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## **Exploring Sexual Health in Polish Adolescents – A School-Based Survey and Comparative Analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Introduction**

Sexuality is a complex area of study. That and the fact that the role of sex education in public health may have a potentially big impact, especially given safe sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), highlights the need for a better understanding of sexuality. This pilot study was aimed to explore the attitudes of Polish adolescents toward sexuality and sex education provided by family and school.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a survey method and a questionnaire-based research technique, using an original anonymous questionnaire. The questions focused on sexual knowledge conveyed within the family environment of adolescents and in the schools they attended. Additionally, the questionnaire addressed individual experiences related to sexuality among adolescents.

### **Results**

The study included 219 participants (100%). The largest group consisted of girls (173; 79%),

while boys accounted for 46 participants (21%). However, only about one-third of them were satisfied with these conversations, and fewer than 8% expressed satisfaction with the sex education classes conducted at school. The Internet was mentioned most frequently as the source of knowledge about sexuality. More than two-thirds of the respondents admitted to having masturbated, but over 75% had not yet engaged in their first sexual activity with another person.

## **Conclusion**

Sex education remains a sensitive topic for both parents and children. Among the subjects related to sexuality that participants found most interesting were: safe sexual behaviors, sexual maturation, the sexual needs of women and men, sexually transmitted diseases, and having children (pregnancy, childbirth). Sex education, especially when delivered through methods appealing to adolescents, continues to be a challenge for both the education system and the field of medicine, including public health.

## **Keywords**

sex education, sexuality, teenagers, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual health

## **Introduction**

There are many needs in human life: biological, psychological, sociological. Sexuality, which begins to develop from the moment of conception and intensifies during puberty [1–4], encompasses various needs, making it one of the most challenging aspects to study. Due to the complexity of sexuality, society should actively update and disseminate knowledge about it in order to prevent the negative consequences of poor sexual education, such as the spread of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (STI/STDs) [5,6].

Sex education can be divided into two types: family-based sex education and school-based sex education. Both types play a role in the development of children's sexual behaviour [7–12].

Considering the issues mentioned above, a pilot study was conducted among Polish youth in order to assess their attitudes towards topics related to sexuality within this group.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to understand adolescents' opinions on the transmission of knowledge about sexuality in the Polish population.

The survey method and questionnaire technique were used in the study. The research tool consisted of an original survey questionnaire. The main questions concerned sex education provided to the child by parents, as well as school-based sex education, and the sexual sphere of adolescents, taking into account individual experiences and views. The data presented are from a pilot study conducted among students of primary and secondary schools.

The questionnaire was anonymous, and the study was conducted with the consent of the participants' guardians.

## **Results**

The study included 219 participants (100%). The largest group consisted of girls (173; 79%), while boys accounted for 46 participants (21%). The age groups were nearly equal in size: 14–15 years old – 65 participants (29,68%), 16–17 years old – 88 participants (40,18%), Over 17 years old – 65 participants (29,68%), and 1 participant from the 12–13 age group (0,46%). The age distribution of participants is presented in Chart 1.

