

## » Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration

# In Focus: Becoming Sexually Active

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a representative repeat survey. A large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults was launched for the ninth time in the summer of 2019. It follows on from predecessor studies conducted between 1980 and 2014. The goal of the study is to acquire reliable data about the attitudes and behaviours of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regards to sexuality and contraception.

Young people becoming sexually active is regularly the focal point of controversial debates in society. This fact sheet puts together important core results about when and how adolescents and young adults between 14 and 25 actually become sexually active. The angle from which the results of the BZgA representative survey on Youth Sexuality are looked at emerges primarily from the desire to gain insights into the contraceptive behaviour of young people. For this reason the focus is on heterosexual contacts. Whenever this fact sheet talks about sexual contacts, it generally refers to heterosexual contacts. Same-sex contacts are given their own section.

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## Result 1

## The first sexual experiences usually take place during the teenage years.

Most people have their first physical contacts and sexual experiences with a member of the opposite sex during their teenage years. The data shows that enormous developmental changes take place between the ages of 14 and 19:

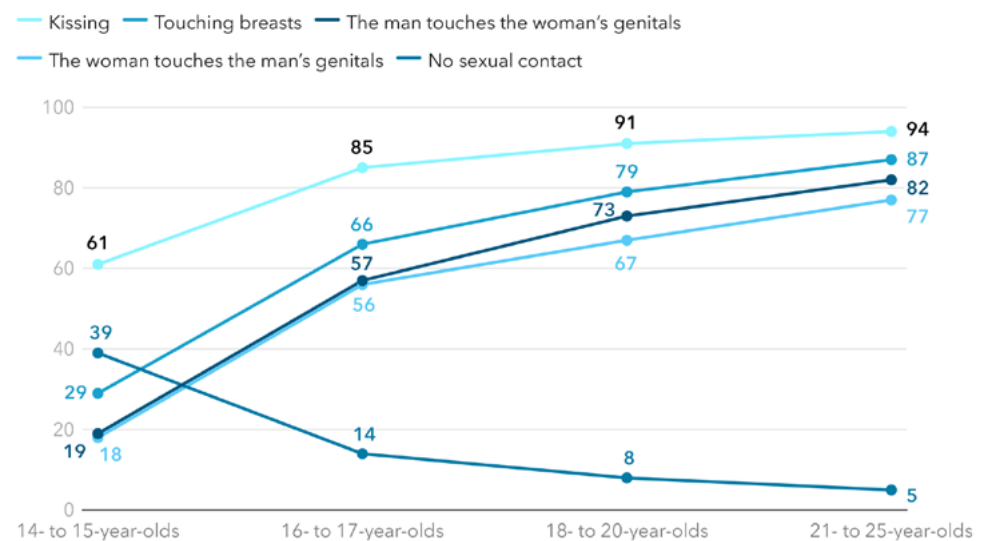
- Among the 14-year-olds almost one in two has not yet had any sexual experience (47 %).
- But among the 19-year-olds this figure has dropped to 6 percent.

The best way to understand when young people become sexually active is to look at the entire age range from 14 to 25. Figure 1 shows various forms of heterosexual contacts - with the exception of sexual intercourse itself - by age.

Figure 1

### Forms of heterosexual contacts excluding sexual intercourse (by age)

Question: There are different ways to exchange intimacy between a man and a woman. Please indicate all of the things you personally have done or experienced. Here: excluding sexual intercourse



Basis: 14- to 25-year-olds | multiple responses possible | figures in percent  
Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

According to this data, the majority of the 14- to 15-year-olds have already kissed someone, while four in ten adolescents have not yet had any sexual contact. Among the 16- to 17-year-olds all the forms of sexual contact that precedes sexual intercourse, from kissing to touching breasts and touching the partner's genitals have been done/experienced by the majority of the respondents.

There are no noteworthy differences between the sexes here. Even when looking at the under-18 cohort, girls and boys are equally likely to report the various sexual experiences.

