YOUNG PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS
Supporting young people as they have their first relationship

Contents

Acknowledgements

The Families Commission would like to acknowledge the help and support that we received from everyone involved in the research.

We would like to thank the participants who shared with us their time and experiences, and the stakeholders and experts who guided and shaped our early thinking about this project.

In particular, we would like to say a big thank you to all the young people we talked with. We appreciated your involvement and your willingness to share your stories and ideas with us. We were impressed by your maturity, honesty and excellent insights.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this project was to find out what support young people need as they have their first relationships.

For this project, young people were defined as people aged 11 to 18 years. The project did not include platonic relationships and was not specifically focused on understanding sexual activity in young people's relationships. It is important to note that young people are not a homogeneous group. Age, gender, sexuality, culture, values, personality and experiences of other relationships, especially within their family, will all influence how young people think about, feel about and engage in relationships. Consequently, the types of support young people use and find effective will be different.

The Families Commission searched and reviewed the limited literature and research available on relationship support for young people. We also talked with key stakeholders in the government and non-government sectors. In February and March 2009 we held the following focus groups and interviews:

- nine focus groups with young people in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, involving 77 young people
- four focus groups with parents, grandparents and whānau in Auckland, Wellington and the Wairarapa, involving 23 participants
- three focus groups with youth workers in Wellington and the Wairarapa, involving 14 participants
- interviews with seven school counsellors in Wellington and the Wairarapa, and a focus group with three social workers working in two South Auckland secondary schools.

We recruited these participants through contacts and, where possible, used existing groups (for example, youth groups, youth support-groups, young people at a boarding school, members of a Families Commission Parents Panel). The young people and parents and whānau were not related to each other. Our sample was small and selective (for example, we did not have sufficient representation in the focus groups from rural areas, Pacific peoples, other ethnic minorities or at-risk young people) and is therefore not representative of young people or parents in New Zealand, and the findings from this project cannot be generalised across the population.

What we were told

The participants in this project provided information and opinions on:

- what relationship issues young people work through and what skills and information they need
- where young people learn about relationships and where they go to for support
- who should be teaching young people about relationships
- how to effectively support young people as they deal with relationship issues, and, particularly, how parents can support their young people.

What are the top relationship issues for young people?
Young people and professionals working with young people answered this question. They agreed that dealing with breakups, sex and text-based relationships were three key relationship issues for young people. In addition, the young people mentioned being cheated on, fights, trust, jealousy, peer pressure, knowing how relationships work, communication, bullying (gay and lesbian young people only) and dealing with strong feelings. The professionals also talked about abusive relationships and generational and cultural differences being key relationship issues for young people.

What skills and information do you think teenagers need so they can develop healthy relationships?
The parents and whānau and professionals we talked with agreed that teenagers need skills and information on breakups, what constitutes a healthy relationship, values and sex. The

parents and whānau also said that young people need skills and information regarding boundaries, peer pressure, alcohol, respect and self-esteem. The professionals added communication skills to the list.

Where do young people learn about relationships?
The young people, parents and whānau and professionals we talked with all agreed that young people learn about relationships from their family (parents, siblings and extended family), friends, school and the media. All these groups were quite critical of what and how young people were taught through the school sexuality education curriculum. Young people and parents and whānau also said young people learn from personal experience. Some young people said they learnt about relationships at church. One group of youth workers spoke of young people learning about relationships through their affiliation with gangs.

Where do you go if you have a relationship issue?
The young people we talked with said that if they had a relationship issue they dealt with it by themselves; talked to someone in their family, their friends, a school counsellor or teacher, youth worker, doctor or Youthline; or looked for advice in a girls' magazine. While most of the focus groups with young people listed school (either teachers or the school counsellor) as a place they could go, not everyone felt comfortable doing so, because they didn't trust them or they didn't give the type of support the young person wanted. All the young people we spoke with said they would not use the internet for information about a relationship issue.

Who has the responsibility to teach young people about relationships?
The parents and whānau and professionals we talked with said the responsibility for teaching young people about relationships rests with their parents and schools.

What are effective ways to support young people with relationship issues?
The parents and whānau and professionals agreed that effective ways to support young people with relationship issues included support from their parents and at school. In addition, parents and whānau said effective support could come from grandparents and other adults, social youth-groups and through the media. Professionals working with young people added that young people should be empowered to solve youth issues. Youth workers, collaborative responses, youth-friendly information, mentors and church could also provide effective support. The professionals also raised a number of issues with the support services that are currently provided.

What do you want from your parents and whānau?
Young people said that the quality and type of their relationship with their parents influenced what they wanted by way of support for their relationship issues from their parents. For the gay and lesbian young people, talking with their parents about relationship issues was always shaped by their parents' reaction to their coming out.

The young people said they wanted the following kind of support from their parents and whānau:
- be available
- be straightforward, tell the truth
- give good advice, share stories about their relationship experiences
- talk about sex
- talk things through and let them ask questions
- don't interfere
- listen and don't judge.
-

They didn't want the following from their parents and whānau:
- closed-mindedness
- too much seriousness about relationships
- being too nosy and trying to find everything out about the relationship
- giving lectures
- telling them to move on and get over it
- putting them down

- teasing.
-

How can parents support their young people?

The parents and whānau said parents can support their young people by:

- giving advice, factual information and ideas of repercussions
- being there, being available and being open
- working as a team with their partner
- including their friends in their home and getting to know their parents
- teaching them to feel good about themselves
- letting them know things can be worked through, and that there is hope
- making them realise they're loved regardless, and love is unconditional
- sticking to boundaries and having standards and rules
- talking with other parents about how to manage.

Do you think parents find it difficult to talk about relationship issues with teenagers? What would help?

In response to this question the parents and whānau said parents should try to avoid over-reacting to what their teen said about relationships, teasing, gossiping or passing comment about their boyfriend or girlfriend, being afraid of setting boundaries, being absent from home or being embarrassed to talk about sex. They also noted that the health of their own couple relationship affected how they could talk with their teen about relationship issues. The professionals said there was a need for effective parenting programmes and that some parents struggle to set boundaries for their teenagers.

As noted earlier, gender, culture and sexual orientation will influence how young people think about, feel about and engage in relationships. There were, however, very few differences in the responses the young people in this project gave across these demographic groups.

Key messages to emerge from the study were:

- Young people learn about relationships by watching their parents, whānau and the adults around them.
- Parents, whānau and other adults are key sources of support for young people.
- Young people want to learn more about the emotional side of relationships through the school curriculum.
- School support services may be under-resourced and need to be better connected with the young person's family and community services.

What the Families Commission will do

As a result of this study, the Families Commission will undertake the following actions:

- raise awareness with parents and whānau of the fact that what they do in their own couple relationship significantly influences young people
- communicate to parents young people's preferences about what they do and don't want by way of support from their parents, and the issues they struggle with advocate that relevant parties in the education sector:
    - change the curriculum name to 'Sexuality *and Relationship* Education'
    - maintain and strengthen a focus on teaching relationship skills and education as part of sexuality education in the health education curriculum
    - provide more information to parents, family and whānau at the same time as their young people are being taught sexuality and relationship education at school
    - investigate the need for better resourcing for effective student support-services in secondary schools
- raise awareness with other adults of the fact that their support is important to young people.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why are we interested in young people's relationships?

The Families Commission has an interest in all types of family relationships. We are interested in finding out more about the dynamics of family relationships so we can help families be strong, safe and resilient. We know that family relationships are powerful, whether they nurture or harm. We also know that all relationships require attention and maintenance, and that taking an early-intervention approach – building relationship skills and knowledge, and supporting children and young people – is likely to reap significant rewards.

Families Commission consultations with families, service providers and researchers over the last few years, which have explored issues for families, parents and couples1, have all included a common theme – that if people are to have healthy relationships and be great parents they need to be taught relationship skills and have good support when they start to have their first relationships as teenagers.

In the Families Commission (2008b) research report *Reaching Out: Who New Zealanders turn to for relationship support* we found that women aged in their late adolescence up to 25 years had low awareness of the options available to support their couple relationship. That report suggested a need to explore further the relationship skills and knowledge of young people.

International research supports the view that young people's relationships are "…a key period during which the foundations of healthy adult marriages may be strengthened" (Karney, Beckett, Collins & Shaw 2007, p. 72). Karney et al also note that "adolescents' experiences in romantic relationships … have potentially life-altering consequences for their emotional health, social and academic competence and self-esteem. These relationships also provide the primary backdrop for intimate partner violence, decisions about whether and when to engage in sexual behaviour, contraceptive use, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy" (p. 4). New Zealand researchers (for example, Jackson, 2002; McKenzie, 2004, Weaver, 2001, 2002) concur with this view that healthy relationships help define and have lasting effects on a young person's identity, wellbeing, competence and self-esteem.

The purpose of undertaking this study was not to find ways to solve relationship issues for young people. Young people learn from, and build resilience through, life experience. Whether in a relationship or not, many young people spend a significant amount of time and energy thinking, talking and dreaming about being in a relationship. Boyfriends, girlfriends, crushes and flings bring emotional ups and downs. Irrespective of our age, every person benefits from support during challenging times. The purpose of this project was to find out what support young people need as they have their first relationships, in order to help them navigate their way through the emotional ups and downs.

1.2 Definitions

For the purpose of this project, young people are defined as people aged 11 to 18 years. We have used the phrase 'boyfriends, girlfriends, crushes and flings' to describe our focus. The project was inclusive of all relationship types, including same-sex relationships. The project did not include a focus on platonic relationships and did not specifically focus on understanding sex in young people's relationships, although sex is obviously a key issue and event for some young people's developing relationships. There can be a tendency to focus on sex in relationships at the expense of other important aspects, such as communication and negotiation skills, or how to deal with breaking up.

The following definition, taken from our literature review, describes the project's focus on 'intimate' or 'romantic' relationships:

---

1   Including Focus on Families (Families Commission, 2005), What Makes Your Family Tick (Families Commission, 2006), workshops with the relationship and parenting sectors held in 2007, Parenting Teenagers couch poll (Families Commission, 2008), Reaching Out (Families Commission, 2008).

One in which the individual perceives an ongoing, reciprocated, emotional, erotically charged connection with a partner. By this definition romantic relationships need not involve sexual behaviour. (Karney et al, 2007, p. xv)

1.3 Prevalence of relationships

The formation of romantic relationships among adolescents tends to follow a developmental sequence: young people begin socialising in same-sex groups, moving on to mixed-gender groups and finally to romantic relationships as couples (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002).

The Youth Connectedness Project (Crespo, 2009) asked 2,174 young New Zealanders aged between 10 and 15 years if they had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Almost 26 percent of boys aged 10 to 11 years and nearly 21 percent of girls the same age had a girlfriend or boyfriend at that age. By the time they had reached 14 to 15 years old these figures had risen to 32 percent for both boys and girls.

Youth'07 (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008) reports that of their sample of 9,107 young people attending secondary school and aged 18 years or younger, most had never had sex – 38 percent of male students and 35 percent of female students reported having had sex.

During 2008, 0800WHATSUP counsellors answered 145,060 phone calls from children and young people aged five to 18 years old. In their statistical report for 2008 they note: "the five most commonly presented issues of concern vary little from year to year. Relationships with others, particularly other children, consistently present the key challenges faced by children and young people" (Barnardos, 2008, p. 5). They go on to say: "relationships with partners (girlfriends/boyfriends) [were] the main concern of teenage callers. Of all calls about partner relationships, 37 percent reported significant difficulties or relationship breakdown – a decrease from 2007. Thirty-one percent said they wanted to establish a relationship, about the same as in 2007" (p. 6). Sex-related problems (including pregnancy, sexual activity, contraception, sexual harassment and STIs) accounted for six percent of all calls to 0800WHATSUP.