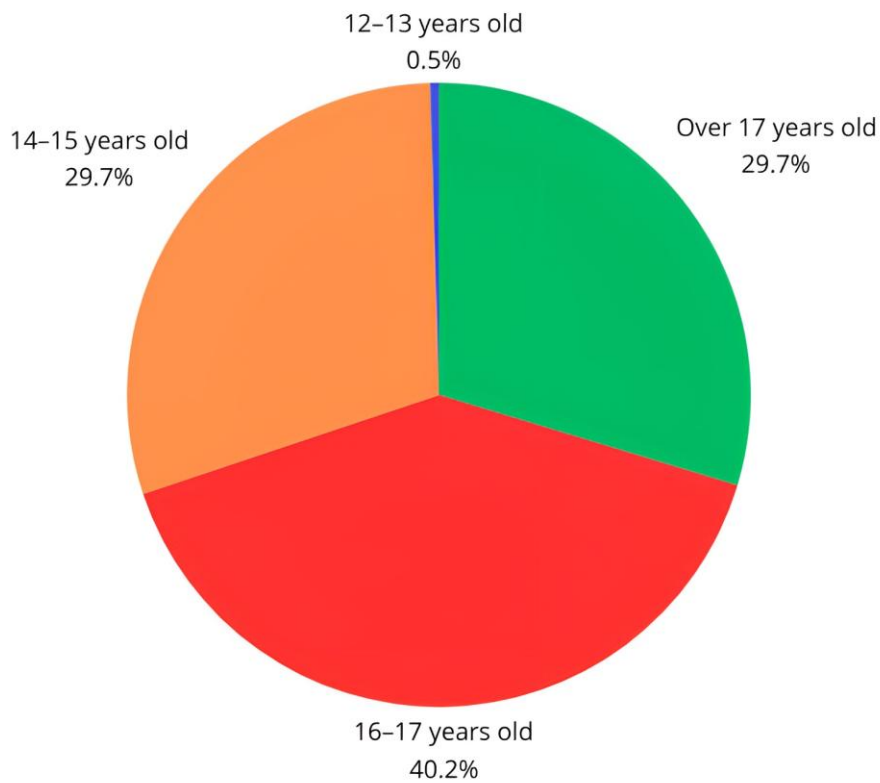


Chart 1. Distribution of data regarding the age groups of study participants.

(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

119 people (54,32%) were from the city, and 100 (45,68%) were from the countryside.

Attitudes of the participants toward religion varied: 83 individuals identified as believing and practicing (37,90%), 48 as believing but non-practicing (21,92%), 52 declared themselves non-believers (23,74%), and 36 (16,44%) had no opinion regarding the role of religion in their lives. The variation in attitudes toward religion is presented in Chart 2.

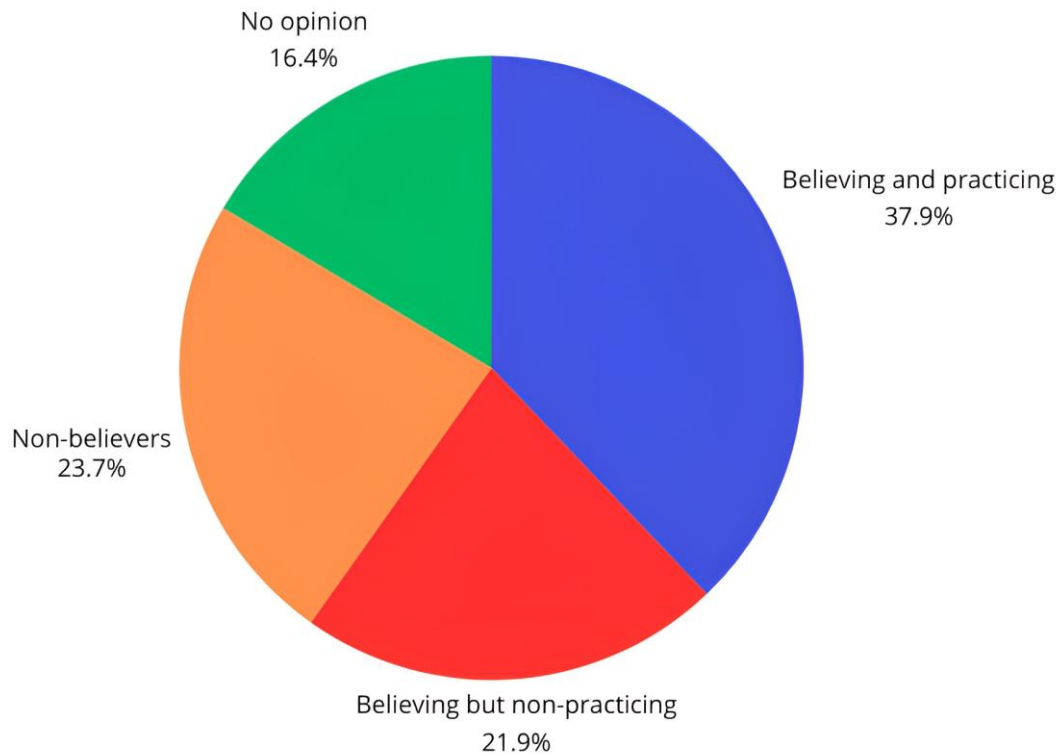


Chart 2. Distribution of data on the respondents' attitudes toward religion.

