for life.

Introduction

fpa (Family Planning Association) celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2005. Over the course of its history there have been significant changes in society, not least in the nature of families, sex and relationships, and fpa has been closely involved with many of these changes.

In order to mark our anniversary we were keen to reflect on how society has changed over the last 75 years, and on the new challenges it faces over the next 75 years. We have come a long way in sexual health since 1930, but what more do we need to do? We wanted to hear both from people who have lived through the dramatic changes of the 20th century, and from young people who have grown up already accustomed to many of the freedoms for which their parents and grandparents fought.

We therefore commissioned an initial stage of qualitative research, followed up by quantitative research, to explore these issues, understand society’s attitudes towards these changes, and consider people’s hopes and fears for the future.

Research methodology

In August 2004, fpa commissioned research consultancy Opinion Leader Research (OLR) to carry out qualitative research to explore perceptions of the changing nature of families, sex and relationships, in particular the similarities and differences between younger and older age groups. OLR carried out a series of in-depth interviews and small discussion groups with participants in two distinct age groups: 16-24 year olds - divided into 16-18 year olds and 19-24 year olds - and the over-55s - divided into 55-69 year olds and those
over 70. Research participants were stratified by gender and socio-economic group, and were interviewed in three locations across England.

Following the qualitative research, OLR carried out a quantitative survey to test the hypotheses identified during the first stage of research. The quantitative survey was carried out in October 2004 amongst a sample of 1,008 adults across Great Britain, broadly representative of the population as a whole.

**Key findings: Family**

**THEN...**

Older research participants recall growing up in a family environment very different from the one experienced by their children and grandchildren. In the 1930s, society was still dominated by Victorian and Edwardian moral codes about family, relationships and sex, and children were subject to much stricter rules from their parents and family.

“You were brought up to fit in with the family life and you were living a life which was really being run by your parents and you were fitting into that life. You didn’t have your own life - you just fitted into the family.”

Male, 55-69, BC1C2, Manchester

“I don’t know, the times were different then so the relationships between parents was different, my mum for example...she left school at 14, got a job and was working and she’d come home and give most of her salary to her parents.”

Male, 19-24, DE, London

However, despite the control exercised over young people’s lives, families were perceived to be much closer 75 years ago, both geographically and emotionally. Strong family ties were maintained across generations and across the extended family group.

“In those days...families were very close - much closer than they are today, you know? Every Friday the family came to dinner - the whole family - and it was bonding, you know?”

Male, 70+, BC1C2, London

**AND NOW...**

It is clear that family continues to be important to people today - 87% of those surveyed agree that ‘my relationship with my family is the most important relationship in my life’. Many young people stress how important their family is to them, and outline aspirations to have a family like their own in the future.

“My own personal experience of family is quite a close unit, sticks together.”

Male, 16-18, BC1C2, Manchester

Moreover, there is a strong sense that parents and children now have more open and equal relationships, and are more likely to talk honestly with each other. 76% agree that ‘a parent needs to earn their child’s trust and respect’, and 41% agree that ‘children and parents have much better relationships with one another now than they did 75 years ago’.

“My daughter and my wife particularly can talk about anything...I think it's a good thing.”

Male, 55-69, BC1C2, Manchester

“My children are my friends, we talk to each other about anything and everything.”

Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

People also perceive that definitions of what constitutes a family have changed over the years. There is no single definition of what is an ‘acceptable’ family unit; rather, it is normal for there to be a much wider range of relationships and family structures, including unmarried couples, lesbian and
Key findings: Relationships

THEN...
All generations agree that there were very specific expectations of men and women 75 years ago. Young women were expected to be demure and chaste, and young men were expected to behave honourably towards women. For both men and women, sex was only seen as an element of married life.

“You couldn’t go to bed with a man. Oh murder that would be! No! I was very good.”
Female, 70+, DE, London

“In my day, to go out with a girl you’d have to go through a lot of preparation. It was like you had to walk her to the door. She had to be home early, do you know what I mean? And you’d have to give it your best show, and you’d go to see her parents, and all that jazz.”
Male, 70+, DE Manchester

Both men and women were also expected to behave in a certain way, and to follow their parents’ wishes in terms of getting and staying married. Older research participants, in particular, emphasised that this situation caused great unhappiness to those pressured into an unwanted marriage, or those compelled to stay with an abusive or violent spouse.