## Result 2

## The first sexual contacts are also a question of cultural background.

The majority of young people have their first physical experiences with a member of the opposite sex between the ages of 14 and 19. When taking a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the question of when a young person becomes sexually active is strongly influenced by their cultural background - consequently there are clear differences when the pervasiveness of sexual experiences is broken down by

- religious orientation
- cultural background

Among the 14- to 25-year-old girls and young women who are not religious only 9 percent say they have not yet had any contact to the opposite sex and the figures are comparable for those who are Protestant or Catholic (7 % and 9 % respectively).

The figure for those who have not yet had any physical or sexual contact with the opposite sex is much higher among those girls and young women who are of the Muslim faith (37 %). When their religious ties are close, this percentage goes up even further (45 %). The situation is similar for the Muslim boys and young men of the same age, but the strength of their religious ties is less relevant.

Table 1 provides an overview of the cultural differences described, broken down by age. It also becomes clear that the differences that are correlated with religious orientation and cultural background remain visible among the young adults.

**Sexual restraint by migrant background and religious orientation**

No physical contact with the opposite sex so far

	<b>14- to 25- years-olds</b>	<b>14- to 17- year-olds</b>	<b>18- to 25- year-olds</b>
Total	12	26	6
<i>Migrant background</i>			
No	9	22	3
Yes	20	34	13
<i>Religion</i>			
No religion	9	25	3
Protestant	8	21	2
Catholic	10	23	4
Muslim	34	45	29
<i>Religious ties</i>			
Close	24	39	15
Casual	10	25	4
Negative/indifferent	10	22	5

*Basis: 14- to 25-year-olds | figures in percent*  
 Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

Table 1

In the same vein, adolescents and young adults are consistently less likely to report having engaged in kissing, breast/genital touching or sexual intercourse if they are members of the Muslim faith. The situation is similar when the respondents say they have close religious ties, regardless of what denomination they are a member of – but it is less pronounced in this case.

## Result 3

## The trend towards becoming sexually active later is consolidating.

Only a small number of young people are under the age of 17 when they become sexually active with a heterosexual partner for the first time. Among the 16-year-olds just one in three of the respondents said they have become sexually active (34 %).

However, sexual activity increases significantly with increasing age:

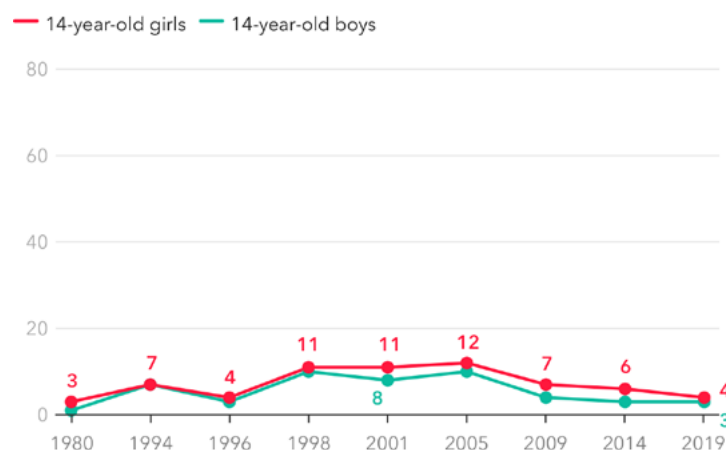
- Among the 17- and 18-year-olds 61 percent - that is the majority - have had sexual intercourse.
- From age 22 it is consistently nine in ten respondents who say they are sexually active.