Anecdotally, relationships are the number one issue for callers to Wellington Youthline. This includes romantic relationships and relationships with parents, siblings and peers. For the callers concerned with romantic relationships, managing relationships and sexual health were key issues.

1.4 Differences – girls and boys, sexuality and culture

Young people as a group are not homogeneous. Age, gender, sexuality, culture, values, personality and experiences of other relationships, especially within their family, will all influence how young people think about, feel about and engage in relationships. Consequently, the types of support young people use and find effective will be different. We already know that adults vary in the way they prefer to receive information and support. This was highlighted in our report Families Commission (2008b), which discussed the use of informal, semi-formal and formal support in adult couple relationships.

It is also obvious, but important to remember, that boys and girls, like men and women, have different ways of thinking about and working through relationships.

The project was inclusive of all relationship types, including same-sex relationships. One focus group was made up of gay and lesbian young people. The number of gay and lesbian young people is likely to be less than 10 percent of the youth population. In Youth'07 (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008) most students (94 percent of males, 91 percent of females) reported being exclusively attracted to the opposite sex (p. 28).

Culture also affects how people discuss, think about and engage in relationships. Different cultures have different rituals or may require different behaviour regarding initiating, building

and maintaining relationships. Some cultures have expectations about escorting young people on dates, arranged marriages, pre-marriage counselling or only dating people from the same ethnic group. A person's religious beliefs and their ethnicity affect the way they conduct their intimate relationships. Some cultures are more or less liberal than others in respect of such issues as when it is appropriate for young people to have sex.

1.5 Structure of this report

Chapters 2 and 3 of this report provide an overview of the available literature and research on relationship support for young people and the methodology used in this study. Chapters 4 and 5 describe what the participants in the study told us and discuss these findings. Chapter 6 then briefly outlines the conclusions reached in this study.

2. Literature and research on relationship support for young people

2.1 The availability of literature and research

In the course of this project we searched and reviewed New Zealand and overseas literature and research on relationship support for young people. We found relatively little addressing this specific subject. The available literature was grouped around the following themes:

- violence in relationships – including violence experienced by young people within their relationships, the impact of young people observing parental conflict, maltreatment of children, bullying, sexual predators
- sexual behaviour of young people – including sex education, sexual health, onset and predictors of sexual activity, teen pregnancy, sexuality
- patterns of dating and relationship-formation
- differences in relationship-formation by gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation
- the influence of the young person's social networks on the development of their relationships – including parents, siblings, peers, youth groups
- how individual characteristics influence relationships – including communication and conflict-resolution skills, self-esteem, personality disorders, depression.

A comprehensive review of young people's relationships as 'precursors of healthy adult marriages' has been undertaken in the United States by Karney et al (2007). With regard to the availability of research, they note that "the empirical literature on romantic relationships among adolescents is still in its early stages…"; it has focused "almost exclusively on the causes and consequences of sexual behaviour"; and there is a lack of data on the implementation or effectiveness of programmes and interventions (p. 5). They also observe: "…the majority of this research has collected data at only a single occasion, relied exclusively on individuals' self-reports, and assessed only a few variables at a time. Importantly, even the strongest studies in this area have sampled almost exclusively from populations that are predominantly middle-class and white and have not followed these samples beyond the earliest years of young adulthood" (p. 71).

There is some overseas research about how adults seek relationship support. However, the relevance of the findings translates only in part to young people, since their relationships occur within the developmental life-stage of adolescence.

The literature on support for adult relationships considers issues such as relationship satisfaction and stability, the impact of significant change and stressful life events on couple relationships (for example, parenthood, illness, blending families), protective and risk factors (such as individual characteristics, relationship history, social-support networks) and the different types of support that are available. Families Commission (2008b) summarises this literature and presents the findings of a qualitative research study on whom adult New Zealanders turn to for relationship support. The study interviewed 50 adults about how, why, when and from where they accessed information and support for their couple relationship. The majority of the participants preferred 'informal' support, from family and friends, over 'formal' support from professionals such as counsellors or psychologists. A significant number of participants also accessed 'semi-formal' support from their GP, school teachers or their church or community elders. Many participants had little or no awareness of the options available for formal support.

2.2 New Zealand literature and research

Two large surveys of young people have recently been undertaken in New Zealand. The Adolescent Health Research Group (2008) has undertaken New Zealand's first nationally representative youth health and wellbeing survey. Topics in the questionnaire covered culture and ethnicity, home and family, school, injuries and violence, health and emotional health, food and activities, sexuality, substance abuse, neighbourhood and spirituality. Data have been collected and reported in two waves – Youth2000 surveyed 9,699 students from 114

randomly selected New Zealand secondary schools, and Youth'07 surveyed 9,107 students from 96 secondary schools.

The second survey, the Youth Connectedness Project,[2] has quantitatively and qualitatively followed three cohorts of 2,174 young people, starting at ages 10, 12 and 14, for three years. The objectives of the project are to examine how connectedness supports young people in negotiating the challenges of adolescence, and to identify modifiable factors that foster and enhance connectedness. The main focus has been on young people's connectedness to communities and wider society, families and whānau and schools. The Youth Connectedness Project was due to be completed in September 2009.

In addition to these two large surveys, two researchers have investigated New Zealand young people's relationships. Sue Jackson (2002) has researched abuse in heterosexual adolescent dating relationships, and Stephanie Weaver has published two books with interviews of 50 teenage boys (2001) and 52 teenage girls (2002) talking about their lives.

Overall, there is little international or New Zealand research specifically focusing on the support needs of young people in their first relationships. We found little research on the relationship-support needs of young people in same-sex relationships and even less on those of young Māori.

The development of youth policy, programmes and research in New Zealand has been significantly influenced by the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* (YDSA) (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002), which provides a framework for positive youth development. The YDSA outlines four key social settings that provide a support network for young people:

The YDSA provides a useful framework for considering how to support young people best as they have their first relationships.

---

2   See http://www.victoria.ac.nz/mckenzie-centre/research/youth-connectedness/index.aspx

Kaye McLaren's literature review (2002) on how to achieve good outcomes for young people in their families, peer groups, schools, careers and communities is also a key youth development publication.

2.3 Family and whānau

The family and whānau-youth relationship is associated with the development of social skills such as conflict resolution and intimacy. Supportive and warm relationships between parents or caregivers and young people particularly appear to influence the development of other social relationships, including relationships with friends and romantic partners (Hair, Jager & Garrett, 2002).

In a study of 253 adolescents, Crockett and Randall (2006) found that the quality of early family relationships had a greater influence on adult romantic relationships than peer relationships. Their results are consistent with longitudinal studies that have documented the connection between parent-child relationships and family practices in adolescence and the quality of young adults' romantic relationships.

Research undertaken by Steinburg, Davila and Fincham (2006) suggests that before adolescents are even involved in serious romantic relationships, the quality of their parents' relationship and their own relationship with their parents may influence their romantic lives and their expectations for their romantic lives. For example, young women who reported more negative perceptions of parental conflict were more likely to engage in risk-taking romantic experiences, and also had greater expectations of unhappiness and divorce in their own future marriages.

Kirk (2002) found that parental divorce did not affect young people's relationship competence, but that the level of perceived family conflict influenced the self-esteem and romantic relationship satisfaction of young adults.
Research has also suggested that the experience of parental conflict in the family environment can affect young people's relationships by increasing relationship dependency (Toomey & Nelson, 2001).

Jackson's study of New Zealand high school pupils (2002) explored the link between family violence and abuse in adolescent dating relationships. She argues that young people who have experienced family violence are more vulnerable to abusive dating relationships.
The Youth2000 survey (Fleming et al, 2007) reported that students who witnessed violence between adults at home (compared to those who had not) had significantly increased rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies, as well as increased rates of problematic behaviour, substance abuse and relationship difficulties.

2.4 Friends

Young people use their friends a great deal for support, advice and information. Having close platonic friendships appears to promote relationship competence in young people by increasing their self-esteem, improving their romantic relationship satisfaction and lessening fear of intimacy (Kirk, 2002).

Peers also feature highly in the limited literature that is available regarding young people's help-seeking behaviour. The studies found that the most frequent source of help was from friends, and that girls were more likely to seek support from someone than boys (Jackson, 2002). When boys seek help they tend to talk to female friends (Jackson, 2002, Weaver, 2001).

Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders and Black (2007) examined the responses of 'informal helpers' to young people who had disclosed dating violence or upsetting but non-violent experiences in their romantic relationships in a survey of 224 high school pupils. They found that adolescents were most likely to talk to peers, if they talked to anyone at all. Informal helpers recognised the need for a nurturing response and acted in this way more often than avoiding

the help-seeker. However, the more severe a dating violence incident was, the more the potential helpers avoided the help-seekers.

McLaren summarises the influence peers have as follows (2002, p. 79):
- "Friends seem to have more impact on the development of romantic relationships than parents, particularly opposite sex friends.
- The wider the network of friends of the opposite sex a young person has, the more likely they will get involved in a romantic relationship earlier.
- Young women with large networks of other-sex friends tend to have earlier, longer-lasting and more emotionally intimate relationships.
- Little research has been carried out on the impact of peers on same-sex romantic relationships and more is needed."

2.5 School

In New Zealand, school is important in the development of young people's relationships for a number of reasons. School provides opportunities for socialisation with peers; the sexuality education curriculum has a strong focus on building relationship skills; and student support services provided through schools can be a key point of contact for young people seeking relationship support, information and advice.

Youth'07 (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008) presents findings on young people's relationships with their schools. Almost all (91 percent) reported that people at school cared about them. The survey also reports on the contact young people's families have with their schools. Just under half of the students reported that someone from their family had attended a parent-teacher meeting in the past year. This was more common among younger students and students from less deprived neighbourhoods. About 40 percent of families had attended a school event in the last year.

Sexuality education is one of seven key areas of learning in the health education curriculum. Health and physical education is compulsory for Years 1 to 10. Beyond Year 10 schools may choose to offer sexuality education as part of a senior health education programme designed to meet the requirements of NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education 2007) states that in health education "students develop competencies for mental wellness, reproductive health and positive sexuality, and safety management, and they develop understandings of nutritional needs. Students build resilience through strengthening their personal identity and sense of self-worth, through managing change and loss, and through engaging in processes for responsible decision-making. They learn to demonstrate empathy, and they develop skills that enhance relationships" (p. 23).

At least once every two years it is expected that schools will consult with their communities when developing their health and sexuality education programme. Parents retain the right to withdraw their child from attending sexuality education lessons.

In 2007 the Education Review Office (ERO) completed an evaluation of the quality of sexuality education programmes in Years 7 to 13 in 100 primary and secondary schools (Education Review Office, 2007a). The findings of the evaluation led ERO to make 11 recommendations to schools and the Ministries of Education and Health. These recommendations focus predominantly on the *sexuality* rather than *relationship* aspects of the curriculum. In response to one of the ERO recommendations, the Ministry of Education commissioned a literature review and critical appraisal of best practice in sexuality education (Learning Matters Limited, 2008). The review made nine recommendations, including the following:
- Qualitative research should be conducted into students' views about their learning and how programmes can best meet their needs. This research should include primary, intermediate and secondary-school-aged students (Recommendation 3).
- Parent-education workshops or meetings should be developed and provided on understanding the purpose and intent of teaching and learning in sexuality education, what sexuality education is and isn't, and how to address issues that arise at home, including answering children's questions (Recommendation 6).

- Easier access to health information and services should be provided for students in intermediate and secondary schools and in the community (Recommendation 7).
- Advisory support should be available to all teachers and schools to ensure effective delivery and implementation of sexuality education throughout the school (Recommendation 9).

In addition to their review of the sexuality education curriculum, ERO also completed a companion report, *The Teaching of Sexuality Education in Years 7 to 13: Good practice* (2007b), which profiles four schools delivering high-quality sexuality education programmes.