(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

Students were asked to assess their academic performance at their current school. More than half of the students (119; 54,34%) rated their performance as good; 42 (19,18%) as very good; 51 (23,29%) as satisfactory; 6 (2,74%) as sufficient; and 1 (0,46%) as unsatisfactory.

In the next section, students were asked about their relationships with their parents or legal guardians. The dominant majority reported good or very good relationships with their mother or female guardian: 111 (50,68%) described the relationship as very good, and 75 (34,25%) as good. Only 21 students (9,59%) reported average relationships; 2 (0,91%) had poor relationships; and 6 (2,74%) reported very difficult relationships, resulting in a lack of mutual understanding. Additionally, 2 students (0,91%) reported having no contact with their mother, and 2 (0,91%) stated they did not have a mother. A graphical overview of the relationships with the mother is presented in Chart 3.

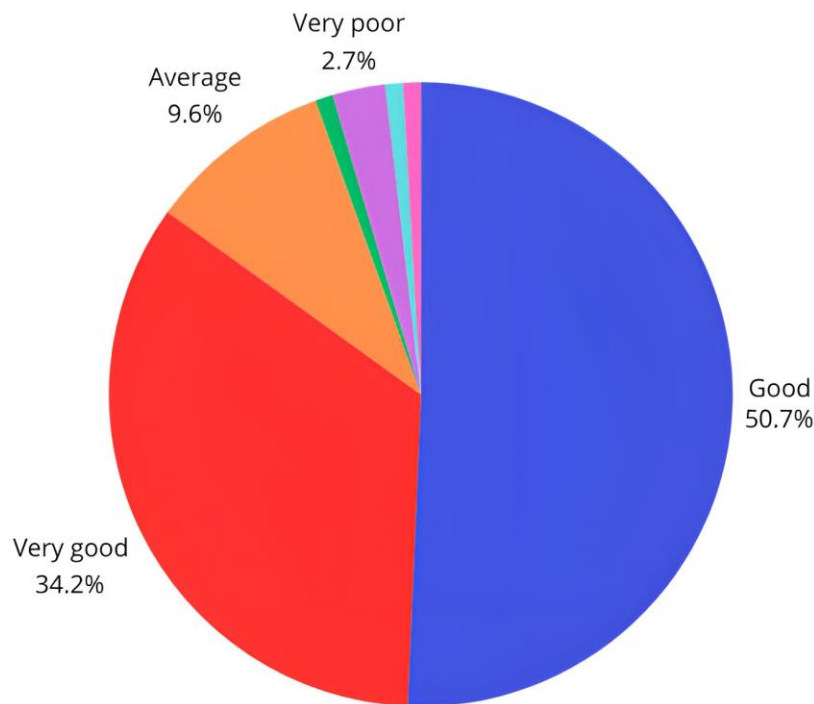


Chart 3. Distribution of data on relationships with the mother/female guardian among respondents.

(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

In response to the question about their relationship with their father or male guardian, the highest number of students indicated good relationships (85; 38,81%). Very good relationships were reported by 72 respondents (32,88%). A total of 31 students (14,16%) described their relationship as average; 11 (5,02%) as poor; 6 (2,74%) as very poor, with difficulties in mutual communication. Additionally, 9 respondents (4,11%) reported having no contact with their father, and 5 (2,28%) stated they did not have a father. A graphical overview of the relationships with the father is presented in Chart 4.