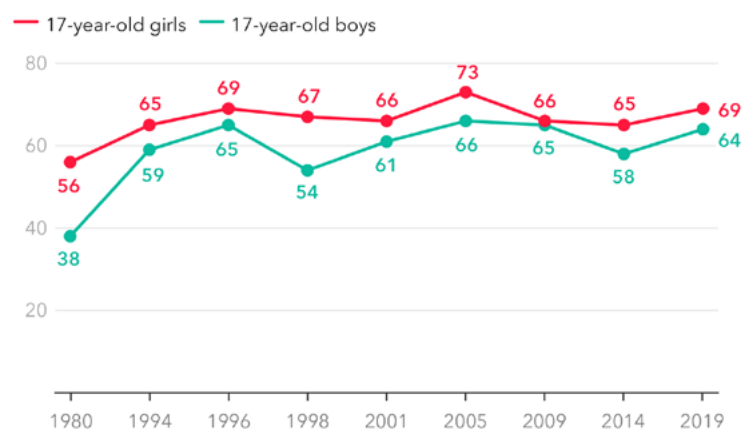
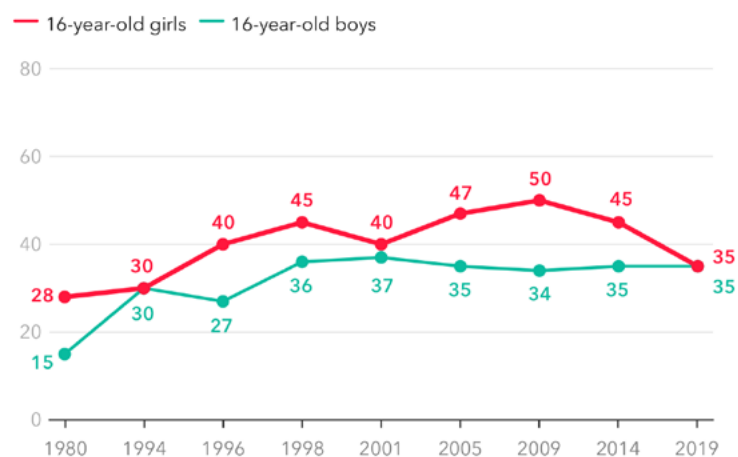
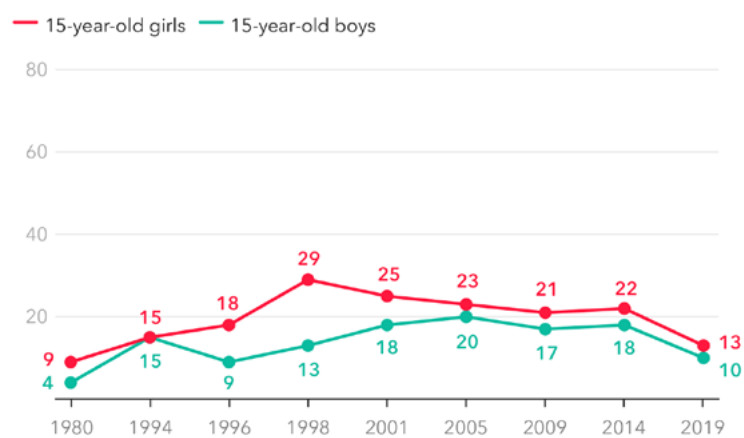
For the group of 14- to 17-year-old adolescents without a migrant background (until 2009 young people with German citizenship) we have enough data to take a unique look into the past. And the trend comparison over the decades (see Figure 2) shows that there is no evidence that young people today are becoming sexually active at a younger age than they used to.

Figure 2

### Heterosexual intercourse experience among adolescents without a migrant background (until 2009: German citizenship), a trend comparison

Question: Please indicate all of the items on this list that you have done or experienced yourself.  
Here: heterosexual intercourse





Basis: 14- to 17-year-olds with German citizenship / from 2014: without a migrant background | figures in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 1980, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2014, 2019 surveys

Today 31 percent of the 14- to 17-year-old girls and 29 percent of the boys of the same age without a migrant background are sexually active. Although the percentages of respondents who have had sexual intercourse is now higher than it was when the first survey was conducted in 1980 (25 % versus 15 %), there is no unbroken linear development towards more and more minors having sexual intercourse.

Quite on the contrary: after a maximum value was measured in 2005 for those saying they had had sexual intercourse (39 % girls, 33 % boys with German citizenship), a steadily declining trend has taken place since:

- Looking at how the individual age groups have developed reveals that the 15- and 16-year-olds in particular are exhibiting more restraint again.
- Among the 17-year-olds on the other hand the percentage who have had sexual intercourse has remained relatively constant over the decades, at around two thirds.
- The least amount of fluctuation can be found among the 14-year-olds. In this age group only a small minority is already sexually active.