In the United Kingdom, interest groups have recently lobbied intensely to make the inclusion of sex and relationship education compulsory in all schools. A group set up to review the sex and relationship curriculum in the United Kingdom looked at international evidence to find 'what worked'. Their conclusion was that it was difficult to be precise about the impact of sex and relationship education, partly because of the differences in the way it could be measured (Harrison, 2008). The English Family Planning Association and other lobby groups argued that better sex and relationship education, with the opportunity to learn about and discuss the emotional and positive side of sex and relationships, would help young people make more informed choices (Brook, 2008; FPA, 2007).

Taking the results of the review and the advice of the interest groups into consideration, in October 2008 the British Government announced that sex and relationship education would become mandatory for all children aged five to 16 years in England (Curtis, 2008). It will be included in the personal, social and health curriculum alongside topics such as alcohol, drugs, risk-taking, personal safety and career choices to give a complete set of life skills.

In 1996 the Federal Government in the United States implemented the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and provided money to states to promote healthy marriages. This included relationship and marriage education classes in high schools, which are recommended in some states and mandatory in others. The Bush administration also funded abstinence-only sex education, which attracted criticism because research questions the effectiveness of such programmes (Solomon-Fears, 2007; Wetzstein, 2005).
The value of strengthening family and community involvement in schools is recognised in the Ministry of Youth Development publication *Making it Happen… Strengthening Youth Development in Schools* (2005).

Support for pupils is typically provided in secondary schools in New Zealand by a school counsellor. New Zealand research indicates that young people have differing views about school counsellors, and that many would not seek help from them. Both Jackson (2002) and Weaver (2002) suggest that embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality, lack of trust in someone they don't know, feeling at fault or ashamed, and an admission of failure are all reasons that can prevent young people from seeking help from more formal sources.
An Australian study, Mission Australia, surveyed 45,000 young people aged 11 to 24 years and found that only 11.5 percent would rank school counsellors in the top three people they turn to for advice and support (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 2008).

Community

The YDSA (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) notes that "communities take many forms, including those related to geography, ethnicity, religion and interests. Outside school, young people have most contact with their neighbourhoods" (p. 19). With regard to relationship support for young people, 'community' can include:

- the neighbourhood where they live and go to school, and community activities that might be available
- 'very important adults' who may influence them
- formal social services delivered by non-government and government providers.

McLaren (2002, p. 113) remarks that neighbourhoods "can have a positive impact on young people, but it is difficult to tease out the influence of families, friends and schools from that of

the neighbourhood … overall, the impact of neighbourhood is fairly low compared with family and other influences".

She also notes that "the availability of supervised activities locally … has an impact on peer relations" (p. 129). Young people who are involved in structured, supervised activities tend to socialise with friends who have good social skills, be involved in fewer antisocial activities and be more likely to stay at school.

Māori researchers and commentators have cited *kaupapa whānau* as influential. Kaupapa whānau is described as groups of people who get together for a common purpose or shared interest, as distinct from *whakapapa whānau*, who are people with a shared ancestry (Walker, 2006).

Alongside parents, members of their family and whānau and friends, young people often have influential relationships with other adults, including teachers, coaches, church leaders and neighbours. Research indicates these 'very important people' (VIP) support young people's personal development and achievement of academic goals, and help solve interpersonal problems (Greenberger, Chen & Beam, 1998). McLaren (2002) notes that "while the influence of these VIP adults is not as strong as that of family or same-age friends, they clearly make a difference. The more positive influences a young person can have the better, and this is a rich source of even more positive support" (p138).

Research has shown that some young people are turning to online communication to help solve problems (Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies, 2008; Chilli Marketing, 2006; Piper & MacDonald, 2008). Group interviews of young people in Wellington conducted by Chilli Marketing included questions about their attitudes to seeking help in the context of ex-periencing violence. Most were unlikely to seek help, but if outside help was available all said they would prefer interacting with a website rather than face-to-face or phone contact (Chilli Marketing, 2006).

Only 20 percent of the young people surveyed for Mission Australia ranked the internet in their top three sources of advice or support. This percentage was fourth highest, but a long way behind friends, parents and relatives or family friends (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 2008).

Piper and MacDonald (2008) researched how first-year tertiary students in Auckland use in-formal online communication (such as email or MSN) to help solve significant problems; often relationship and personal issues. In this study the people turned to were predominantly friends and family, the same as we have seen in other research. An interesting finding from this research was that it was young male New Zealanders who found sharing problems online with others most helpful.

Statistics from youth telephone helpline 0800WHATSUP (Barnardos, 2008) report that rela-tionship issues are the number one reason young people call to talk. Youthline reports that growing numbers of young people are using their text service since it became free in 2008. The number of texts has trebled, and they expect that texts will soon outnumber calls to their service, as they can receive up to 400 texts on some days. These texts contain questions about sex, relationships and family and friends. There is no available information about the proportion of texts that deal specifically with relationship issues (Youthline, 2008).

In New Zealand, other sources of support for young people include counsellors, youth work-ers, youth health services, girls' magazines (such as *Girlfriend*) and websites such as Urge (part of Youthline) and Attitude (part of Parents Inc). Website topics include dating ideas, the language of love, what makes a relationship work, where to go and what to do, and what not to do on your first date. In 2001 Relationship Services released a programme called Young People Relate. This programme was intended to run over six sessions and explore relation-ship issues and build skills. The programme is not currently being provided because of a lack of demand.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study was to find out what support young people need as they have their first relationships. To find out we decided to talk with young people, parents and whānau and professionals who provide support to young people.

The fifth principle of the YDSA (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) is that "youth development is triggered when young people fully participate. This principle acknowledges the importance of providing opportunities for young people to increase their control of what happens to them and around them, through advice, participation and engagement" (p. 22). In undertaking research about an issue affecting young people it was important to ask young people for their views. The YDSA also states that positive youth development is about young people being connected – to their family and whānau, school, training or work, peers and their community (Principle two); and that youth development happens through high-quality relationships (Principle four). These principles suggested that it was important to talk with the people who were likely to be providing support to young people as they worked through relationship issues. We therefore recruited parents, whānau and a range of professionals working with young people, including school counsellors, community-based youth workers and social workers working in secondary schools.

3.1 Focus groups and interviews

The focus groups and interviews were guided by five questions, which varied slightly depending on who the participants were. For example, only the young people were asked the question "What do young people want out of a relationship?" In summary, the questions asked were as follows:

- What skills and information about relationships do young people need?
- Where do young people learn about relationships and who has the responsibility to teach them?
- Where do young people go for support and what are effective ways to support them?
- How can parents support their young people?

The focus group and interview questions are provided in full in Appendix 1.

Most of the focus groups were attended by two facilitators, one of whom took and then transcribed detailed written notes. Interviews were undertaken by one researcher who took and transcribed written notes.

3.2 Recruiting participants

Personal and organisational networks were used to recruit all the participants. To recruit young people we approached youth groups established through a church, schools and a community-based social and health-service provider, and a contact with links to a co-ed Catholic boarding school (four of the nine focus groups were affiliated with a church youth group or Catholic school). Using established groups of young people meant that the young people already regularly met as a group and knew each other, their parents were aware of their participation in the group (and so parental consent was easier to attain, where the young person was aged 15 years or under), an adult facilitator was already engaged with the young people and a support system was already in place. We aimed to recruit a mixture of girls and boys aged 11 to 18 years old, from a range of ethnic groups and, specifically, a group of gay and lesbian young people. The three focus groups with predominantly Māori young people were co-facilitated by the Families Commission researcher and Māori facilitators. The focus group of gay and lesbian young people was co-facilitated by the Families Commission researcher and the convenor of the support group.

The young people and the parents and whānau we recruited were not related to each other. To recruit parents and whānau we used contacts in a workplace and in two community

groups, and members of an existing Families Commission Parents Panel.[3] We aimed to recruit mothers and fathers, Māori whānau and grandparents and parents living in a rural or provincial community. The focus group with Māori parents and whānau was co-facilitated by the Families Commission researcher and a Māori facilitator.

To recruit the professionals working with young people we contacted the school counsellors' representative at the New Zealand Association of Counsellors, who referred us to contacts in the Wellington region. We consulted with the Wellington Youth Network to recruit youth workers. We also recruited youth workers and school counsellors through a youth worker working in a community-based organisation in the Wairarapa. We used contacts to recruit three social workers working in secondary schools in Auckland.

In February and March 2009 we held the following focus groups and interviews:

- nine focus groups with young people in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, involving 77 young people
- four focus groups with parents, grandparents and whānau in Auckland, Wellington and the Wairarapa, involving 23 participants
- three focus groups with youth workers in Wellington and the Wairarapa, involving 14 participants
- interviews with seven school counsellors and a focus group with three social workers working in two Auckland secondary schools.

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS AND WHĀNAU PARTICIPATING IN FOCUS GROUPS

GENDER		AGE		ETHNICITY	
Girls	42	11–14 years	16	NZ European	33
Girls	35	15–17 years	56	NZ/European/Māori	13
		18+ years	5	Māori	10
				Pacific Island	9
				NZ European/Māori/Pacific	4
				Māori/Pacific	2
				NZ European/Pacific	1
				Other	5
Women	14	40–49 years	7	NZ European	9
Men	9	50–59 years	7	Māori	7
		60–69 years	5	NZ/European/Māori	2
		70+ years	2	Samoan	1
		Unknown	2	NZ European/Tongan	1

3   Families Commission Parents Panels are discussion groups of eight to 12 participants who live in similar circumstances. Groups meet three times a year for two years to discuss issues that affect people raising children. Currently we have 10 discussion groups across the country. These groups represent Māori whānau, sole parents, parents of teenagers, rural families in Central Otago, parents of young children, grandparents raising grandchildren, refugees, fathers and parents of children with disabilities. Each group is co-ordinated by a community organisation selected for their expertise in a particular field, or their ability to connect with local representative families and whānau.

		Māori/Samoan	1
		Unknown	2

The professionals working with young people were not asked to provide demographic information about themselves.

3.3 Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Families Commission Ethics Committee. All potential participants were given information sheets outlining the aims of the study and what their participation would involve, and explaining that any information they provided would be confidential, and that recordings of interviews would be destroyed at the conclusion of the research. All participants signed consent forms. For participants aged 15 years and under, information sheets and consent forms were also sent to their parents and their consent obtained. The young people aged 15 years and under also assented to their own participation in the research.

3.4 Data analysis

A thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken for each group of participants (young people, parents and whānau and professionals) and by each question asked. Analysis included noting common themes and issues, and examining the extent to which results varied across the different groups of participants. Where possible, some assessment was made of the extent to which responses differed by gender and ethnicity. The responses from the group of gay and lesbian young people were also compared to responses from the focus groups with heterosexual young people (note, however, that the latter focus groups were not asked to identify their sexual orientation and may have also included gay and lesbian young people).

Given the small number of participants in the sample, a quantitative analysis of the issues emerging through the focus groups was not undertaken.

Verbatim quotes from the participants have been used in the report to illustrate the themes that emerged. Following each quote, information about the participant is provided in brackets (for example, 'Girl, Wellington'). We have done this to provide some context for the quote, while also aiming to protect participants' anonymity.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Our sample was small and selective. For example, we did not have sufficient representation in the focus groups from rural areas, Pacific peoples, other ethnic minorities or at-risk young people. The research findings are therefore not representative of young people, parents and whānau or professionals working with young people in New Zealand, and the findings from this project cannot be generalised across the population.

4. What the participants told us

4.1 Introduction

In this section we summarise what all the focus group and interview participants told us. Wherever possible we have provided information in the participants' own words. We hope other researchers, policy-makers, programme-providers and decision-makers will also use this information. Note that responses to the same questions cannot be directly compared across the different groups (that is, the young people, the parents and whānau and the professionals working with young people). None of these groups were related to each other, in a familial or professional sense.

