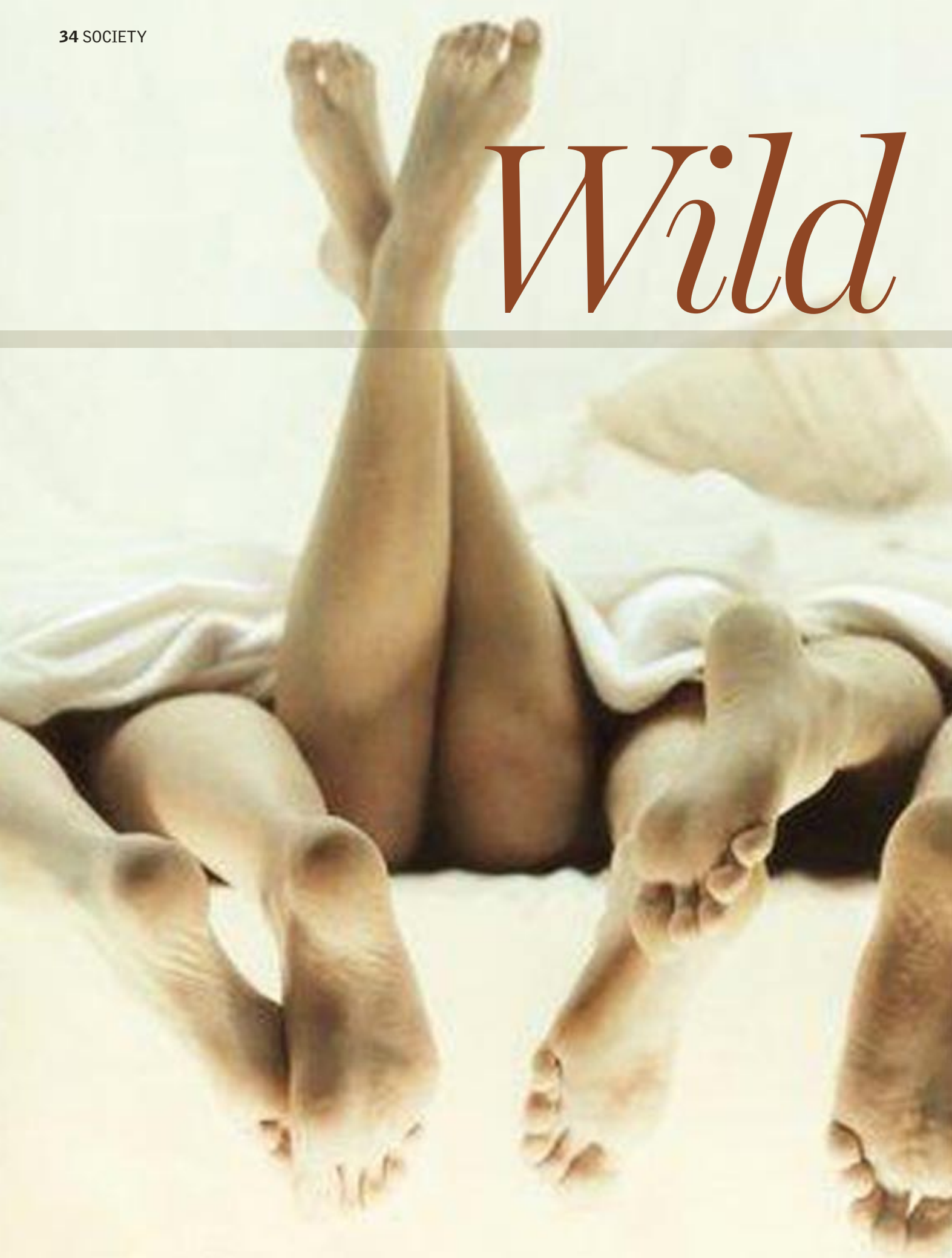


Wild



Your teenaged son watches porn, your daughter thinks oral isn't sex. Welcome to the X-rated world of new teen sex.

things



HOW YOUNG ARE GIRLS engaging in oral sex? How many eight-year-old boys have watched X-rated porn? And what's with the "bi-curious" and the "trisexuals"? A new book is about to lift the lid on the sexual practices of young Australians.