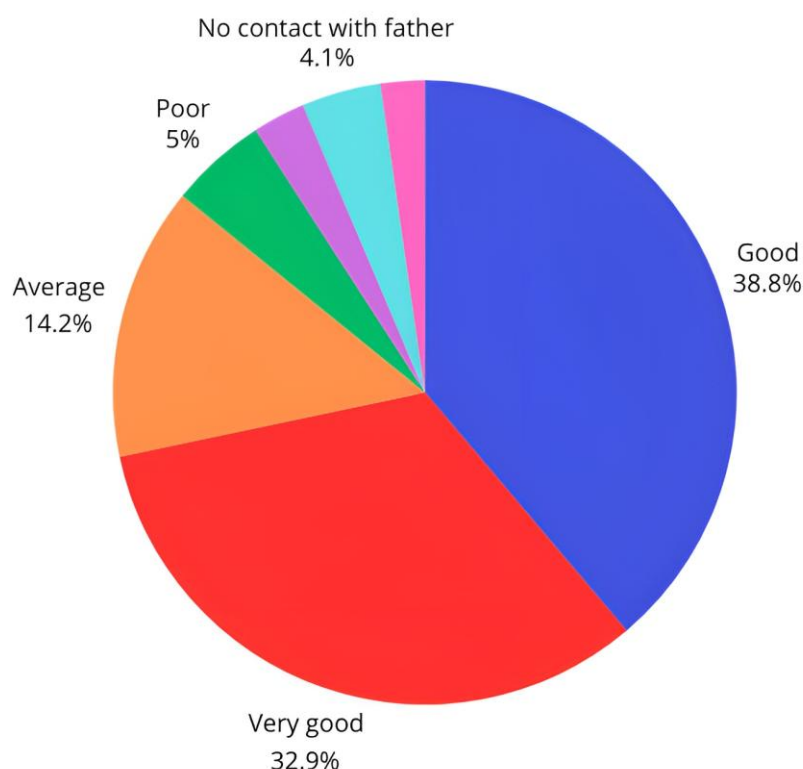


Chart 4. Distribution of data on relationships with the father/male guardian among respondents.  
(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

In response to the question of whether parents or guardians had ever talked with the student about sexuality (including gender, sexual health, menstruation, sexual behaviors, intercourse, contraception, pregnancy, and related topics), 152 people (69,41%) answered affirmatively, while 67 (30,59%) gave a negative response.

Next, the respondents were asked whether there was a sense of discomfort when discussing sexuality – both on the part of parents/guardians and the students themselves. 150 students (68,49%) stated that their parents or guardians did not experience discomfort when talking about sexuality, while 69 (31,51%) reported that such discomfort was present. The opposite trend was observed regarding the students' own feelings: 143 people (65,30%) indicated that they felt discomfort when talking to their parents or guardians about sexuality, while 76 (34,70%) reported no such discomfort.

When asked about how satisfied they were with discussions about sexuality with their parents



or guardians, students gave a wide range of responses. 76 people (34,70%) stated that the conversation was fully satisfying and their parents or guardians answered all of their questions; 69 students (31,51%) said the conversation was not satisfying, as it covered topics they were already familiar with; 4 individuals (1,83%) admitted they had a conversation about sexuality, but it was not satisfying, as their parents or guardians avoided the topic and did not answer their questions; 48 participants (21,92%) lacked the courage to ask their parents or guardians anything related to sexuality; 17 students (7,76%) reported that their parents or guardians avoided the topic; 5 students (2,28%) were referred by their guardians to other sources (such as the internet or books). The breakdown of responses to the question about satisfaction with conversations on sexuality was presented in Chart 5.