4.2 What do you want out of a relationship?

The young people we talked with said they wanted:

✓ fun	✓ someone just for them
✓ something to do, to hang out	✓ image, status, popularity
✓ shared interests	✓ to look cool
✓ friendship	✓ someone to show off
✓ sex	✓ to fit in
✓ love	✓ to do what everyone else was doing
✓ to find a soulmate	✓ to be like older kids
✓ a sense of belonging	✓ to meet new people
✓ someone to talk to	✓ to learn stuff
✓ to be treated as special	✓ experience
✓ to feel wanted, valued	✓ to be someone they were not
✓ support, comfort	✓ someone they could take care of

The focus groups with boys were less likely than the focus groups with girls or mixed gender to say they wanted 'love'. Otherwise there were no consistent differences across the focus groups by gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

4.3 What are the top relationship issues for young people?

Some of the young people and all the professionals working with young people were asked this question.[4] They agreed that dealing with breakups, sex and text-based relationships were three key relationship issues for young people. In addition, the young people listed the following issues: being cheated on, fights, trust, jealousy, peer pressure, knowing how relationships work, communication, bullying and dealing with strong feelings. Only the young people in the gay and lesbian focus group named bullying as an issue. The professionals also talked about abusive relationships and generational and cultural differences being key relationship issues for young people.

Young people (from three of the nine focus groups) said…

Being cheated on

Fights

---

[4]   Just three of the nine focus groups with young people were asked this question. The question was included as an 'additional prompt' (see Appendix 1 for the full list of questions asked at the focus groups). In retrospect, it would have been useful to ask all the young people to respond to this question. Knowing the issues that young people are facing would help to ensure relevant support is provided.

Breakups	
Trust	
Jealousy	*Your girlfriend being jealous of you having other girl friends, it gets messy, or jealous of me hanging out with my friends.* (Boy, Christchurch)
Sex	*Having different sexual needs and wants.* (Boy, Christchurch) *Where sex comes in. If you want sex how to get it without destroying the relationship. And likewise, if you don't want it, how to preserve the relationship.* (Boys, Wellington)
Peer pressure	*Peer pressure, including your boyfriend pressuring you into doing something you don't want to do.* (Girls, Wellington)
How relationships work	*An understanding of how to start a relationship and how to finish one.* (Boys, Wellington) *What to do once you're in a relationship.* (Boys, Wellington)
Communication	*Will she say yes if I ask her out? What is going on in her head?* (Boys, Wellington) *Sometimes couples have unequal feelings about each other.* (Group, boys and girls, Wellington) *People use the word 'love' in different ways; some people say 'I love you' after going out for three days.* (Group, boys and girls, Wellington)
Bullying	*Our [gay] relationships get us bullied.* (Group, boys and girls, Wellington)
Text-based relationships	*You are constantly in touch and it gets intense really quickly and can break up really quickly.* (Group, boys and girls, Wellington)
Strong feelings	*Sometimes something happens and you feel like the world is ending. You think something was a really big deal at the time, then you look back on it later and realise it really wasn't that bad.* (Girl, Wellington)

Professionals said…

Abusive relationships	*Domestic violence is acted out at school. We are seeing more dysfunctional families, with a lot of violence and that is starting to be portrayed as the norm … males seven to 15 years old have a real attitude toward women.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) *Some kids don't know what a safe relationship is. Many are in a high-risk relationship which has the potential to be abusive. They characterise it as love – someone I've chosen as my significant other who is not my family. The boys haven't had good relationship role-modelling.* (Youth workers, Auckland) *A big relationship issue for kids is 'ownership' of a person they are in a relationship with. You can see unhealthy habits starting. Not just in boys but also girls who are wanting to control their boyfriends. Can be very possessive in their relationships.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a))
Sex	*If they (girls especially) have early sexual experiences it is likely to involve alcohol or sometimes because they have been sexually abused. Huge education is required for the boys around STIs… Catholic and Pacific kids (especially girls) are hugely conflicted, have guilt.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) *Get intense in a relationship very quickly including unwanted and unhappy sex. Drugs and alcohol are frequently involved in the formation of a relationship. This means they have no fear of consequences, in-*

	cluding STIs, rape, pregnancy. (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa)
	Pacific kids don't get sex education from their parents. When adults say no they're going to do it anyway. (Youth workers, Auckland)
Breakups	*Breakups are messy. Relationships can spill over into bad feelings within a group or groups of young people. It simmers and some kids are happy to stir the pot.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a))
Generational and cultural differences	*P.I. kids keep home and church separate from school. They might be good at home and church and then come to school and be loud, swear, hook up in a relationship.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *First-generation Kiwi kids have particular issues with peer pressure and their parents' views are often very black and white. Kids talk to their friends to get permission to do what they are doing, when their parents would tell them 'no'.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) *Refugee boys are rampant, they have no boundaries. In the refugee camp they had nothing, no men, sometimes there are six boys raised by one woman who may not be their mother.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a))
Texting and social networking	*Kids know everyone's business, within seconds, with texting. They are not given a break from texting and socialising. They are communicating with their peers constantly.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) *Influence of technology is huge, texting relationships, Bebo, Facebook, telephone. I know a girl who has had a six-month relationship who has seen her boyfriend only three times. They might only know them by their nickname.* (Youth workers, Auckland) *If you haven't received a text by a certain time, what does it mean? They don't know how to interpret texts. It is the worst medium for expressing emotion. They get confused by the lack of emotion. It can make and break a relationship and it can happen really quickly.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b))

4.4 What skills and information do you think teenagers need so they can develop healthy relationships?

The parents and whānau and professionals we talked with agreed that teenagers need skills and information regarding breakups, what constitutes a healthy relationship, values and sex so they can develop healthy relationships. In addition, the parents and whānau said that young people need skills and information regarding boundaries, peer pressure, alcohol, respect and self-esteem. The professionals added communication skills to the list.

Parents and whānau said…

Boundaries	*The most important thing to teach young people is to have boundaries for the relationship, including trust.* (Grandmother, Auckland)
Breakups	*It's ok to fall out of love, you need to care, but it's not your responsibility whether your ex sinks or swims.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Peer pressure	*To withstand peer pressure, especially the pressure to have sex.* (Mother, Wellington) *That you are still cool if you say no, if you don't want to be involved.* (Mother, Wellington)
Alcohol	*Alcohol counselling is important. Their bodies are not ready for a lot of alcohol. But being drunk is no excuse afterwards. It is too late to say 'I was drunk and I didn't know what I was doing'.* (Grandmother, Auck-

	land)
Respect	*Have respect for whoever they're going out with, whether the relationship lasts or it doesn't. Break up with dignity, don't trash the other person.* (Father, Wellington)
Self-esteem	*If kids have confidence and self-esteem they then are more inclined to be prepared for life later on, it starts as little kids. They have to be comfortable to stand against the trend.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Dealing with disputes	*Teenagers often have inappropriate anger, they don't know how to deal with it. Need to teach them restraint, don't say the first thing that comes into your head.* (Father, Wellington)
Values	*By the time they get to be a teenager they should have a solid value system and good sense of judgement. They can look at things with some independent thought and decide what is right for them. Sometimes they don't have the skills, but they have the common sense and values* (Mother, Wairarapa)
What constitutes a healthy relationship	*Know what is a healthy relationship, need to define this, eg dating and sexual stuff. Everyone has different views about what is healthy.* (Father, Wellington)
Sex education	

Professionals said…

Breakups	*The intensity of first breakups can't be underestimated; their investment is very deep. There is self-blame, a struggle between head and heart, a huge sense of grief. Our role is to let them know that they are not alone.* (School counsellor, Wellington (b)) *There is a sense of failure when a relationship ends. Young people don't have the background, they don't know that it will be ok. They also have to deal with 'publicity' around the breakup.* (Youth workers, Wellington (a))
What constitutes a healthy relationship	*Being able to tell the difference between what is and what isn't ok in a relationship – is this normal? Eg, people don't understand that abuse doesn't have to be physical, it can be about emotional control.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b)) *What kinds of boundaries they have. They might feel weird about a relationship but they are unable to put their finger on it.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b))
Communication	*Some young people, when they are starting their first relationship, are incapable of reading the signs of the other person.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b)) *Boys don't know what girls want, they want to know what the rules are.* (Youth workers, Wellington (a))
Values	*Kids need to learn about values, morality, being part of a community.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a))
Sex education	

4.5 Where do young people learn about relationships?

The young people, parents and whānau and professionals all agreed that young people learn about relationships from their family (their parents, siblings and extended family), friends, school and the media. All these groups were quite critical of what and how young people were

taught through the school sexuality education curriculum. Two focus groups of young people who were recruited through a co-education Catholic boarding school did not name school as a place where they learnt about relationships. These boys and girls said their school's policy was to not provide sexuality education.

Young people and parents and whānau stated that people learn from personal experience. Young people in three of the focus groups (which were not necessarily recruited through a church), and none of the parents and whānau or professionals, said they learnt about relationships at church. One group of youth workers talked about young people learning about relationships through their affiliation with gangs.

Young people said they learn about relationships from…

Personal experience

My family	*My parents have separated, because of that I'm really cautious about the 'status' of my relationships. I never saw them being happy and in love so I don't use the love word for a long time in a relationship.* (Girl, Wellington)
My friends	*You get the G-rated version of sex education from your parents and get the R18 version from your friends.* (Boy, Christchurch)
At school	*The teacher gets a condom, gives a demonstration on how to use it but they don't talk about the emotional side. They tell us you have sex, get pregnant or you get AIDS and die. They don't teach how to deal with a breakup. They focus on the physical side and say you also need to be emotionally ready but not anything more.* (Group, girls and boys, Wellington) *School talks on the birds and the bees are useful and we need to know (even if we pretend that we don't want to know in front of our mates).* (Girl, Christchurch) *There is too much sex education, it is just repeated every year, I wish I could pull out of having to do it.* (Boy, Christchurch) *They should teach how to deal with relationship breakups. However, everyone also does it differently, so it might be better to learn that one-on-one.* (Group, girls and boys, Wellington) *We had a guy come to school a couple of times to talk with our year group about drugs, alcohol, sex and stuff. He told us stories about his own life and experiences. He was cool and funny and he talked at our level. He answered questions that other kids had asked him before.* (Group, girls and boys, Wellington)
At church	*At church there are lots of older people in relationships and they are good examples.* (Girl, Wellington)
Media	*[about relationships in movies]: …they make it look so easy, even when they have problems. They make you think that's what life is like, that's how it can be, but it is all fantasy.* (Group, girls, Wellington)

Parents and whānau said…

Family	*These kids are watching and hearing us all the time, more than we realise.* (Grandmother, Auckland) *Some young people are not observing their parents cuddling on the couch at home.* (Grandmother, Auckland) *My parents split up when I was young and I never saw their arguments and fights. I make a point of showing conflict and making up in front of my kids, that it's ok to disagree, a sense of reality is important.* (Father, Wellington) *In blended families children learn about how to form relationships as*

	they see their parent's new partnership form. (Mother, Wairarapa) *My 14-year-old grandson asks his great-nan, 'How old were you when you first had a boyfriend?' They are very close and she is very honest with him.* (Grandmother, Auckland)
Friends	*My kids were influenced by other kids' family rules (or lack of them). I was always having to justify why we do it the way we do. There is a lot of peer pressure.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
School	*School education has a huge influence, particularly about sex. Lots of it is about the mechanics, but they have left out the emotional part, it is hard to teach. The mechanics can be taught too early.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Media	*[Young people have] a fascination with Hollywood star relationships. If they don't know any better, they think that's normal.* (Father, Wellington) *Kids discuss stuff on social networking sites and we have no idea. They worry me. I'm not au fait with them.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Personal experience	*[Young people] learn by trial and error. They learn by doing, by making mistakes. Sometimes they are terrible mistakes. Hopefully they are coming out from these experiences knowing a little bit more about relationships.* (Father, Wellington)