AND NOW...
There is a strong sense that there is now much greater equality between men and women in all aspects of life, including relationships, and this is seen as an enormously positive development. In particular, this means that young women have more opportunities and are able to make their own free choices about their relationships, as well as about their lives more broadly.

“Because they’re not sort of tied down with kids at an early age, they’ve got their life, they’re having a bit more life and then when they’re seen a bit of something, travelled round, then they’re more ready to settle down.”
Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

“Even if the couple didn’t get on...they stayed together. They stayed tight, through thick and thin. I remember couples that are friends of mine, the women and their fellows had different lives, you know, but he always came home at night.”
Male, 70+, BC1C2, London

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Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

“And yeah they’re more independent, they can say, ‘I don’t want to be with this man’, whereas before it was like the man took you, you were his wife, so it was his choice whether he left you or not.”
Male, 19-24, DE, London

There are now considered to be far fewer societal codes about what is and is not deemed to be an acceptable relationship, just as there is much greater acceptance of a wide diversity of family structures. Marriage is no longer seen as a necessity for couples, particularly among younger age groups - although overall 46% agree that ‘marriage is just as relevant now as it was 75 years ago’, among 18-24 year olds more disagree (40%) than agree (35%) with this statement.

Similarly, there is far greater acceptance of homosexual relationships now, and again this is particularly the case for younger age groups. Overall there is a balance between those in favour of and against lesbians and gay men being allowed to marry - 38% agree, 38% disagree - but this is closely correlated with age. 60% of 18-24 year olds and 52% of 25-34 year olds agree that ‘lesbians and gay men should be allowed to marry’, compared with 20% of 65-74 year olds and 22% of the over-75s.

Key findings: Sex

THEN...
It is clear that sex was a strictly taboo subject 75 years ago - none of the older participants in the
qualitative research could recall their parents ever openly discussing sex or sexual health with them. There was also no formal sex education at school, and young people had to rely on playground gossip for information. In the absence of any reliable or accurate information, many older people recount how frightening it was for them when they started going through puberty, and later when they had their first sexual experience.

“It was just never mentioned at all. And if it was on the telly it was always turned off.”

Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

“I can remember starting my periods when I was 11, not being told a thing about it...I had to like come downstairs in the morning in my pyjamas covered in blood...I was sent out of the room when my dad came home from work and he’d be eating his evening meal and my mum would say ‘she’s a woman now’, and my dad didn’t look at me, no eye contact, ‘mmm keep yourself clean, keep away from boys’, that was it. Nothing else was ever discussed about anything.”

Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

“We never had sex education at school or anything like that so all that you learnt you learnt from your mates round you really. Or reading books.”

Female, 70+, BC1C2, Birmingham

There were also much stricter moral codes around sexual behaviour; sex outside marriage and infidelity within marriage were both considered to be shameful and sinful. Gay sex was still illegal, and gay men risked jail if they were known to be having sex. Those who did transgress in any aspect of sexual behaviour were strongly vilified, and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour was thought to bring shame on the whole family. This feeling of shame manifested itself most strongly in families where a daughter had a child outside marriage - in many cases, daughters were sent away and children were adopted or raised by relatives.

“When I worked in the psychiatric unit there were a lot of women there that were put in a home because they’d had children and they were forgotten about and they [were aged] 40 and 50 in there.”

Female, 55-69, DE, Manchester

There is a sense that there was little or no concept of female sexual pleasure 75 years ago - rather, women were expected to ‘lie back and think of England’. This tied in closely with the subordination of women across all spheres of life: in the bedroom, at home, and in the workplace.

“I don’t know, I think [older] women in relationships were a lot more repressed so they felt they had to be in the relationships, they didn’t have a choice, it might not have been out of love.”

Male, 19-24, DE, London

AND NOW...

There is strong agreement across the generations that modern-day society is much more open and tolerant about sex – people are more knowledgeable about sex, there is more and better information available, and there tends to be much greater dialogue within families about sex and sexual health. This climate of increased openness around sex and sexuality is perceived to have diminished the fear around puberty and first sexual experience, although some young people still admit to finding both of these experiences scary.