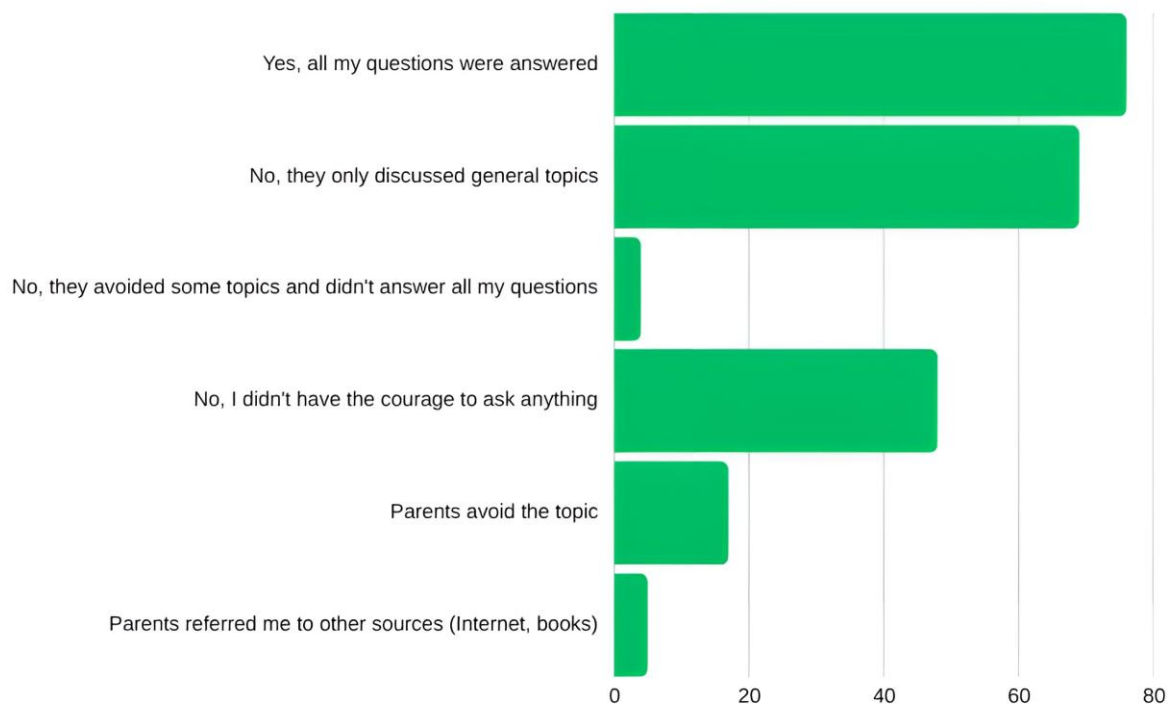


Chart 5. Distribution of responses regarding students' satisfaction with conversations on sexuality with their parents or guardians (n = 219).

In the following section, students who participated in sexual education classes at school (n = 152) were asked whether the classes were satisfactory for them. 12 participants (7.89%) stated that the lessons are satisfying and interesting, and the instructor answers all questions; 9

participants (5.92%) said the lessons are not satisfying because the instructor talks about things they already know; 9 participants (5.92%) mentioned that the lessons do not focus on topics related to sexuality, and as many as 122 participants (80.26%) admitted that they do not actively participate in the lessons and the lessons are indifferent to them. The graphical representation of students' satisfaction with sexual education classes conducted in school is shown in Chart 6.

