Definition of sex? [1]

Alice,
How would you define sex?
— Budding Webster

Answer

Dear Budding Webster,

Kanoodling. Nookie. Banging. What does it all mean? Many have paused to ponder this question. The short answer is that sex can mean many different things to many different people. There's not one universal definition of sex but a variety of perspectives. Want a more in-depth discussion for doing it? Read on!

This question could be asked about sex: the verb or sex: the noun. In noun form, sex (or sex assigned at birth) is a term used to describe physical or genetic markers — more specifically, hormones, genes, and reproductive organs. Biologically speaking, it's a myth that there are only two sexes, male and female. All physical sex characteristics — from genitals, to hormones, to chromosomes — fall on a spectrum. For more information on how sex: the noun is used, Planned Parenthood [2] is a great resource.

Many seeking the elusive definition of "sex" are curious about sex: the verb. The birds and the bees. Getting it on. Sex has a history of being defined somewhat narrowly, centering on traditional cultural and religious norms and heterosexual practices. Folks may initially learn to define sex strictly as vaginal/penile intercourse, perhaps as an answer to the famed "where do babies come from?" question. Some definitions imply that sex can only happen if someone is trying to get pregnant. Other definitions imply that penetration must be involved for sex to have occurred. But not everyone can spot their sexual experiences in these definitions, so why not alter or expand definitions to reflect lived experiences? First, time to talk consent.

Thanks to decades of anti-sexual violence activism, people have started incorporating consent into their definitions of sex. Consent means that all parties engaging in any given sexual activity (think kissing, foreplay, hand holding, etc.) have given some form of enthusiastic and un-coerced
"yes." Consent is a necessary component for all sexual activities, which goes back to the original question: What specifically is s-e-x?

A more inclusive definition could describe lots of different activities performed by people with a diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations, with any number of partners. Under this definition, any act involving contact with the vulva, clitoris, vagina, anus, penis, or testicles between one or more consenting people for the purpose of sexual pleasure could constitute doing the deed. Genital-to-genital, mouth-to-genital, mouth-to-anal, hand-to-genital, anal-to-genital, toy-to-genital — you get the idea. This definition can also encompass phone sex, masturbation, and genital contact through clothes. In this definition, consent matters and intent matters (pelvic exams don't equal sex, for example). Additionally, with this definition, neither penetration, possibility of pregnancy, nor orgasm define sex. And there is no sex hierarchy where some practices are considered more "real" than others.

What might you take away from all this ruminating? There are lots of ways to have sex and the most necessary characteristic of sex is the presence of consent. Understanding what sex means to you is a process of self-discovery and of figuring out what types of sex are fun and meaningful for you and your partner(s). What turns you on and what gets you off?

So now the question becomes, dear Budding Webster, what does sex mean to you?

Alice!

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Published date:
May 01, 1994
Last reviewed on:
Jul 14, 2017