Professionals said…

Parents	*Relationships are modelled at home. If the child has a sole parent, if there is violence at home or drugs are seen as acceptable – where are they going to see and learn about healthy relationships?* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *They learn relationships from the context within which they live. The strongest context is from within their family, what is modelled at home.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) *Many [Pacific] girls are told they are not allowed to have a boyfriend until they are 18 or 21 years old.* (Youth workers, Auckland)
Peers	*Within their peer group … eg the old girl crones of the group are setting up young girls with boys.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) *A lot of youth are isolated, they are learning from their peers and it is not necessarily good information they are getting.* (Youth workers, Auckland) *Friends – this is a big influence. Young people talk to their friends a lot. Peer pressure is significant, there is lots of gossiping in playground.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b))
Media	*TV is often really unhealthy and the relationships are either volatile or sweet and forever.* (Youth workers, Wellington (a)) *Kids learn a lot of stereotypes from music videos, particularly about gender roles … they project that there is a high-up love you would do anything for, for true love, including putting yourself in danger of hurt because this love is the ultimate thing. They insinuate that if this relationship doesn't continue on you will be broken.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b)) *Kids learn about relationships from Playstation games, the internet and DVDs – that their parents rent and don't screen or censor.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *On social networking sites … it is a different style of being in a relationship.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b))

Gangs	*Gangs have a big influence on building relationships. Every second young person has an affiliation to a gang. Affiliation will mean different things for different people … it is cool in South Auckland to be part of a gang. It is an identity thing. It depends on the gang – they create a family, a sense of being wanted, recognised and acknowledged.* (Youth workers, Auckland)
School	*Some kids don't come to the sex education classes. There is a fine line for faith-based schools in terms of what they teach about sex. [My Catholic school] is very careful to teach sex education within the context of a relationship and relationship issues…the health curriculum is taught through the Religious Education Department. The approach is that relationships are within the context of spirituality. It is a holistic approach.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) *Sometimes we are exposing kids to things that they're not ready to hear.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c))

Other issues raised about sexuality education included the difficulties associated with schools buying in programmes; the calibre of teaching staff; and its perceived lower status in the curriculum compared to academic or NCEA subjects.

4.6 Where do you go if you have a relationship issue?

The young people we talked with said that if they had a relationship issue they dealt with it by themselves; talked to someone in their family, their friends, a school counsellor or teacher, a youth worker, a doctor or Youthline; or looked for advice in a girls' magazine. While most of the focus groups with young people named school (either teachers or school counsellors) as a place they could go, not everyone felt comfortable doing this, because they didn't trust them or they didn't give them the type of support they wanted. All the young people we spoke with said they would not use the internet for information about a relationship issue.

In response to this question, there were differences between the Māori and non-Māori young people. The Māori young people we talked with did not say they would talk to 'no-one', or try to work through the relationship issue by themselves. They also did not identify other sources of support, aside from their family, friends and school, such as Youthline, youth workers, magazines or a doctor.

> *All young people are different so it is hard to have just one thing.* (Girl, Wellington)

Deal with it by myself

My family	*Really they're [parents] probably better to talk to than you think.* (Girl, Wellington) *My mum went psycho and went over to try and sort it out with her parents, I felt shame, whakamā.* (Boy, Auckland) *I wouldn't talk to my dad because he wouldn't take it seriously, he still thinks of me as his little girl.* (Girl, Wellington)
Friends	*Having enough friends around you helps, they support you and know you.* (Girl, Wellington) *Going out with mates – talking to them about issues but not telling them about your issue.* (Boy, Auckland) *With another adult, not your parent, because they will take it in differently – you'd get a mean telling-off from your parents. Yeah, your parents will be disappointed in you.* (Boy, Wellington)
School counsellor/teacher	*Not school counsellors, young people don't think they can trust them. Making an appointment is not confidential.* (Group, girls, Wellington) *The school counsellor tries to find a solution, but I don't want that. I just need someone who will listen, I need guidance. Just by talking*

Some young people also said they would go to a youth worker, counsellor, doctor, girls' magazines or Youthline.

4.7 Who has the responsibility to teach young people about relationships?

The parents and whānau and professionals we talked with said the responsibility for teaching young people about relationships rests with their parents and schools.

As illustrated in the first two quotes below, the focus groups with Māori parents and whānau and one Samoan father in another focus group said that women in the family had the primary responsibility for talking about relationship issues, especially sex.

While parents listed school as having a responsibility to teach young people about relationships, many questioned the content, quality and appropriateness of what young people were being taught at school.

Parents and whānau and professionals said…

Parents, whānau	*In the traditional whānau model men did not talk about sex, it was tapu and kids were told go see your aunty to have that women's discussion … who is responsible – it is a wairua thing, the person gravitates to you, it is everyone's responsibility. But you need to be prompting them, asking her cousins … it takes time, effort, commitment and resources (and not just money). You think something is wrong with that girl, and you go sort it out. We are sometimes seen as the witches! But it has to be a safe place for them to come to.* (Group discussion, Māori grandmothers, Auckland)
	Mum has the ability to talk about deep and quite explicit things. This is partly a cultural thing. (Samoan father, Wellington)
	If parents are in a dysfunctional relationship they may not feel comfortable talking about relationship issues … need to let parents know it's ok to talk about [relationships], that young people want to. A lot is embarrassment. Some [parents] are not ok about talking about feelings … ideally, the parents and teen should be getting the same information together, eg, have sex education at school with both parents and teen present. (Youth workers, Wellington (b))
School	*They get relationship education at school.* (Mother, Wellington)
	Teachers who are comfortable about teaching it are rare. You can't expect all teachers to have those skills. [Young people] are captive at school and it's the place where most establish their relationships. (Mother, Wairarapa)
	I am uncomfortable about the detail they go into at school at such a young age. By getting the information they're getting the permission to go ahead. The information needs to be in a context and they need to be ready. (Mother, Wairarapa)
	Some kids don't feel safe in the class to ask questions, they need a safe social environment to teach it in. (Father, Wellington)
	Wherever they get it needs to be reinforced at home. (Father, Wellington)

It would help if parents knew what was happening at school, then parents could reinforce it. (Mother, Wellington)

4.8 What are effective ways to support young people with relationship issues?

The parents and whānau and professionals we talked with agreed that effective ways to support young people with relationship issues included support from their parents and at school. In addition, parents and whānau said effective support could come from grandparents and other adults, social youth groups and through the media.

Professionals working with young people added that young people should be empowered to solve youth issues. They said that youth workers, collaborative responses, youth-friendly information, mentors and church could also provide effective support. The professionals raised a number of issues with the support services that are currently provided, and these issues are noted under the BUT… headings below.

Parents and whānau said…

Parents	*The best place is one-on-one with parents, not even with other siblings present.* (Father, Wellington)
Grandparents and other adults	*Grandparents are different from a parent. We are more relaxed and lenient with our grandchildren. [I say to my grandchildren] mum's your boss but I'm not your boss.* (Grandmother, Auckland) *For dysfunctional kids mentoring has significant merit. [Mentors] can speak through experience, provide balance.* (Father, Wellington) *Often they have a relationship with another adult, eg a workmate. It is a good thing to have. They are like a mentor and we should encourage it. However, they may not always give the advice you would like and the young person may take it as gospel. You have to be accepting of the other influence even if it is slightly different to us.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Social groups	*Peer pressure is both positive and negative; if they haven't got a good group the results are disastrous.* (Father, Wellington) *Church youth-group constructs positive other influences to help them shape their own values.* (Father, Wellington)
School	*You can't just expect the education system to solve it. Must have whānau support, and linking whānau to school. When kids notice their whānau are involved it matters to them. Kids are wanting their parents to be there for them. For parents who are working there is no putea for them to take some time off and watch their kids' activities at school.* (Aunty, Auckland)
Media	*I've seen on TV on Saturday morning these panels of kids where they ask questions, and they are great.* (Grandmother, Auckland)

Professionals said…

Parents	*Teens ache for something from their mums and dads, that's what they want. If you match up with the love that's inside their mother then you are getting somewhere.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) *I work with families to get a good relationship with the parents. It starts with whānau, that's where it will finish too. What they see at home is what they will do.* (Youth worker, Wairarapa)
Youth solving youth	*We should listen to young people more, not just pay them lip service.*

issues	*Give them respect and responsibility, give them resources and autonomy. Only youth will solve youth problems. They need our support and trust.* (Youth workers, Auckland)
Youth workers	*Youth groups, youth workers and leaders. They want someone they trust, honesty, someone of the same gender. They don't want their parents or school. They want people who can share their own experiences. We had a youth workers' panel which answered anonymous questions and it was really successful.* (Youth workers, Wellington (a)) *We are seed-planting. We are modelling [healthy relationships] as youth workers.* (Youth worker, Wairarapa)
School	*For some kids, their teachers and schools are often the safest adults they meet.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *Young people need to have a mix of skill – what are you supposed to do plus experience. This is a level of inquiry that is going deeper than passing on information.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) BUT… *Young people don't see school as a place they can go for personal issues. It depends on your relationship with the school.* (Youth workers, Wellington (a))
School counsellors	*The school counsellor is a normal part of the school. I'm involved in coaching the dragon boat team so I'm interacting in the school in other ways. Then there is less stigma about seeing the school counsellor, kids just drop by. However, the role of counselling needs to be understood in the school, by the other teachers. School counselling is not therapy. School counsellors work in an educational setting. Our role is to enable kids to learn … we have a triage role – listen to kids, help them out and/or refer on.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) BUT… *Ninety-five percent of a school counsellor's work is social work, brokering services for the young person. This leaves no time for counselling and it is getting worse. The intensity and complexity of problems prevent school counsellors from seeing kids with 'middle-range' issues, eg with relationship issues.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa)
Collaborative responses	One school counsellor gave an example of a collaborative response: *If a girl comes to see me when she is pregnant I say to her 'This is going to be a very hard time and you need people there to help you. Who are you going to tell and talk to?' They can always find somebody who they know will be ok to tell, eg an aunty. I say 'That person and I need to talk' and it goes from there. The parents then find out. I need to honour the parental authority. Kids try to fragment out their world. They try to keep their friends, family, church and school all separate, but it is not a good thing to do.* (School counsellor, Wellington (c)) *[Our school] has an excellent relationship with [local] Youth Health Service. One of their nurses comes to school. There is a natural transition for kids between school and [the Youth Health Service].* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *Strengthening Families as a place to start has been really effective.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) *There should be a one-stop shop for young people … a space where young people go, with good access. It should be aligned with school.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa) BUT… *Time is a barrier. There are different levels of buy-in [to collaboration initiatives] … the contracting model is stuffed. Need funding to do collaboration and more time to do this.* (Youth workers and school coun-

	sellors, Wairarapa) *There are limited places to refer on to in the community. Parents can't pay for private counselling.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a))
Youth-friendly information	*There is a lack of youth-friendly resources. The Family Planning red heart concertina brochure is liked by kids. Information from the It's not OK campaign is very good but it is not targeted at youth. There need to be stories from young people, and include young people in designing the resources.* (Youth workers, Wellington (b))
Mentors	*There are many parents who don't see anything wrong with what they are doing. In these families, mentoring for young people is useful, if the family is not going to change … need to strengthen the community around the young person, with an adult to teach them.* (Youth workers, Auckland)
Church	*In some churches [youth] are to be seen and not heard. It is important to be seen in church, though there is no way they'd talk to their pastor if they had problems. Some P.I. communities are pushing the change. It's about re-educating the pastors, they hold the power.* (Youth workers, Auckland)

4.9 What do you want from your parents?

Young people said that the quality and type of their relationship with their parents influenced what they wanted from them by way of support for their relationship issues. For example, one girl said: I wouldn't talk to my dad because he wouldn't take it seriously, he still thinks of me as his little girl. Some said they would talk to their mother or father about sex, whereas others were adamant that was one issue they would not talk with their parents about.

