



# Adolescents' Perceptions of Healthy Relationships

Policy Brief

## Young people in Bulgaria: "We need better sexual education!"

### Introduction

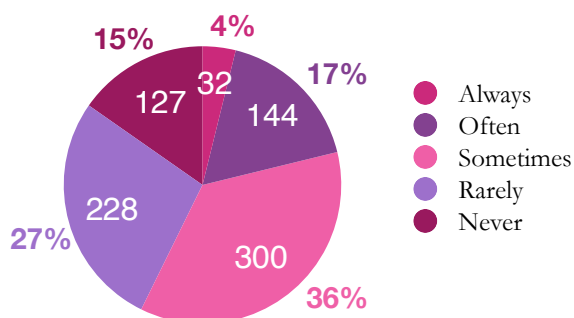
From January 2017 to March 2019 the Adolescent Perceptions of Healthy Relationships (APRH) project took place in Bulgaria. This youth lead research investigated young people's ideas about and experiences with (sexual) relationships. A group of around 40 Youth Peer Researchers (YPRs) were trained in two cities (Sofia and Aytos). They designed research questions and surveys themselves, and conducted both a quantitative and qualitative research amongst around 1300 of their peers.

### Findings APRH project

The YPR's looked into various aspects of relationships in different settings, such as the family, peers/friends and the school. They unpacked concepts like trust, respect, equality, dominance and researched topics such as violence, sexuality and online behavior. Although the findings in general show that children have positive perceptions of their relationships, some of the findings concerning sexuality and violence are worrying, for example:

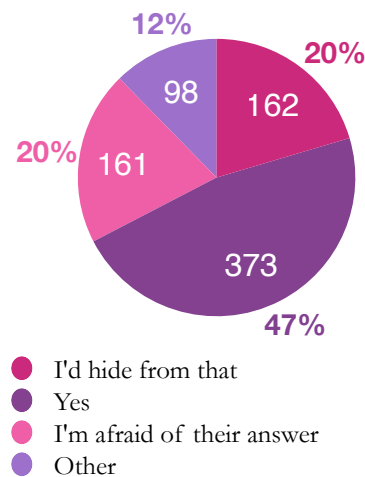
- 58% responded that they think that violence always, often or sometimes occurs in romantic relationships between teenagers, mostly psychological violence.

#### According to your observations, does violence in romantic relationships between teenagers exist?



- Less than half of the respondents say that they would feel comfortable sharing that they are homosexual (which has been a "hot" topic of public debate in Bulgaria for the last several years), not with their parents (47%), nor with friends (44%).

#### Would you share with your parents the fact that you are homosexual?



- School does not always seem to be perceived as a safe place. 52% of the respondents has been a victim of aggression, mostly at school or on the street. Sexual violence is said to occur mostly at parties or on the street, but 12% states that it happens at home or at school.
- 18% has been a direct victim of cyberbullying, however 75% has heard about situations of cyberbullying, mostly concerning online threats and offensive messages.

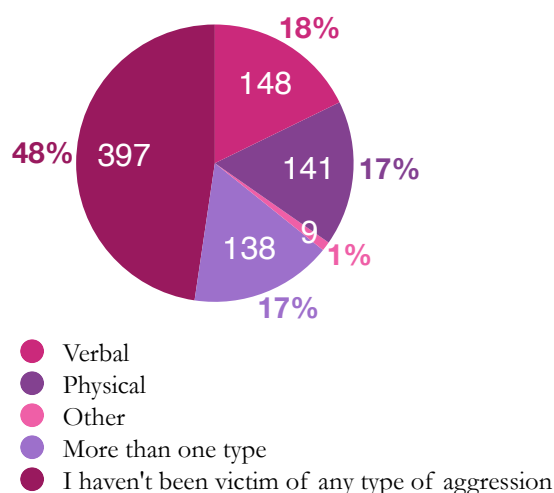
The findings of the research contribute to the knowledge base on how young Bulgarians perceive their lives and gives insights in how they themselves, as well as society as a whole, can support healthy relationships among adolescents.

#### **A gap in education, a lack of space**

An important finding yielded by this youth-led research project is that Bulgarian adolescents experience **a lack of comprehensive sex education**. They feel that they do not learn anything meaningful about sex in their school settings. Many schools offer no sexual education at all, teacher are unwilling to talk about it and where they do, the curriculum tends to focus on 'biological' and negative aspects and risks such as early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. YPR's pointed out that, although these findings did not surprise them, they found them very problematic. They and their

peers depend on each other and on the Internet to get their information. The YPR's also commented that the school does not provide any space for learning or exchange when it comes these topics.

**What type of aggression have you been a victim of?**



Despite the dearth of sexual education, adolescents in the study saw the role of sex as essential in order to keep a relationship healthy. YPRs explained that there is a need for a program focused on sexual relations. They believe that such a program could provide space for young people to talk about other aspects of sexuality and intimacy. Based on this the following policy recommendations were formulated:

**Recommendations**

- Comprehensive sexuality education should become part of the standard curriculum of high schools in Bulgaria. Not as an afterthought, or in minimalistic manner, leaving it up to teachers if and how they want to address it, but as a standardized, high quality “course”, that deserves the same respect and attention as other subjects.

*“Actually, I’ve read a lot of articles about sex, I took part in a course [not related to the school] dedicated to sexual education. I do not learn anything in my school. I learned a lot from the girls from this group.” (Alexander YPR, 17)*

- Sexuality and relationships should be discussed in a broader sense in schools. Sex education classes should continue to address the biological aspects of sex (including STD’s, preventing pregnancy). However, the conversation about sexuality and relationships should be expanded and also include topics like love and romance, sexual pleasure, online pornography, healthy relationships, communication, homosexuality, emotions, dominance and equality and (preventing) sexual abuse.
- Young people should be involved in design and development of the above mentioned sexual education programme.
- Schools should create more space for meaningful child and youth participations, not only to talk about sexuality and relationships, but about other issues that may concern them. Adolescents express a desire to discuss and exchange with their peers and with teachers. They want to be heard, to be taken serious.

APHR is an adolescent-centred research and advocacy project. Funded by Oak Foundation, the project aims to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation by improving the safety and security of environments for children. Promoting healthy relationships can prevent violence by developing gender equitable attitudes and behaviours among young boys and girls. APHR utilizes participatory processes by training adolescents as peer researchers and advocates, and through the development and dissemination of our adolescent-centered Healthy Relationships model for policy-relevant research and advocacy.

For more information, contact Dr. Kristen Cheney (cheney@iss.nl), International Institute of Social Studies, PO Box 29776, 2502 LT The Hague, Netherlands.

**Our project partners:**



**Our funding partner:**