“I talk to my son, we’re very open. I discussed it with them, that didn’t bother me at all because they had sex education at school anyway so that didn’t bother me talking to them about it.”

Female, 70+, BC1C2, Birmingham

People are overwhelmingly positive about the technological developments which have helped to promote greater equality between men and women in terms of sex, in particular the revolution in the availability of contraception which has happened between 1930 and the present day. 73% agree that ‘oral contraception [the pill] has liberated women’, and this percentage is even higher among older age groups who remember what life was like before contraception was freely available: 82% of 55-64 year olds, 80% of 45-54 year olds, and 75% of 75-74 year olds agree with this statement, compared with 61% of 18-24 year olds. Similarly, 71% agree that ‘emergency contraception is a real benefit for women’, and again, agreement is highest among older age groups, with 77% of the over-75s agreeing with this statement compared with 63% of 18-24 year olds.

“Well I think a lot of it altered when the pill became available so women were free sort of thing weren’t they to go round, like the men were so to speak.”

Female, 70+, BC1C2, Birmingham

There is also widespread agreement that the legalisation of abortion has been an important step in enabling women, in particular, to determine their own lives, and there is clear recognition that abortion is a valid choice to which all women are entitled - 71% of those surveyed agree that ‘women should have the right to choose whether or not to continue with their pregnancy’.

Overall, sex is perceived to have become more fun for both men and women, and there is a far greater emphasis on sexual
pleasure and fulfilment - 66% agree that ‘people have more fun sexually now than they did 75 years ago’. Women, in particular, are seen to have benefited from changing societal attitudes towards sexual relations, and have far greater sexual freedom and enjoyment than they did 75 years ago.

“I’m sure men have always enjoyed sex through the years. Women specifically I think enjoy sex a lot more now than the older generation did.”
Male, 16-18, BC1C2, Manchester

Key findings: Sex in the media

Greater equality in all aspects of life is perceived to have extended into the bedroom. Indeed, some people perceive that a more sexually explicit media - from the days of Cosmopolitan and She magazines in the 1970s right through to 21st century television programmes such as Sex and the City and Footballers’ Wives - has meant that women have become increasingly confident and in control of their sex lives. 69% of those surveyed agree that ‘the media is encouraging women to be more sexually confident and in control’, and almost a third (31%) agree that ‘women have the upper hand in sexual relationships nowadays’. Interestingly, this perception is highest among 25-34 year olds (37%) - the age group at which the most explicit magazines and TV programmes are aimed - and is lowest among 65-74 (25%) and over-75 (22%) year olds.

“I think the girls control the situation now personally. It’s like the Spice Girls, isn’t it? The media and girl power. They’re taken more seriously because of equality and stuff.”
Male, 16-18, BC1C2, Manchester

In this context, there is a sense that the spotlight is now on men to see if they are up to the challenge of satisfying women’s needs and demands - 52% agree that ‘men are under more pressure to perform sexually now than they were 75 years ago’. >
Looking forward to the next 75 years: fresh challenges, fresh solutions

The research shows that there is a consensus across the generations that there have been a lot of positive developments in sex, relationships and the family over the last 75 years. However, there is still a need for further changes to ensure that everyone benefits from good sexual health throughout their lives.

Doing the groundwork: preparing strong foundations

It is clear from the research that there is a real need for people to have better preparation at an early stage for developing strong and successful relationships in later life.

Putting the ‘R’ into SRE

This preparation should start with comprehensive sex and relationships education (SRE), covering the emotional as well as the physical side of sex and relationships. There is growing demand for this to start earlier in order to meet young people’s needs: 56% agree that ‘primary school children should receive appropriate education on sex and relationships in school’, and agreement is highest (59%) among those age groups most likely to have primary school age children, the 35-44 and 45-54 year olds.

Promoting confidence and self-esteem

It is also vitally important that SRE - within the broader framework of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) - addresses issues of confidence and self-esteem. Young people, in particular, are vulnerable to the effects of peer pressure and high expectations, which can be overwhelming if they are not confident enough in themselves and their own judgement to resist this pressure.