For the gay and lesbian young people, talking with their parents about relationship issues was always within the context of their parents' reaction to their coming out. Two different young people in that focus group said:

My mum would take the mickey out of being gay, so I couldn't tell my mum that I was. Parents shouldn't impose their beliefs too much on their kids, they don't know how much it hurts when they joke around.

My parents are fine with me [being gay], but dad has expressly forbidden me to talk about my relationships, my boyfriends.

Young people said…

I want parents to:	I don't want parents to:
✓ fun	✓ someone just for them
✓ be available	✓ be closed-minded
✓ be straightforward, tell the truth	✓ be too serious about relationships
✓ give good advice, share stories about their relationship experiences	✓ be too nosy and try to find everything out about the relationship
✓ talk about sex	✓ give a lecture
✓ talk things through and let me ask questions	✓ tell me to move on and get over it
✓ not interfere	✓ put me down
✓ listen and not judge	✓ tease me

Let us do our own thing. If we need support we will ask. Offer it and we know it's there. (Boy, Christchurch)

Adults need to know that we will come to them if we need their help. Parents need to offer to be there first. (Boy, Christchurch)

4.10 How can parents support their young people?

Parents and whānau said…

✓ give advice from your own experience

✓ build the relationship

✓ give facts and ideas of repercussions

✓ work as a team with your partner

✓ teach them to feel good about themselves

✓ talk things through

✓ be there, be available and be open to them, in their time

✓ raise issues in general conversation, rather than sitting down formally

✓ include their friends in your home and get to know their parents

✓ let them know things can be worked through, that there is hope
  make them realise they're loved regardless, that your love is unconditional
  stick to your boundaries and have standards and rules for your own home
  give young people a home, security, a physical space
  it is good to talk with other parents about how you're managing

4.11 Do you think parents find it difficult to talk about relationship issues with teenagers? What would help?

In response to this question, the parents and whānau said that parents should try to avoid over-reacting to what their teen has said about relationships; teasing, gossiping or passing comment about their boyfriend or girlfriend; being afraid of setting boundaries; being absent from home; or being embarrassed to talk about sex. They also noted that the health of their own couple relationship affected how they could talk with their teen about relationship issues. The professionals we talked with said there was a need for effective parenting programmes, and that some parents struggle to set boundaries for their teenagers.

Parents and whānau said…

I haven't known a parent who doesn't want to do good. They know they want changes but they don't know where to begin; they can be stuck and it's a question of how to get unstuck. (Mother, Wairarapa)

The parents we talked to said parents should try to avoid:

Over-reacting	*Parents can be reactive, need to learn to sit and listen and talk later.* (Father, Wellington)
Passing comment about your teen's boyfriend or girlfriend	*You need to be careful about communicating your personal opinion about your teen's boy/girlfriend, be careful about passing comment or opinion. You really need to bite your tongue sometimes.* (Mother, Wellington)
Teasing or gossiping about your teen's relationship	*You need to be aware how sensitive they are about these things. My husband and I soon learnt that we couldn't tease our son about his relationships and girlfriends.* (Mother, Wellington) *Parents shouldn't gossip about their kids with their own friends. It doesn't encourage kids to give confidences to their parents. However,*

	it is also good to talk with other parents about how you're managing with your teens. (Mother, Wellington)
Being afraid of setting boundaries	*I have my rules. For example, they are not allowed to sleep [with their boyfriend or girlfriend] in the same room at home. It is about not being afraid to have some standards, in my own home, under our roof.* (Mother, Wairarapa)
Being absent from home	*If you're not around because you're working then you can't see the good things that they are doing.* (Grandmother, Auckland) *There is a lack of parents at home, parents are working. The kids have no boundaries and are left searching for a sense of belonging.* (Grandmother, Auckland)
Being embarrassed to talk about sex	

Parents also talked about the health of their own couple relationship:

It's important for you to be happy for your children to be happy. (Grandmother, Auckland)
[Your ability to talk with your teen about relationship issues] depends on your relationship with your partner. If it is not good then it is hard for children to come to ask for advice. Then they might just go to their peers. (Mother, Wellington)

If your relationship is pretty strong and you feel happy in yourself then you are equipped to talk to them. They pick up on that as well. They can see through all that. (Grandmother, Auckland)

Only a small number of parents and whānau mentioned knowing about or using resources, services or parenting programmes. Those parents mentioned hearing useful messages from Ian Grant and Pio Terei of Parents Inc.

Professionals said…

Parenting programmes	*Parents do appreciate these courses … parents could be helped by community responses. It is necessary to have a sense of community, of having connections. Someone like super-gran idea, where parents are drip-fed practical ideas and it's an ongoing relationship.* (School counsellor, Wellington (b)) *To be successful parenting programmes need to have free transport, no course fee, childcare available. They need to be holistic…it needs to be sustainable and empowering. If a mum feels good they're going to parent better. There is not the same level of support available for dads.* (Youth workers, Auckland) *Need to get to parents through churches, community notice-boards, rugby clubs, leaders in the community. Need to be targeted at the community level and parents will come along if they trust the person who is delivering the programme.* (School counsellor, Wellington (a)) *The model of parenting programmes is not real. They are founded on a mother and father, people being articulate, organised and employed. For example, strategies like time out are useless when there are five kids sharing that room* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa)
Setting boundaries	*Sole parents struggle with teenagers, especially where they haven't set appropriate boundaries for their kids … parents end up saying your boyfriend can stay over and sleep with their daughter. They say it is better that they're at my house rather than roaming the streets at 3am.* (Youth workers and school counsellors, Wairarapa)

4.12 Differences by gender, culture and sexual orientation

As noted in the introduction to this report, gender, culture and sexual orientation will influence how young people think about, feel about and engage in relationships. There were actually very few differences, however, in the responses the young people in this project gave compared across these demographic groups.

Focus groups with boys were less likely to say that they wanted 'love' out of a relationship than mixed or girl-only focus groups. Otherwise, boys and girls listed the same types of issues and supports that they found useful.

Non-Māori young people were more likely to say they would deal with relationship issues by themselves. The focus groups of Māori young people only named family, friends and school, and no other types of support, in response to the question   Where do you go if you have a relationship issue? One focus group of Māori young people said: [you go to] people who you know have had experience. Someone you trust. Someone who has been through it before. [Facilitator: What about somewhere like a telephone helpline like Youthline or WhatsUp?] No, I wouldn't do that (Group, boys and girls, Wellington).

There were two issues raised in the focus group with gay and lesbian young people that were not discussed by the heterosexual young people. They talked about how it was not uncommon for their relationships to lead them to being bullied by their peers. They also said that the reactions of their family and friends to their coming out as gay or lesbian influenced the support that was subsequently sought or provided for their relationship issues.
The small number of parents and professionals we talked with does not allow for comparisons to be made within or across these groups.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The responses outlined in the previous section match neatly with the YDSA (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) framework for positive youth development. As noted in the introduction to this report, the YDSA distinguishes four social environments where young people learn about and get support for their relationships: family and whānau; peers; school; and community. The findings of our study will be discussed in this context in the following section.

5.2 Parents, family and whānau

Our finding that young people seek support and learn about relationships from a range of people and places, but especially family and friends, is consistent with findings in Reaching Out – Who New Zealanders turn to for relationship support (Families Commission 2008b), which reported that adults primarily sought out informal support from family and friends when they had relationship issues, rather than using formal professional support from a counsellor or psychologist.

One of the most consistent and striking themes in the focus groups with young people was how they watched their parents, caregivers, older siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents, and viewed them as role models for the development of their own first intimate relationships. This theme was also consistently noted by the parents and whānau, and the professionals we talked with.

As young people observe their parents' relationship – how they communicate, how they show love and so on – they are forming a view about what standards and types of behaviour are acceptable in intimate relationships. Research indicates that   in families where parents discuss differences constructively, rather than having hostile disagreements in front of their children, young people tend to grow up happier and better behaved … families where parents do not engage in violence towards each other have children with less risk of anxiety, substance abuse, conduct disorder and property crime (McLaren, 2002, p. 50).

Not all parents and whānau members will be aware of how much they are watched by their children and how this information influences young people as they make choices about their own intimate relationships. There is also a difference between teaching relationship skills and talking about relationship issues, and being conscious of the daily, incidental interactions between yourself and your partner. We recommend that further consideration is given to how to raise parents' awareness of the fact that what they do in their daily life in their own couple relationship matters to young people. This consideration could include investigating how common it is to include in parenting programmes a section on self-awareness and recognising the health of parents' own intimate relationship.

Some young people in the study said they would not go to their parents if they had relationship issues. Some said they got better support from other family members who were not so close to them, or perhaps protective of them. A few young people talked about their parents setting up connections with other family members or adult friends so they had someone to talk to. This seems a constructive approach – where parents acknowledge that young people are likely to have relationship issues and will benefit from an adult or older person's support, and parents acknowledge they might be too close to the young person to offer constructive support.

Some young people's parents or whānau are unavailable, unapproachable or do not provide examples of healthy relationships. Some young people and professionals who participated in this project talked about young people needing to have huge courage to choose to live their lives in a different way – for example, by living free from violence. For these young people, positive and pro-social support provided by peers and through their school and community is critical.

Young people who observe unhealthy relationships need to be provided an alternative, healthy model of relationships. In her fact sheet, *Adolescent Romantic Relationships*, Sorensen (2007) states that young people do not automatically know what constitutes right and wrong behaviour in a dating relationship, and that without a clear understanding of what makes a healthy relationship, they are likely to tolerate relationships that put them at risk. This opinion is supported by research in New Zealand that recommends young women should be taught the early warning signs of 'ownership' by their partners, which is seen as a precursor of abusive behaviour, and be able to identify ethical and respectful relationships (Towns & Scott, 2008).

In our scan of relationship information provided to young people, we found that information about what constitutes a healthy relationship is commonly included. Both Family Planning and Parents Inc, for example, include this information in their youth resources. However, as noted by a youth worker in this study, there may be a lack of youth-friendly resources readily available to young people.

The young people in this study were clear about what they did and didn't want by way of support from their parents and family. They also easily outlined the relationship issues they struggled with. Communicating these preferences and issues to parents, who sometimes find it difficult to raise and address their teen's relationship issues, would be useful. For instance, some parents may be surprised by the level of distress some young people experience when a relationship breaks up. To an adult, teen breakups may seem somewhat trivial in the entire context of a young person's life, but to the young person at that time, it is often an overwhelming event.

Only a few parents and whānau members mentioned knowing about or using resources, services or parenting programmes to help them to support their young people as they worked through relationship issues. In the light of our small sample size (n=23), this may not necessarily mean that parents lack information about young people's relationships, or that they lack the skills to assist young people as they have relationship issues.

Two exceptions to this could be the following. Many of the young people participating in our focus groups mentioned how awkward or embarrassed their parents seemed to be when giving 'the sex talk'. Also, in recounting their experiences of coming out, the group of gay and lesbian youth we talked with said how affected they were by their parents' reactions. Family Planning has excellent resources for parents, including the book Open and Honest (2007), which provides information and techniques for parents to grab the moments that present every day to discuss sex, sexuality and relationships with their children and *Invisible Families* (Stewart, 1993), a New-Zealand-written book for parents of lesbian and gay young people. Alternatively, Parents Inc has a focus on abstinence education which they promote to young people and their parents.

Another important issue is where parents avoid talking to their young people at all about sex. Families with traditional, conservative religious beliefs are more likely to consider premarital sex, and therefore young people having sex, to be sinful and taboo. Some cultural groups are also less inclined to talk about sex generally. Young people who are not learning about sex from their parents, and whose parents do not consent to their attendance at sexuality education classes at school, are potentially at risk of not being able to make well-informed decisions if they have a relationship.