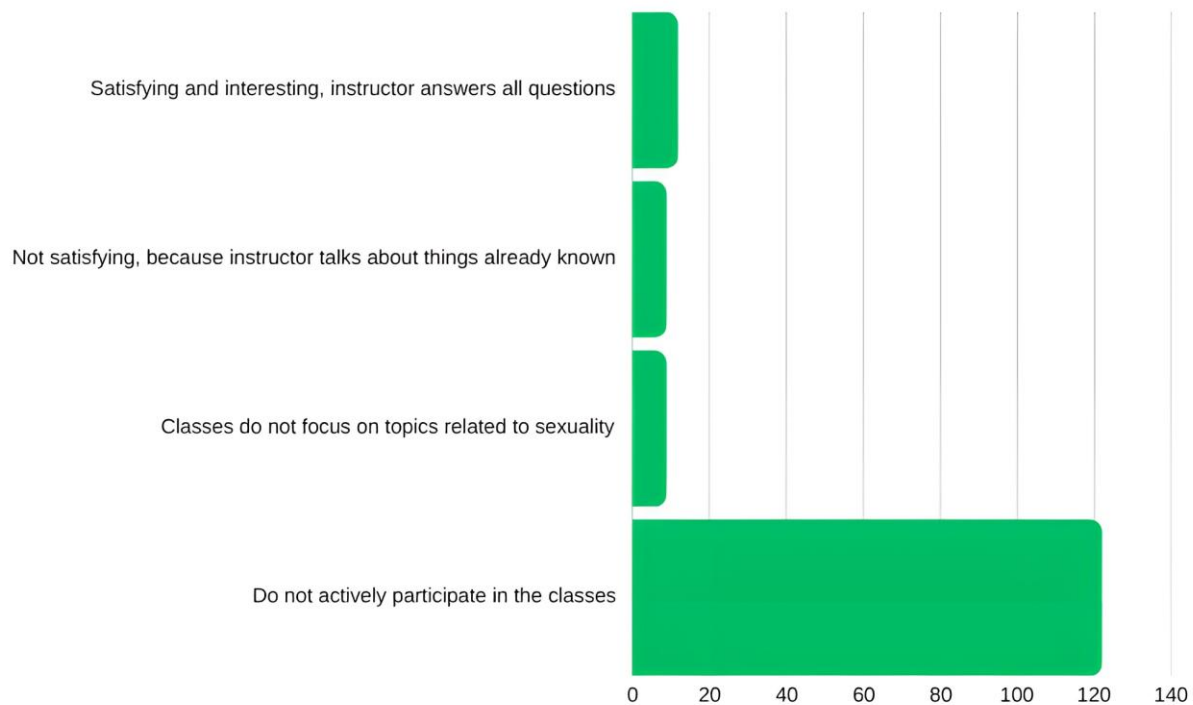


Chart 6. Distribution of responses to the question about satisfaction with the sexual education classes conducted in school (n = 152)

Almost two-thirds of the respondents (142; 64,84%) believed that family life education classes should not be mandatory.

Among the five most popular topics that, according to the respondents, should be discussed during family life education classes were: safe sexual behaviors, sexual maturation, the sexual needs of women and men, sexually transmitted infections/diseases (STI/STDs), and having children (pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period).

The most frequently indicated source of knowledge about sexuality was the Internet, chosen by

147 students (67,12%).

When asked whether they are able to speak freely and without embarrassment about human sexuality, 152 students (69,41%) responded affirmatively, while 67 (30,59%) denied it.

Almost half of the participants (107; 48,86%) were not in a relationship. 58 students (26,48%) were in a relationship, while 54 (24,66%) were not in a relationship but had romantic feelings for someone. A graphical representation of the participants' relationship status is presented in Chat 7.

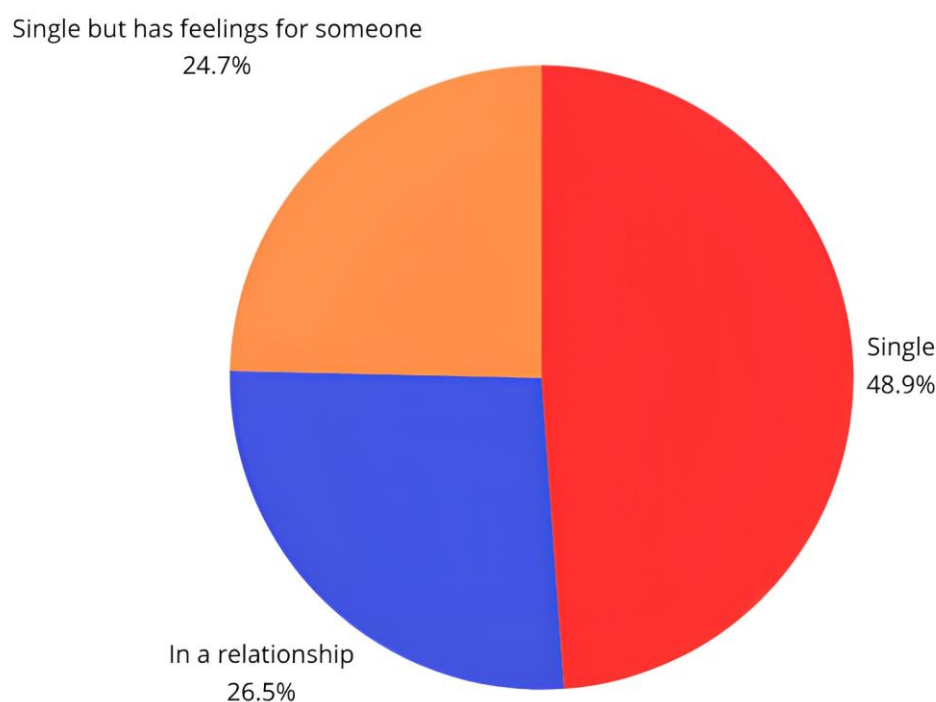


Chart 7. Status of the relationship among participants.

(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

More than two-thirds of the participants (147; 67,12%) reported that they had masturbated at some point in their life, while 72 (32,88%) stated they had never done so.

Over 75% of the participants (167; 76,26%) had not yet had their sexual initiation (first sexual intercourse). 52 individuals (23,74%) reported having had their first sexual experience.