Unlike previous sex surveys which focus on the clinical, *Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers*, by Joan Sauers, described as a "Kinsey [Report] for teenagers" addresses the intimate: not only what teens do, but also how they feel about what they do. The result, written in authentic teentalk with SMS abbreviations and little or no punctuation, sheds a light on an area which, despite our permissive society, remains cloaked in misconceptions and ignorance.

The findings may not be what parents want to know but they suggest, undeniably, that the sex education programs in schools are inadequate. Today, the majority of the teenagers questioned learn about sex from pornography. As one 16-year-old boy from Victoria says, he masturbates, "in front of the computer watching porn. The normal way."

"While a generation ago, *Playboy* magazine was about the most hardcore you could get, now access to really hardcore negative porn is very easy," says 53-year-old Sauers, a best-selling author and script editor who specialises in films for children and adolescents; her credits include, *Caterpillar Wish*, *The Heartbreak Kid* and television series *Heartbreak High*. Hardcore porn is now just a net search away. And hardcore is not an exaggeration - these are not the first sexual images you want your eight- or 10-year-old child to see.

A vivacious, direct-talking woman with ebony hair and pearly skin, New York-born Sauers lives with her 18-year-old daughter, Ruby, in a neat, modest flat in Sydney's Double Bay. Silk cushions plump up the sofas, *Sexualia: from Prehistory to Cyberspace* lies on the coffee table. In 2005, Sauers was working as a creative consultant on three film scripts addressing teenage sexuality when she realised the information she needed about what

"teenagers actually get up to" didn't exist.

"They are surveys done by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS)," she says, flicking open a textbook filled with statistics, "but no-one interviewed was under 15 years old and all [of them] needed parents' permission. Fantastic information, but not the emotional stuff."

Although not a medical doctor or counsellor, Sauers organised her own internet survey, working with Julie Catt, a Sydney-based psychologist, and Dr Gemma O'Brien, a physiologist at the University of New England, specialising in female adolescent sexuality. Between October 2005 and January 2006, Sauers and dozens of teenage helpers handed out several thousand leaflets across Australia (bar the Northern Territory). They stood outside train stations, malls and cinemas, giving leaflets only to those who looked like teenagers, which promoted Sauers "teenspeak" website. On the site was a survey with 50 questions and it stated clearly that any information given would be used in a book.

Out of the several hundred responses, Sauers narrowed it down to 300 reliable respondents: 190 girls and 110 boys, ranging from the ages of 13 to 19. The book is divided into two, with the first half analysing the data and the second giving a sample of the unedited content of the questionnaires. While this may be a relatively small number, crucially it is a targeted and random response.

As it was done anonymously and over the internet, increasingly favoured by academic and corporate studies, Sauers hoped the respondents would not censor themselves. And nor would she. There are limitations. Sauers cannot prove whether it's a teenager responding, or their age, gender and postcode - which she asked all to include. If she or Catt felt any survey was questionable, they disallowed it.

The results are compelling and at times alarming. What's glaringly obvious is that while parents' descriptions of sex are stuck in the 1950s, Australian teenagers are growing up in an increasingly disconnected world of techno sex. Whether it's the internet, SMS sex (having sex via texting someone) or chat-room sex, today's teenage bedroom has no walls.

According to the survey, 53.5% of girls 12 and under have seen porn, and by the age of 16, this rises to 97%. Boys start earlier: 70% have seen it by the age of 12 and 100% by the age of 15. Around 58% of girls and 87% of boys are sexually excited by porn, which is viewed as much on films and videos as on the internet - which means a "net nanny" is inadequate as prevention.

"Before most boys have had their own personal encounter," says Sauers, "they have seen all these images of women with Brazilians [pubic hair waxes] or breast implants." Not only does this leave both sexes feeling confused about their body and genital image, it can trigger feelings of inadequacy. One girl describes being "ashamed" when her boyfriend complained she was "too hairy".