5.2.1 Summary

The young people we talked with said they sought relationship support from various people and places, but especially family and friends. This finding is consistent with other research. They said they learnt about relationships through watching their own parents and caregivers. Not all parents will be aware of how much they are watched by their children and how this information influences young people as they make choices about their own intimate relationships.

We recommend that consideration is given to raising parents' awareness of how what they do in their daily life in their own couple relationship matters to young people. The young people in this study were also clear about what they did and didn't want by way of support from their parents and family, and they easily listed the relationship issues they struggled with. Communicating these preferences and issues to parents, who sometimes find it difficult to raise and address their teen's relationship issues, would be useful.

In our scan of the relationship information that is available to young people, we found that information about what constitutes a healthy relationship is commonly included. However, there may be an issue about the availability of youth-friendly resources for young people. Only a few parents and whānau in our small sample mentioned knowing about, using or wanting additional resources, services or parenting programmes to help them to support their young people as they worked through relationship issues. An exception to this may be relationship issues to do with sex and sexuality. In recounting their experiences of coming out, the group of gay and lesbian youth we talked with said how affected they were by their parents' reaction. The young people participating in our focus groups mentioned how awkward or embarrassed their parents seemed to be when giving 'the sex talk'. Another important issue is where parents avoid talking to their young people at all about sex. Young people who are not learning about sex from their parents, and whose parents do not consent to their attendance at sexuality education classes at school, are potentially at risk of not being able to make well-informed decisions.

5.3 Friends

The young people in this study all said they learnt about relationships and sought support from their friends. This confirms the findings of other research. The parents and professionals we talked with also noted the influence (both positive and negative) peers had on young people.

As noted in the introduction to this report (see reference to Weisz et al's study of 'informal helpers' (2007)), the competence of peers responding to their friends' relationship issues is of interest. Peer-support programmes are available in many schools, and they should enhance the competence and confidence of peers responding to relationship issues. It would be useful to review what other resources are available to 'help the helpers'.

5.4 School

Three themes emerged around the education system, and they are discussed in turn in this section:
- delivery of sexuality education in schools
- the provision of student support in schools
- a four-way partnership – young people, parents and whānau, school and community.

5.4.1 Delivery of sexuality education in schools

As noted in the introduction, a considerable amount of focus has been placed in the last two years on sexuality education through ERO's review of the curriculum in 2007.

Our overall assessment of the sexuality education curriculum can be summarised by the following four points.

First, the principles underpinning sexuality education in the curriculum appear to be sound. Information and skill-building regarding relationships appears to be appropriately included within the framework that is provided by the curriculum. The skills and information that parents and whānau in our study thought important for young people to have in order to develop healthy relationships (boundary-setting, breakups, peer pressure, alcohol, respect, self-esteem, values and the characteristics of a healthy relationship) are, by and large, covered by the curriculum.

Second, the name 'sexuality education' suggests that this part of the curriculum is primarily focused on learning about sex, which is in fact not the case. The emphasis is weighted too much toward sex education and too little toward relationship issues. In the United Kingdom this part of the curriculum is called sex and relationship education (SRE). Using the word *relationship,* in the title may achieve greater clarity for teachers, pupils and parents about what the curriculum actually covers.

Third, while the curriculum includes relationship skills as a core strand, in practice the findings of our study indicate that both young people and parents and whānau still think there is too much emphasis on the mechanics of sex and not enough focus on the emotional side of relationships. This was also noted by ERO in their 2007 review. It was also a finding of an open hearing on youth sexual and reproductive health held by the New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development in 2006.

Finally, as found by the Ministries of Education and Health in response to one of ERO's recommendations, there are probably adequate written resources available to schools and teachers to support their delivery of the sexuality education curriculum. For example, the teaching resource produced by Family Planning (2008), *Te Piritahi*, provides a manual complete with plans, activities and prompts for teachers to pick up.

Ultimately, while the Ministry of Education may set out a curriculum based on solid principles and a clear rationale, and make resources and professional development opportunities available, it is up to individual schools and teachers to take up those opportunities. The literature review and critical appraisal of best practice in sexuality education addresses this concern in Recommendation 9, which recommends that   advisory support be available to all teachers and schools to ensure effective delivery and implementation of sexuality education throughout the school. (Learning Matters Limited, 2008)

The Families Commission will talk with the New Zealand School Trustees Association, secondary-school principals and the New Zealand Health Education Professionals Association about how a focus on relationships can be maintained and strengthened in the teaching of the health curriculum. We will also be asking how Recommendation 6 of the same literature review has been addressed – that   parent education workshops/meetings be developed and provided for parents/caregivers on understanding the purpose and intent of teaching and learning in sexuality education, what sexuality education is and isn't and how to address issues that arise at home, for example answering children's questions.

5.4.2 Provision of student support in schools

Student support is typically provided within secondary schools by a school counsellor. Some schools have a nurse or doctor on site, and a smaller number again contract social workers to work within the school. Other schools have forged relationships with community-based youth services, such as youth health services, to ensure that young people have access to the services they need. Services like Parents Inc's Attitude programme and Youthline also offer seminars to schools to supplement the health curriculum.

Many of the school counsellors we talked with seemed under-resourced. One school counsellor, based in the Wairarapa, said:

> *Ninety-five percent of a school counsellor's work is social work, brokering services for the young person. This leaves no time for counselling and it is getting worse. The intensity and complexity of problems prevent school counsellors from seeing kids with 'middle-range issues', eg with relationship issues.*

Student support services are funded in a school's operational budget, which is allocated by the Ministry of Education and then prioritised for spending by individual schools' board of trustees. Schools do not have unlimited budgets, and need to prioritise spending. However, the provision of high-quality student support is important to ensuring students are ready and able to learn. We note that section 77(a) of the Education Act (1989) states that   the principal of a

state school shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that students get good guidance and counselling.

We noted an apparent discrepancy between the demand for school counselling services from young people and the availability of counselling services in schools. The young people we talked with ranged from those who reported they would never go to a school counsellor to those who had, and had found the service very useful. The school counsellors we talked with all reported being inundated with requests for appointments from students and referrals from teachers. As with any service, one size does not fit all, and it is important to ensure a range of services is available to match the diverse needs of young people.

One issue raised by both the young people and the parents we talked with, but for different reasons, was confidentiality. Some young people were concerned that making an appointment with a school counsellor was not confidential, and that the counsellor might pass information on to other teachers at school. Parents were concerned that decisions were being made by young people with the support of school counsellors that they were not involved with (for example, deciding to terminate a pregnancy).

Section 77(b) of the Education Act (1989) states that   the principal of a state school shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that … a student's parents are told of matters that, in the principal's opinion, (i) are preventing or slowing the student's progress through the school; or (ii) are harming the student's relationships with teachers or other students.

Relevant parts of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors *Code of Ethics* state that:
   6.1 Extent of Confidentiality
      (a) Counsellors shall treat all communication between counsellor and client as confidential and privileged information, unless the client gives consent to particular information being disclosed.
   6.2 Exceptions to Confidentiality
      (a) Counsellors shall only make exceptions to confidentiality in order to reduce risk.
      (c) Exceptions to confidentiality occur when:
            • there is serious danger in the immediate or foreseeable future to the client or others
            • the client's competence to make a decision is impaired. 5

On this issue, the Privacy Commissioner (2009) notes:

Under the Privacy Act parents do not have an automatic right of access to personal information about their children. The Privacy Act only deals with an individual's right to request their own information. It doesn't give a right for people to access information about others. A parent is not requesting their own information when they want information about their child. However, depending on the age of the child, we encourage agencies to take a pragmatic approach to requests from parents and release information, unless there are serious concerns why a parent should not have access to information. If a parent is requesting information from a public sector agency, such as a school, then the request for their child's information is an Official Information Act request. Often, the parent would be entitled to get the information, unless there were serious concerns around the child's safety or welfare, or the child was of an age to be able to express a strong view about their own choices. Under the Health Information Privacy Code parents do have a right of access to their children's health information as long as the child is under 16.

This is a complex issue which warrants continued debate and attention.

5.4.3 A four-way partnership – young people, parents and whānau, school and community

In the talks with school counsellors for this project it was evident that some were not well linked in with local community services. Many had links with youth health services; fewer had

---

5   See http://www.nzac.org.nz/ethics

links with services for families or parents. Student support services are predominantly youth-focused. They do not specifically aim to include parents and whānau. It could be worthwhile to explore the potential for secondary schools to provide youth workers or social workers on site so that more holistic and family-inclusive support can be provided where this is appropriate for young people who are facing relationship issues.

One of the focus groups we ran for this project was attended by both school counsellors and youth workers working in and around a provincial township. Some of the participants knew each other and some did not. They all found it useful to meet together, and at the end of the focus group one of the youth workers undertook to include all the focus group participants on an email network of local youth workers. Facilitating other networking opportunities for school counsellors and community services, including youth workers, could be useful.

We note that within the education sector there is debate about the role of schools in their wider community and the extent to which schools should go beyond their central educational functions.

Encouraging community-based youth organisations to offer their services to schools would benefit young people. The organisation 24-7 is an example of a Christian-based youth organisation that has formalised relationships with schools, particularly in Christchurch. In a study of 24-7   staff [at a secondary school] reported how youth workers reduced teacher loads in regard to sports and other extracurricular activity as well as tutoring and support for students with special needs. They were seen as powerful role models and mentors who were liked and respected by students. Youth workers were frequently used to support socially isolated students and help them establish relational networks. They were also valued for the positive impact they had on school spirit. Schools also endorsed youth workers leadership development work (from www.24-7youthwork.org.nz).

The National Youth Workers Network (NYWN) has also recognised the potential of building the relationship between schools and youth workers. In its report *Real Work: A report from the national research project on the state of youth work in Aotearoa* (2006), one of the needs identified was to   recognise schools as an important context for youth work, and develop funding for youth workers in schools (p. 12).

5.4.4 Summary

A considerable amount of work has been undertaken in the last two years relating to sexuality education, particularly in response to an evaluation of the quality of sexuality education programmes in schools undertaken by the Education Review Office in 2007. We are of the view that:

- the principles underpinning sexuality education in the curriculum appear to be sound
- using the word *relationship* in the title of 'sexuality education' would achieve greater clarity for teachers, students and parents about what the programme actually covers
- while the curriculum includes relationship skills as a core strand, in practice the findings of our study indicate that both young people and parents and whānau still think there is too much emphasis on the mechanics of sex and not enough focus on the emotional side of relationships *while there appear to be adequate written resources available to schools and teachers to support their delivery of the sexuality education curriculum, an issue appears to be that individual schools and teachers may not be making the best use of those opportunities.*

Some of the school counsellors we talked with seemed under-resourced. Some also did not seem to be well linked in with local community services. Many had links with youth services, much fewer had links with services for families or parents. Facilitating networking opportunities for school counsellors and community services, including youth workers or social workers, could be useful so that more holistic and family inclusive support can be provided where this is appropriate for young people who are facing relationship issues. Young people, their families, schools and the surrounding community could all benefit from developing a four-way partnership.

5.5 Community

Role-modelling and support for young people is not confined to parents and caregivers. In his influential book *The Invisible Table* (2002) New Zealand youth worker Lloyd Martin talks about positive youth development occurring in a context where young people are supported by at least six significant adults. He notes: "the importance of a network of informal relationships with adults in shaping a child or young person. This type of education takes place outside the formal classroom and it includes the communication of value, of social obligations, of gender role models, and of a sense of belonging" (p. 117).

Developmentally, adolescence is a time when young people begin to explore beyond their family, and relationships with peers and other adults can become more influential. (Note that this does not necessarily diminish the importance of the parenting role; it is more likely to occur in addition to that influence. Youth'07 found that most students in their survey reported feeling close to their parents (72 percent) and the great majority felt that their parents cared a lot about them (90 percent) (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008, p. 15))

We note that mentoring services for young people have been slowly but steadily growing in New Zealand over the last 10 years. Mentoring services tend to focus on linking young people with other non-familial pro-social young people or adults. The Youth Mentoring Trust promotes effective youth mentoring opportunities for young New Zealanders and to provide professional development initiatives for individuals and organisations working in youth mentoring. Its website has a focus on showcasing "what is happening in New Zealand" (see www.youthmentoring.org.nz).