And: while girls became sexually active much earlier than boys of the same age in 1980, a convergence has taken place here in recent years.



Result 4

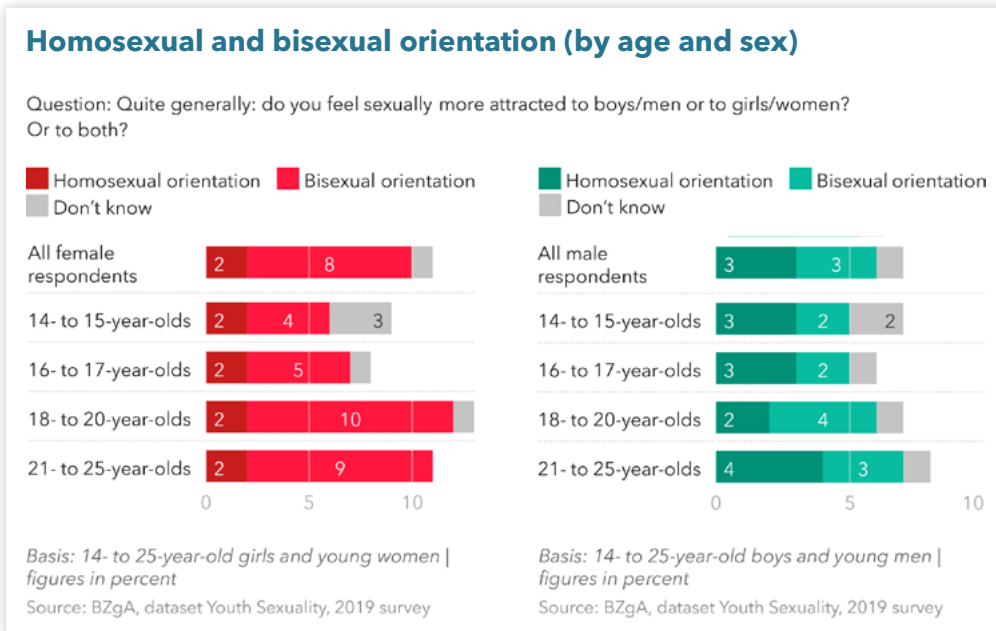
## Same-sex contacts are more widespread among female respondents than male respondents.

For the majority of adolescents and young adults in Germany it is exclusively heterosexual contacts that are relevant:

- Nine in ten girls and young women between the ages of 14 and 25 say they are heterosexual (89%).
- Among the boys and young men the equivalent figure is 93 percent.

A sexual orientation that is not purely heterosexual is more likely to be reported by the female respondents than the male respondents. Here it is particularly the young women aged 18 or older who say they are either homosexual or bisexual (see Figure 3). The percentage of women with a bisexual orientation between 18 and 25 is 9 percent, three times as high as that of the young men of the same age (3%).

Figure 3



Among those who said they felt attracted to both sexes or to their own sex, one in two respondents had already had homoerotic sexual contacts that went beyond kissing and stroking (51%). 30 percent said that they had not gone beyond kissing and stroking their same-sex partner. Among the 14- to 17-year-olds that figure was 34 percent, while among the young adults it was 29 percent.

At 31 percent there is a large proportion of minors who said that despite their same-sex or bisexual orientation they have not yet had any physical sexual contact with a person of the same sex as them. That is only the case for 14 percent of the respondents aged 18 and above.