“If you don’t have sex with him then you’re seen as weak and if all your friends have done it as well they’re going to think there’s something wrong with you. You feel pressured into doing it so you have to do it to be in with the crowd.”

Female, 16–18, DE, Birmingham

“Well a lot of men they say in the papers are not so confident now women have become more confident...and that’s a sad state of affairs really because there’s been more men under the age of 28 I think it was that have committed suicide because they haven’t felt confident in themselves or there’s been something lacking.”

Female, 70+, BC1C2, Birmingham

Exploring the realities of relationships

In order to prepare people effectively for future relationships, there is a need for greater discussion of the realities of relationships, both within SRE and in wider discussions and media comment about sex and relationships. Currently, 58% agree that ‘sexual relationships are more likely to break down now than they were 75 years ago as young people have unrealistic expectations of them’.

The research clearly shows that young people aspire to have long-lasting relationships, but that expectations about behaviour have changed. In this context, there needs to be a move towards balancing out people’s expectations of the realities of long-term relationships.

Taking responsibility

It is important that people are equipped with the knowledge, skills and values to prepare them for the complexities of sex and relationships in the modern world. Once thus equipped, there is a need for people to take responsibility for their own...
and others’ sexual and emotional wellbeing.

Responsibility for yourself and for your sexual partner

It is encouraging to see that 91% of those surveyed agree that ‘men have the same responsibility as women to use contraception during sex’. As we have seen, there is now much greater equality between men and women in all aspects of life, including sex and relationships. There is clearly now a consensus that contraceptive use is a shared responsibility between sexual partners.

However, beyond contraception, there is some concern that other aspects of sexual health are more likely to be neglected. Currently, 46% agree that ‘sexually explicit TV shows (like Sex and the City and Footballers’ Wives) encourage people to be less responsible about their sexual health’ – although this falls to only 35% of 18-24 year olds compared with 56% of 55-64 year olds. Nonetheless, an increasingly explicit media inevitably has an impact on people’s perceptions of sex and relationships, and it is important to develop a societal climate which encourages people to be responsible about every aspect of their sexual health.

There is also concern that people are more likely to cheat on their sexual partners because new technology has given access to multiple means of doing so. 61% agree that new technology (such as e-mail, text messaging and chatrooms) makes it easier for people to cheat on their sexual partners. Although it is difficult to know whether this perception is borne out by reality, it is clear that people do need to take responsibility for their own use of modern technology within the broader context of their sexual relationships.

STIs and HIV

There is clear concern about the rising rates of sexually transmitted infections – including HIV – in the UK. Some older research participants recalled a time when syphilis was considered a death sentence, and are horrified that there is an equivalent threat nowadays in HIV. 70% agree that ‘HIV presents more of a threat to the heterosexual population in the UK today than it did a decade ago’.

“There’s loads more diseases now.”
Female, 16-18, DE, Birmingham

“But when it boils down to it, you can have had sex with a few people or sex with one person but [if] that person has had sex with a hundred people and you’re both just as likely to get, you know? You have sex with one person, you’re not careful, you can get AIDS...it’s all so risky, whatever way you look at it.”
Female, 19-24, BC1C2, London

In this context, all generations are keen to see people take greater responsibility for their sexual health, and for the scourge of STIs, especially HIV, to be eradicated globally.

Conclusions

There is a strong consensus across all age groups that the changes and developments that we have seen in family life, relationships and sex over the last 75 years have been overwhelmingly positive. People welcome the fact that there is now greater equality and opportunity for all, and that people are allowed to make their own choices in life rather than being forced into conforming to family and societal expectations.

“So times have changed really haven’t they, radically. I don’t think they were the good old days, don’t get me wrong, I think you’ve got far more now than ever you had before, you’ve got far more opportunity.”
Female, 70+, BC1C2, Birmingham

However, people also recognise that there are areas within the arena of family, sex and relationships that could be improved further. In particular, people are keen to see better preparation given for the realities of sex and relationships, and for people then to take real responsibility for their own and their sexual partners’ health and wellbeing. We’ve come a long way in 75 years, and there is a strong will for us to go further to ensure that all people are able to benefit from sexual health, for life.