The average age of losing one's virginity is still 16, according to the survey, the same as 25 years ago, but what has dramatically shifted is the age of having significant sexual encounters - whether oral sex or mutual masturbation, known as "handys" or "wristys". "Oral sex certainly isn't casual," Sauers points out, "but it does usually happen before intercourse." By the age of 16, 51% of girls and 65% of boys who responded had engaged in oral sex, either giving or receiving or both.

The "new sexual sequence", says the author, is kissing, touching, mutual masturbation, oral sex and then intercourse as the last thing. "They don't call oral sex, sex. Sex is now intercourse." So, from a teen's point of view, Bill Clinton wasn't lying.

THEY LIKE TO WATCH Kids' exposure to pornography

Age	Girls	Boys
<7	4%	5%
7-8	15.5%	20%
9-10	26.5%	40%
11-12	53.5%	70%
13-14	85.5%	92%
15-16	97%	100%

SOURCE: Sauers, 2007

Sauers suggests that the prevalence of pornography means adolescents are more at ease with oral sex and “because kids don’t want to get pregnant or catch diseases.”

Girls in the survey particularly seem underwhelmed by oral sex. One 14-year-old commented how “it felt very odd having someone’s genitals in my mouth”. Many of the boys, in contrast, found the experience “amazing” or “awesome”.

Not only are the sex acts changing order, but teenagers’ sexual orientation is shifting. “threesomes” and “moresomes” are popular and, writes Sauers, “The idea of multiple partners is obviously a huge turn-on for both genders.” Girls appear to be more experimental than boys, with 42% of girls having had sexual encounters with other girls.

In response to how each participant identifies, with the choices “straight”, “gay”, “lesbian” “bisexual” or “other”, 6% of girls and 7% of boys said “other”. Some were “bi-curious” or “tri-sexual” and three boys were “zoosexual”.

When Sauers read the first zoosexual respondent she admits being horrified. “But you can’t pretend it doesn’t happen; this is something that children can look at on the internet.” According to other sex surveys, including Kinsey, it is not uncommon for respondents, especially in rural regions, to

admit having had sex with animals.

More reassuring, perhaps, is how teenagers answered the question, “How could sex be better for you?” with the majority saying that they wanted more emotional intimacy. Nor are teens being fooled by raunch culture. Many are frustrated that sex is used to sell everything from cars to shampoo: boys because it means they can’t stop thinking about it, girls because it cheapens sex.

While schools think they are tackling the issue, most kids give sex education a thumbs down: 76% of girls and 60% of boys say it doesn’t help much or at all. “All the sex education they get is either about the reproductive system, STIs [sexually transmitted infections] and pregnancy prevention. Yet 1% of sex acts result in reproduction,” says Sauers. One 18-year-old boy summed it up: “They should warn you in school how bad you feel after a one-night stand!”

The bad news is that parents don’t seem to help. Neither does religion, with 92% of girls and 88% of boys saying it had little or no influence on their sexual behaviour.

Families, it would seem, are also the most unforgiving when their gay or lesbian children “come out”: “My father tried killing me ... my sisters hate me. My mother physically and verbally abuses me,” wrote one girl, 19.

Navigating the stormy waters of sex is still rough for girls, with more than a quarter feeling pressured into a sex act, and most have regrets when they have sex with “a random” (stranger). Around 25% of both sexes have had sex with an adult and while for half the girls it was usually positive and the age difference minimal, the other half were taken advantage of, abused or raped – mostly by boyfriends or a relative. The rash of stories of assaults, “sneak attacks” – when the boy “slips it in” – are depressing and, sadly, typical.

Sauers says she was surprised that out of 300 participants there’s only one homophobe, one misogynist and one paedophile-in-the-making, adding “this is one too many”. She hopes that specialists in the field of adolescent sexuality will analyse her data and draw their own conclusions. She urges educators and parents to take more responsibility.

“There is no right age to talk about sex, but it should be part of the wallpaper. Sex ed isn’t about having ‘the big talk’ when you explain about the penis and vagina. It’s about laying the groundwork for a whole emotional context of sexuality, to talk about attraction, love and pleasure.”

As one 17-year-old girl puts it: “All in all, people should start being more open and not so afraid. Sex is part of life not a sin.” ● **Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers, by Joan Sauers, is published this week by Random House, \$34.95.**

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