5.5.1 Summary

The participants in this study confirmed that role modelling and relationship support for young people are not confined to parents and whānau. Many adult family friends and people coming into regular contact with young people may have never reflected on the potential for them to proactively model positive relationships and life skills. We recommend that consideration is given to how awareness can be raised amongst adults who are in contact with young people of the fact that what they do in their daily life can positively influence young people.

6. Conclusions

In this project we asked young people, parents and whānau and professionals working with young people a range of questions to help find out what support young people need as they have their first relationships. The responses provided information and opinions about:

- what relationship issues young people are working through and what skills and information they need
- where young people learn about relationships and where they go to for support
- who should be teaching young people about relationships
- how to effectively support young people as they deal with relationship issues, and particularly how parents can support their young people.

The findings from our study highlight the significance family and whānau and schools have in influencing and supporting young people as they have their first relationships.

Key messages to emerge from the study are:

- Young people learn about relationships by watching their parents, whānau and the adults around them.
- Parents, whānau and other adults are key sources of support for young people.
- Young people want to learn more about the emotional side of relationships through the school curriculum.
- Schools' student support services are probably under-resourced and need to be better linked in with the young person's family and community services.

As a result of this study, the Families Commission will undertake the following actions:

- raise awareness with parents and whānau of the fact that what they do in their own couple relationship significantly influences young people
- communicate young people's preferences about what they do and don't want by way of support from their parents and the issues they struggle with, to parents
- advocate that relevant parties in the education sector:
    - change the curriculum name to *'Sexuality and Relationship Education'*
    - maintain and strengthen a focus on teaching relationship skills and education as part of sexuality education in the health-education curriculum
    - provide more information to parents, family and whānau at the same time as their young people are being taught sexuality and relationship education at school
    - investigate the need for better resourcing for effective student support services in secondary schools
- raise awareness with other adults of the fact that their support is important to young people.

References

Adolescent Health Research Group (2008). Youth'07: The Health and wellbeing of secondary school students in New Zealand. Initial Findings. University of Auckland, Auckland. Available at: http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/soph/_docs/youth2000/InitialFindings.pdf

Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (2008). Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians 2008 Available at: http://www.acys.info/youth_facts_and_stats/attitudes/2008/mission_australia_survey2008

Barnardos (2008). Statistical Summary 2008 – Profile of calls and callers for the 2008 calendar year. 0800WHATSUP, Auckland.

Brook (2008). Brook's Position on Sex and Relationship Education. Available at: http://www.brook.org.uk/sex-and-relationships-education

Chilli Marketing (2006). Report on Interviews with Young People – Their attitudes to violence and non-violence. Available at: http://www.respect.org.nz/PDFLinks/Research%20Report%20on%20Young%20People%20Attitudes%20to%20Violence%20and%20Nonviolence%202006.doc

Crespo, C. (personal communication 2009) Youth Connectedness Project. Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, Victoria University of Wellington. http://www.vuw.ac.nz/youthconnectedness/

Crockett, L.J., & Randall, B.A. (2006). 'Linking adolescent family and peer relationships to the quality of young adult romantic relationships: the mediating role of conflict tactics'. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 23(5): 761–780.

Curtis, P. (2008). Sex Education Made Compulsory in all Schools. Guardian News and Media Ltd. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/23/sexeducation-primaryschools1/print

Education Review Office (2007a). The Teaching of Sexuality Education in Years 7 to 13. Education Review Office, Wellington. Available at: http://ero.govt.nz/ero/publishing.nsf/Content/sex-ed-jun07

Education Review Office (2007b). The Teaching of Sexuality Education in Years 7 to 13: Good Practice. Education Review Office, Wellington. Available at: http://ero.govt.nz/ero/publishing.nsf/Content/sex-ed-jun07

Families Commission (2005). Focus on Families. Families Commission, Wellington. Available at: http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz/research/children/focus-on-families

Families Commission (2006). What Makes Your Family Tick. Families Commission Research Report No 1/06, Wellington. Available at: http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz/research/service-delivery/what-makes-your-family-tick

Families Commission (2008a). Parenting Teenagers Couch Poll. Families Commission, Wellington. Available at: http://www.thecouch.org.nz/member/report/23

Families Commission (2008b). Reaching Out: Who New Zealanders Turn to For Relationships Support. Families Commission, Research Report No 5/08, Wellington. Available at: http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz/research/couple-relationships/reaching-out

Family Planning (2007). Open and Honest. Family Planning, Wellington. Available at: http://www.familyplanning.org.nz/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=9iyGMkwgU20%3d&tabid=699

Family Planning (2008). Te Piritahi – Exploring Relationships: A teaching resource for young people. Family Planning, Wellington.

Family Planning Association, (2007). Are you ready? Young People's Views on Sex and Relationships. FPA, London. Available at:
http://www.fpa.org.uk/attachments/published/838/PDF%20Are%20you%20ready.pdf

Fleming, T.M., Watson, P.D., Robinson, E., Ameratunga, S., Dixon, R., Clark, T.C., & Crengle, S. (2007) Violence and New Zealand Young People: Findings of Youth2000 – A national secondary school youth health and wellbeing survey. The University of Auckland, Auckland.

Gray, A. (2007). Features and Examples of Effective Parenting Education Programmes. Ministry of Social Development, Wellington.

Greenberger, E., Chen, C., & Beam, M.R. (1998). The Role of 'Very Important' Nonparental Adults in Adolescent Development. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 27(3): 321–343.

Hair, E.C., Jager, J., & Garrett, S.B. (2002). Helping teens develop healthy social skills and relationships: what the research says about navigating adolescence. Trends Child Research Brief, July. Child Trends, Washington.

Harrison, A. (2008). Nine-Month Review Bears Fruit. BBC News. Available at:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/uk_news/education/7686734.stm

Jackson, S. (2002). 'Abuse in Dating Relationships: Young people's accounts of disclosure, non-disclosure, help-seeking and prevention education.' New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 31(2): 79–86.

Karney, B.R., Beckett, M.K., Collins, R.L., & Shaw, R. (2007) Adolescent Romantic Relationships as Precursors of Healthy Adult Marriages: A review of theory, research, and programs. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica. Available at:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR488/

Kirk, A. (2002). 'The effects of divorce on young adults' relationship competence: the influence of intimate friendships'. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 38(1/2).

Learning Matters Limited (2008). Literature Review and Critical Appraisal of Sexuality Education: Best Practice. Ministry of Education, Wellington.

McKenzie, D.M. (2004). Happily Ever After: Discourses of emotion, love and health in the intimate relationships of young adult New Zealanders. Thesis, University of Auckland, Auckland.

McLaren, K. (2002). Youth Development Literature Review: Building Strength. Ministry of Youth Affairs, Wellington.

Martin, L. (2002). The Invisible Table: Perspectives on youth and youth work in New Zealand. Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.

Ministry of Education (2007). The New Zealand Curriculum. Learning Media, Wellington.

Ministry of Youth Affairs (2002). Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa. Ministry of Youth Affairs, Wellington.

Ministry of Youth Development (2005). Making It Happen… Strengthening Youth Development in Schools. Ministry of Youth Development, Wellington.

National Youth Workers Network (2006). Real Work: A report from the national research project on the state of youth work in Aotearoa. National Youth Workers Network, Christchurch.

New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development (2006). Youth Sexual Health: 'Our health, our issue'. New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development, Wellington.

Office of the Privacy Commissioner (2009). Quiz Questions and Answers 2009. Available at: www.privacy.org.nz/privacy-quiz-questions-and-answers-200

Piper, F., & MacDonald, B. (2008) 'Sometimes It's Harder to Speak Things Out': How first-year New Zealand tertiary students use informal online communication to help solve significant problems. Australian e-journal for the Advancement of Mental Health, 7(3). Available at: http://amh.e-contentmanagement.com/archives/vol/7/issue/3/article/3260/'sometimes-it's-harder-to-speak-out-things'

Relationship Services Whakawhanaungatanga (2001). Young People Relate. Relationship Services Whakawhanaungatanga, Wellington.

Solomon-Fears, C. (2007). Scientific Evaluations of Approaches to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Congressional Research Service. Available at: http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RS22656_20070501.pdf

Sorensen, S. (2007). Adolescent Romantic Relationships. ACT for Youth Centre of Excellence. Available at: http://www.actforyouth.net/documents/AdolescentRomanticRelationships_July07.pdf

Stewart, T. (1993). Invisible Families. Available through Family Planning, Wellington.

Steinburg, S.J., Davila, J., & Fincham, F. (2006). 'Adolescent marital expectations and romantic experiences: associations with perceptions about parental conflict and adolescent attachment security.' Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 35(3): 333–348.

Toomey, E.T., & Nelson, E.S. (2001). 'Family conflict and young adults' attitudes toward intimacy'. Divorce and the Next Generation. Haworth Press.

Towns, A., & Scott, H. (2008 unpublished). The Culture of Cool. Getting in early to prevent domestic violence. Auckland.

Walker, T. (2006). Whānau is Whānau. Blue Skies Report No. 8/06, Families Commission, Wellington. Available at: http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz/research/whanau-is-whanau

Weaver, S. (2001). Teenage Boys Talk. 50 New Zealand teenagers talk about their lives. Random House, Auckland.

Weaver, S. (2002). Teenage Girls Talk. 52 New Zealand teenagers talk about their lives. Random House, Auckland.

Wetzstein, C. (2005). Middle Ground on Sex Ed. The Washington Times 10 February 10 2005. Available at: http://www.washingtontimes.com/culture/20050210-125526-4111r.htm

Wiesz, A.N., Tolman, R.M., Callahan, M.R., Saunders, D.G., & Black, B.M. (2007). 'Informal helpers' responses when adolescents tell them about dating violence or romantic relationship problems'. Journal of Adolescence. 30: 853–868.

Youthline (2008). Christchurch Community Support Youth. Available at: http://www.youthline.co.nz/index.php/about-us/press-releases/577-christchurch-community-support-youth-txt

Zimmer-Gembeck, J.M. (2002). 'The development of romantic relationships and adaptations in the system of peer relationships'. Journal of Adolescent Health, 31:216–225.

Appendix 1 – Focus group and interview questions

Young people

1. What do you think young people want to get out of having a relationship?
2. Where do you learn about relationships?
3. Where do you go and/or who do you go to if you have a relationship issue?
4. What are effective ways to support young people with relationship issues? What works and what doesn't?
5. What sort of support or information about relationships do you want from your parents and/or other people in your family?

Additional prompts:
- Consider the four key settings within which young people live: school; parents, siblings and wider family members, whānau; peers; community including media (TV, movies, magazines), texting, social networking, internet, gaming, service-providers, church, sports clubs etc.
- Are different things appropriate at different ages, or for boys and girls?
- What are the top three relationship issues for young people?

Parents and whānau

1. Where do young people learn about relationships?
2. What skills and information do you think teenagers need so they can develop healthy relationships? Are different things appropriate at different ages?
3. Who should have the responsibility to teach teenagers about relationships?
4. What are effective ways to support young people with relationship issues? What works and what doesn't?
5. Do you think parents find it difficult to talk about relationship issues with teenagers? Why?
6. What would help to make you feel more confident to talk with your teenager about relationship issues?

Professionals working with young people

1. Where do young people learn about relationships?
2. What skills and information do you think teenagers need so they can develop healthy relationships? Are different things appropriate at different ages?
3. Who should have the responsibility to teach teenagers about relationships?
4. What are effective ways to support young people with relationship issues? What works and what doesn't?

Do you think parents find it difficult to talk about relationship issues with teenagers? Why?