Result 5

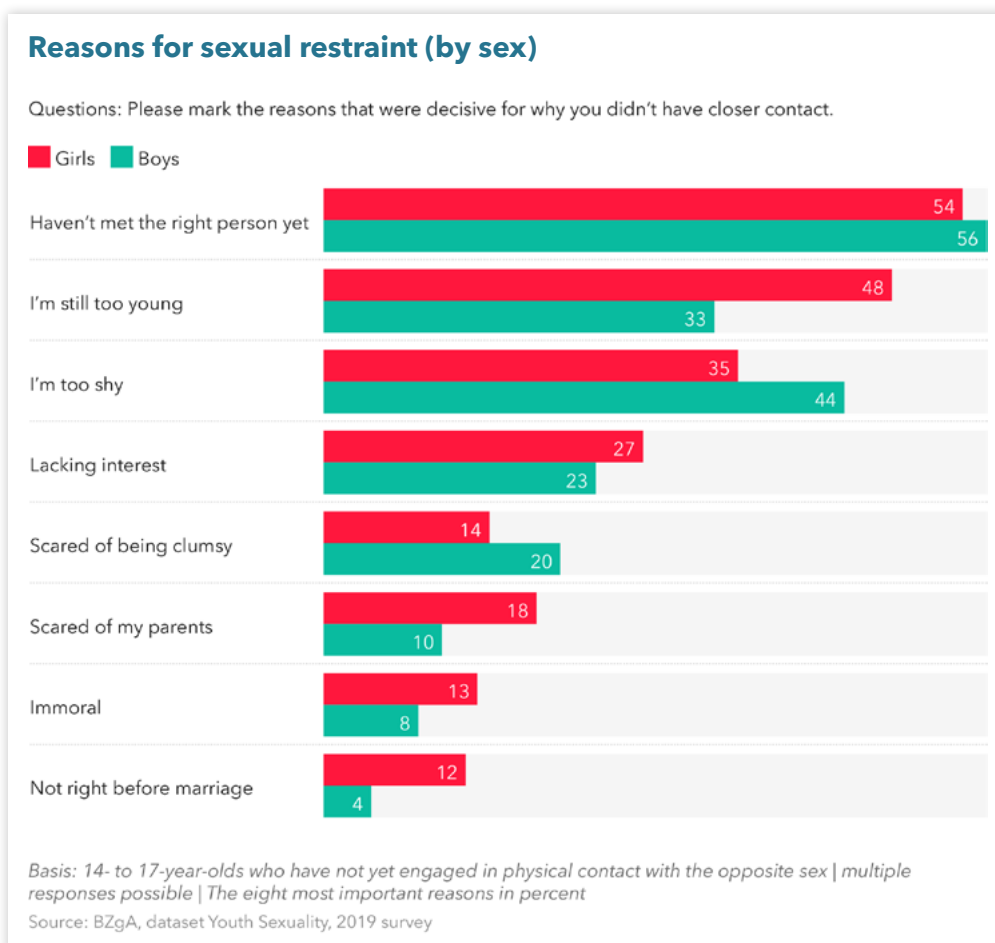
## The reason for waiting to become sexually active is often the desire to wait for the right person.

If the respondents have not yet had any closer contact to the opposite sex, they were given the opportunity as part of the current survey to specify their reasons for this more closely by choosing options from a list. Since this was particularly true for the younger respondents, we will present the responses given by the 14- to 17-year-olds here (see Figure 4).

Top of the list of reason given for sexual restraint is that the respondents had not yet met the right partner (55%). This was the main argument for both the girls and the boys (54% and 56% respectively).

In addition to this it is particularly the girls who view their own age as reason ('too young': 48%), while the boys are more likely to feel 'too shy' to enter into closer contacts with the opposite sex (44%) as the following figure illustrates.

Figure 4



Moral considerations play a subordinate role overall. Depending on the religious, cultural background, however, there were some very different motivational circumstances. For example, the question about the 'right partner' is still important for Muslim adolescents, at 43 percent, but it is by no means the only relevant reason.

The Muslim respondents display an above average probability of citing reasons to do with normative expectations: 30 percent of them said they would find closer contact at this current point in time generally 'immoral' and a similar number said their restraint was to do with their own lack of a marital bond (33%); 42 percent even said they shied away from sexual activities because they were scared of the reaction of their own parents. Among young people with another or no religion these reasons are cited no more than by one in ten respondents.

