

No sex please until we're at least 17 years old, we're British

By Denis Campbell From [The Observer](#) January 22, 2006

A remarkable portrait of Britain's increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex, relationships and fidelity is revealed today in a special poll commissioned by The Observer. The MORI poll of 1,790 adults reveals that people are delaying the moment when they decide to first have sex, that they support greater sex education in schools and that they think prostitution should be legalised.

The fact that Britons are losing their virginity later is perhaps the most surprising detail, dispelling the widespread belief that teenagers are having record levels of under-age sex.

The poll reveals that the number of people having sex before 16 years old has fallen from 32 per cent in 2002 to 20 per cent now. The age at which the typical Briton loses their virginity has increased since they were last asked in 2002, when the figure was 17.13 years. Young women generally have sex younger than their male counterparts - at the age of 17.44 years, compared with 18.06 for men.

Surprisingly, the proportion of teenagers losing their virginity before the legal age of consent at 16 has fallen, with the drop most notable among 14- and 15-year-olds. The survey of people aged 16-64 also shows that Britain has undergone a significant softening in attitudes to other sexual issues.

The most alarming finding, however, was that almost one in three women said she had sex without her consent. Fourteen per cent of women said they had had non-consensual sex while trying to keep the other person happy. Nine per cent did so under the influence of alcohol and 8 per cent when there was physical pressure to do so.

In addition, almost two-thirds believe prostitution should be legalised, an increase of four points since 2002. Those admitting to having had sexual contact with someone of the same sex has also risen, from 11 per cent to 15. Almost three in 10 Britons have had sex with someone of a different colour.

A high proportion, 84 per cent, backs the recent call from the government's advisers that all schools should teach pupils about sexual behaviour and relationships, not just the basic biology of reproduction, which is the only statutory sex education. Anne Weyman, head of the FPA (formerly the Family Planning Association) said: 'For years young people have told us this part of their school education is "too little, too late and too biological". It's a big step forward to see so many adults agreeing with them at last.'

However, one in five is dissatisfied with their sex life. 'We may be more liberal in our attitudes but we are clearly not any happier,' said Paula Hall, a sexual psychotherapist with the counselling organisation Relate. She said that another key finding, the fall in the number of people who believe that monogamy is natural, from 74 per cent to 67, showed that with Britons living longer and healthier lives, the idea of lifetime fidelity is in decline.

'However, it's probably the case that people nowadays increasingly expect to be in more than one significant relationship, but still expect to be faithful for as long as that goes on,' Hall said. 'The large number of people who break up and quickly become involved with [someone who becomes] another long-term partner bears that out.'