In response to the question about sexual activity, 120 participants (54,79%) stated that they do not want to be sexually active yet; 55 individuals (25,11%) said they want to be; and 44 (20,09%) reported currently being sexually active. Graphical representations of participants' sexual activity were presented in Charts 8., 9., and 10.

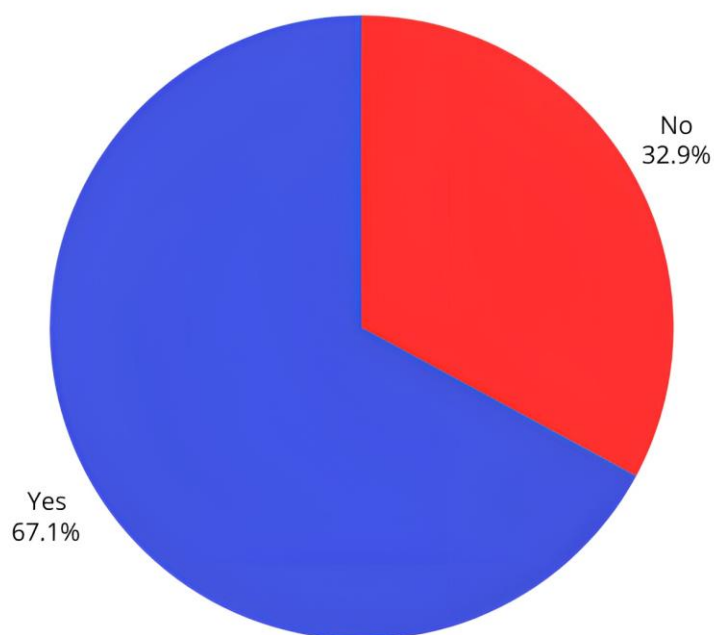


Chart 8. Distribution of responses to the question: Have You ever masturbated?  
(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

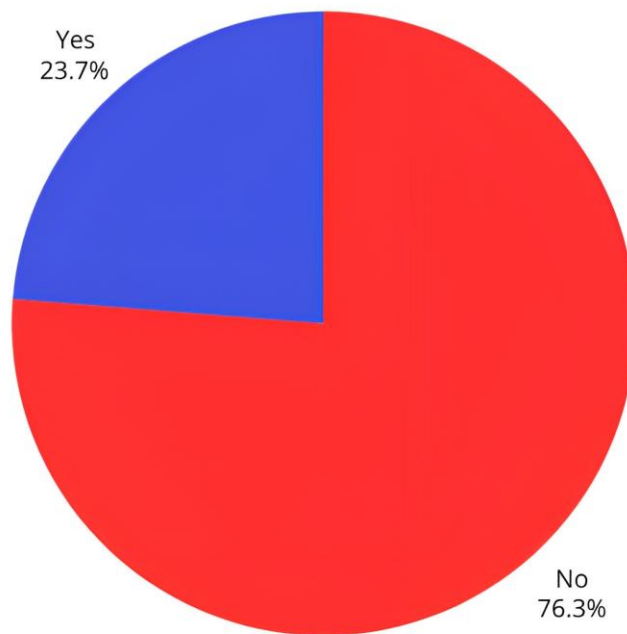


Chart 9. Distribution of responses to the question: Have You already had Your sexual initiation (have You had sexual intercourse)?