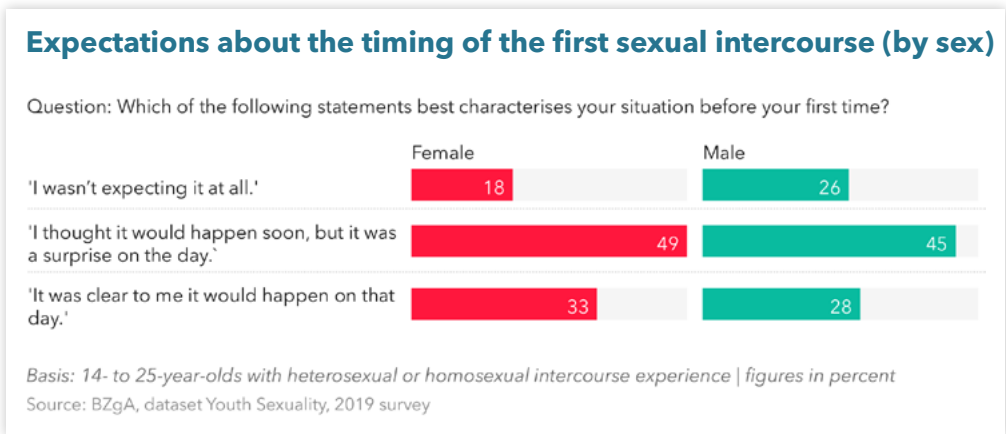
Result 6

## It is only rare that the first time comes as a surprise.

It was only true for the fewest adolescents and young adults that the first sexual intercourse happened completely spontaneously. Regardless of whether these were heterosexual or homosexual intimate contacts:

- Most 14- to 25-year-olds report having known a while before their first sexual intercourse that it would happen soon (47 %).
- Around one third even knew on the day that it would happen (31 %).
- Girls and young women were generally a bit more aware of the situation than the boys and young men (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Merely a fifth (22 %) said they 'weren't expecting it at all'. This fits in with the fact that the majority of adolescents and young adults experienced their first time in a steady relationship (56 %) or they were well acquainted with their sexual partner (28 %). A much smaller percentage (16 %) was only casually acquainted or not at all acquainted with the person they experienced their first sexual intercourse with.

Becoming sexually active is more frequently planned today than it was at the start of the millennium. That is demonstrated by the long-term trend data that are available for heterosexually active adolescents between 14 and 17 with German citizenship.

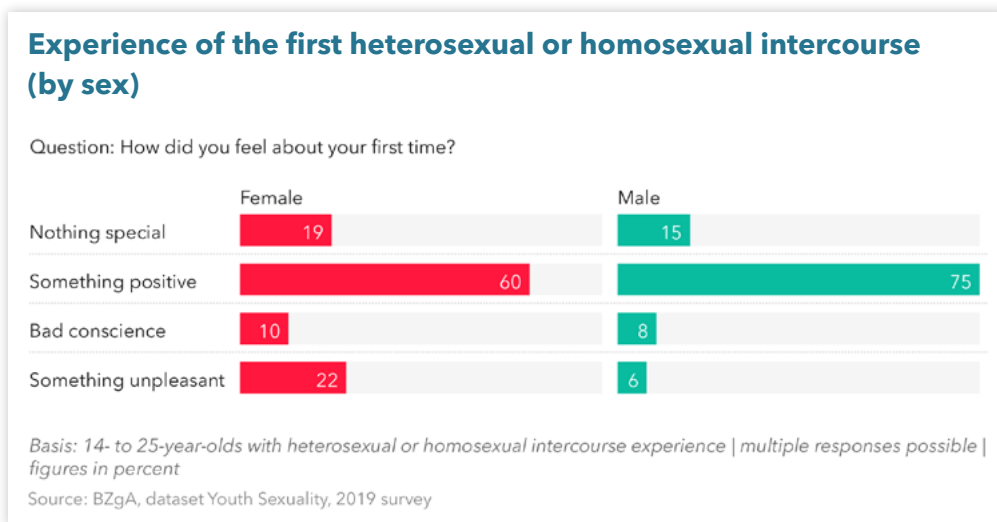
- According to these data the boys in particular were more and more likely from the mid-90s to say that the first time happened completely unexpectedly for them.
- The maximum value to date was measured in 2005. At the time 24 percent of the girls and 37 percent of the boys said they had 'not expected it at all'.
- Since 2009 significantly fewer adolescents have said this. Of the sexually active young people without a migrant background 23 percent of the boys and just 17 percent of the girls say their first time was completely unplanned.

