

Sex clearly undefined for today's youth

By Alanna Mitchell
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When is sex not really sex? When it's oral, manual, on-line or conducted over the phone and sometimes even when it involves **intercourse without orgasm**.

At least, that's the finding of a study of 164 heterosexual university students being published today in The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, and it's raising troubling questions about whether the message of **safe sex** is being hampered by different definitions between the generations.

Hilary Randall, a PhD candidate in psychology at the University of New Brunswick and one of the paper's co-authors, said the findings point to a gaping hole in programs designed to deal with **preventing sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS**.

Young people, bombarded with the safe-sex message, are applying it only to what they consider to be formally having sex. Older adults, who are designing the safe-sex programs, are using it to refer to a wide range of sexual activity, including **oral sex** and certainly **anal and vaginal sex**, with or without orgasm.

"This old, antiquated language is not getting the information across," said Ms. Randall. To be effective, **sexual-health programs** will need to be far more specific in describing sexual activities rather than relying on omnibus terms such as "having sex," her paper says.

When safe-sex educators talk about limiting the number of sex partners to avoid infection, that message, too, may be understood differently by younger Canadians, who may be counting only those with whom they have had vaginal intercourse with orgasm, said co-author Sandra Byers, a psychology professor at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

"They are saying: 'I didn't have sex. I had sexual activity.'" she said. For example, just over three-quarters (77 per cent) of the males interviewed said that **anal intercourse without orgasm** qualified as having sex, meaning that the same act wasn't sex at all to 23 per cent. If orgasm happened with anal intercourse, 84 per cent of the men said it was sex.

For females, the figures were 80 per cent and 83 per cent.

Among males, 10 per cent did not consider vaginal intercourse to be sex if orgasm failed to happen. For women, 96 per cent said vaginal intercourse without orgasm constituted sex. Approximately the same percentage for both men and women defined sex as vaginal intercourse with orgasm.

Fewer than a quarter of the students said that oral sex — with or without orgasm — was real sex. Hardly any of the students said that masturbating to orgasm over the phone or over the computer was having sex.

Ms. Randall said it is even possible — though not proved — that the safe-sex campaigns have somehow skewed the younger generation's idea of what sex is.

"It's possible that we've given them the impression that sex is whatever you use a condom for," she said. She said studies in the United States that attempt to define sexual abstinence come up with similar findings: To the U.S. students, having oral sex qualified as being abstinent.

The Canadian findings reflect the centuries-old sexual focus on loss of virginity and the breaking of the hymen, said Ed Herold, a professor of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph and the founder of the Guelph Sexuality Conference. He added, though, that the findings suggest a sea change in the way people view oral sex. In the 1940s and 1950s, when Indiana University professor Alfred Kinsey did his ground-breaking work on human sexuality, oral sex was often considered to be more intimate than vaginal penetration, and it tended to happen long after vaginal intercourse had been established.

Today, it is often a prelude to vaginal intercourse or an act that never leads to further sexual activity. "What it's saying is that there certainly is a lot more experimentation," said Prof. Herold.

Alexander McKay, research coordinator of the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada, which publishes the journal, also said the study shows that ideas about sexuality are evolving in Canada. "Twenty years ago if we asked people whether oral-genital contact was 'having sex,' most people would have said quite definitely that it was," he said. He said the evolution is healthy. "It certainly helps to legitimize the sexual expression of people that is not specifically directing sexual behaviour toward procreation."

The study also found that when it came to sexual jealousy, the students were prepared to say that almost any activity - including deep kissing and on-line sex - amounted to being unfaithful.