(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

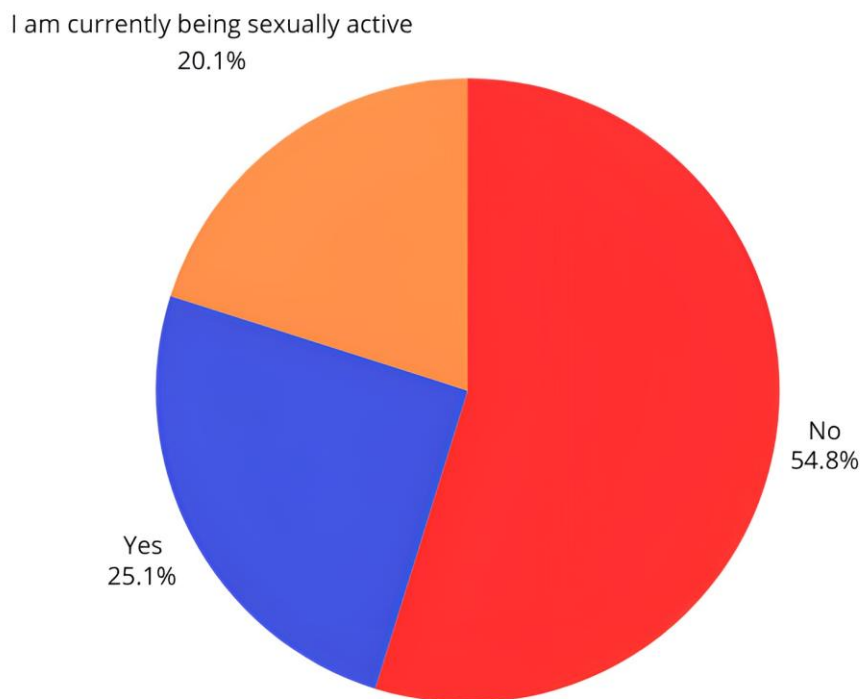


Chart 10. Distribution of responses to the question: Do You want to be sexually active?  
(percentage values are rounded to one decimal place)

## Conclusions

Sex education remains a sensitive topic for both parents and children. Among the subjects related to sexuality that participants found most interesting were: safe sexual behaviors, sexually transmitted infections/diseases (STI/STDs), and sexual maturation. Sex education, especially when delivered through methods appealing to adolescents, continues to be a challenge for both the education system and the field of medicine, including public health.

The majority of adolescents engage in masturbation, but are not sexually active and have not yet undergone sexual initiation.

## Discussion

The first noteworthy aspect is that the vast majority of participants in the study — nearly 80% — were female. Considering the age of the respondents, this may suggest that sexuality and conversations about it appear to be of particular interest to young women [13–16].

The attitude toward religion was highly diverse within the study group (no clear dominance of any particular stance).

Relationships with fathers/male guardians in the study group were clearly poorer than those with mothers/female guardians – there was a lower percentage of 'good' and 'very good' relationships, and a higher share of 'poor' ones. This may indicate that mothers tend to establish better relationships with their children, possibly due to their greater involvement in child care [17,18].

Although sexuality still remains a taboo topic, in most of the surveyed cases, attempts were made to discuss it within the family. However, the outcome of such conversations was often unsatisfactory for the child. On one hand, this reflects a positive willingness to provide sexual education within the family; on the other hand, it still tends to fall short of effectively meeting the expectations of a growing adolescent [7,19]. At the same time, sexual education initiated by parents may bring greater benefits, such as promoting safe sexual behavior [20,21]. On the other hand, there are studies suggesting that conversations about sexuality with parents play a small role in the development of a child's sexual behaviors [22].

It is worth noting that only 8% of students were satisfied with the sexual education classes conducted at school, while for the vast majority, these classes do not represent an attractive form of learning. This is also supported by the fact that most respondents believe that family life education classes should not be mandatory. All of this serves as evidence that introducing an effective and satisfying form of sexual education classes remains a big challenge for the Polish education system. It should be emphasized that a well-implemented system of sexual education has a positive impact on society, particularly in terms of sociology and public health [23–27]. Digital technology could perhaps be helpful in this context, considering that the main source of information on sexuality among the participants was the Internet [9,28–31].

Over two-thirds of respondents admitted to having masturbated at some point, which does not appear to differ from the findings of other studies on this topic [32].

At the same time, over 76% of respondents had not yet had their first sexual intercourse, which is a higher result compared to similar studies conducted on comparable populations [33–35].

## **Disclosure**

### **Author's contribution:**

All authors contributed to the article.

### **Project administration-** Jędrzej Sztajura

**Conceptualization-** Jędrzej Sztajura

**Methodology-** Jędrzej Sztajura, Anna Szot

**Software-** Anna Szot, Monika Bujak

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**Investigation-** Jędrzej Sztajura, Katarzyna Chowaniec-Rybka

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**Writing-rough preparation-** Jędrzej Sztajura, Anna Szot Katarzyna Chowaniec-Rybka

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**Visualization-** Jędrzej Sztajura

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