Result 7

## The first time is a positive experience for most, but not necessarily for girls and young women.

Most adolescents and young adults who have had heterosexual or homosexual experiences felt that their first time was positive (see Figure 6). This perception is relatively clear for the boys and young men: for three quarters of them the first time was ‘something positive’. They therefore are more likely to look back at their first time with a positive outlook than girls and young women (60 %). The female respondents were much more likely to say their first time had been unpleasant (22 % versus 6 %).

Figure 6



What is striking here is that this assessment is correlated with age of the first sexual intercourse for the girls and young women: of those who said they had been 14 years old or younger when they experienced their first time only 44 percent felt it had been a positive experience. If they were 15 or older, 62 percent said it was positive.

And the level of familiarity with the sexual partner also influences the assessment of the girls and young women: if the partner they had their first time with was only casually known to them or not known at all, a mere 26 percent report a positive experience. To compare: if the partner was well known or a steady partner, 63 percent of the girls and young women felt positive about their first time. These correlations cannot be discerned for the boys and young men.



## References

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## Notes on the data

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- As the percentages shown has been rounded to whole numbers, it is possible that they may not add up to 100 percent.
- For the same reason the combined categories (e.g. 'very satisfied' and 'mostly satisfied') can deviate from the sum of the individual categories depicted.
- For questions where the respondents were able to pick several answers, the total figure can exceed 100 percent.
- Where data is available from previous surveys, the survey results are shown in a trend comparison. Because of how the samples were done it is possible to see the long-term trend covering almost 40 years for boys and girls between 14 and 17 without a migrant background.
- Participants are deemed to have a migrant background if they themselves or at least one parent was born without German citizenship; this definition is also used by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021).
- The level of education is determined by the (desired) qualifications the study participants were / are seeking at school based on the education system in Germany. Low: 9 years of school, most are around 15 years old when they leave (e.g. Hauptschule) Moderate: 10 years of school, most are around 16 years old when they leave (e.g. mittlere Reife). High: 12 to 13 years of school, most are 18 to 19 years old when they leave (e.g. Abitur).
- Because of the methodological design of the Youth Sexuality Study a further non-binary differentiation of gender has had to be left out. For this same reason, the term 'sex' (biological aspects, assigned by birth) continues to be used (in contrast to 'gender' in the sense of social construction, gender identity as personal internal perception of oneself) to enable statements on long-term trends (see also Census UK, 2019). This decision is purely a methodological necessity and not based on a lack of awareness of diversity here.



## Imprint

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## The Research Project: Background, Research Team, Methodology

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a repeat survey. In the summer of 2019 the ninth large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults began. A total of 6,032 interviews were conducted nationwide. Since 1980, the BZgA has been investigating the attitudes and behaviour of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regard to sexuality education, sexuality and contraception. This current study follows on from the previous years' studies with the explicit aim of illustrating trends.

### Project profile

<b>Client</b>	Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)
<b>Project lead</b>	Angelika Hessling, BZgA
<b>Survey institute</b>	Kantar GmbH
<b>Survey population</b>	Adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25
<b>Survey method</b>	Computer-supported combined oral-written survey; for the more intimate questions the questionnaire was to be filled out by the respondents without the interviewers being able to see.
<b>Selection method</b>	A disproportionately selected quota sample with regards to sex, age and migrant background
<b>Sample of young people</b>	6,032 interviews of which 3,556 were with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 and 2,476 with young adults between 18 and 25
<b>Sample: parents</b>	In the households of the 14- to 17-year-old adolescents without a migrant background one parent was also surveyed (2,422 interviews)
<b>Weighting</b>	All the data shown underwent a representative weighting in order to remove the sample's disproportionalities caused by the design.
<b>Survey period</b>	May to October 2019



### More information about the study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration Central results and further fact sheets

<https://www.sexualaufklaerung.de/en/english/projects/detail/youth-sexuality-9th-iteration/>