

A large graphic for the article. It features a photograph of four people (two women and two men) silhouetted against a bright beach scene at sunset or sunrise. The people are standing on the sand, looking out towards the ocean. The overall mood is contemplative and nostalgic.

# PUBERTY BLUES

What has changed in three decades

AMY EDWARDS REPORTS, PAGES 4-5

# Generation next

With the new television series *Puberty Blues* to air from next week, **Amy Edwards** takes a look at whether teenagers today are vastly different from those in the '70s.

**S**IXTEEN-YEAR-OLD Layne Wiseman has the same first name as a famous Australian female surfer and is every bit as gutsy. The idea of sitting on a beach watching her male friends surf while she fetches them snacks from the nearby cafe is as foreign to her as panel vans and home phones.

But in the late 1970s, when the book *Puberty Blues* and subsequent film of the same name were created, such mundane activities were the pastime of the main characters, Debbie Vickers and Sue Knight.

*Puberty Blues*, the new eight-part television series that goes to air next week on Channel Ten, is based on the iconic 1979 novel by Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey. The series focuses on Debbie (Ashleigh Cummings) and her best friend Sue (Brenna Harding), their sexual awakening and ambitions to be with the in-crowd.

Born 17 years after the book was published, and having never read it or seen the 1981 film, Layne Wiseman nevertheless has plenty in common with her 1970s counterparts growing up in Cronulla. But while she spends plenty of time on Newcastle beaches, she is not content to be just a pretty spectator.

"I've got a little gnarly group of about seven girls and we all get together and go for a surf," Layne said.

"It's fun. It gets us out there and we went in Surfest this year."

Layne and a group of her friends from St Francis Xavier High School are coming of age in an era of limitless internet access, mobile phone "sexting" and both parents working.

And while today's teenagers have embraced technology and young women feel they are just as capable as their male counterparts, there are some issues that will never change.

Teens still don't discuss sex with their parents, women are easily labelled and no one wants to be in the "nerdy group".

Layne and close friend Molly Walker, 17, spend summers hanging out at Bar Beach

with year 11 classmates Jakub Lunarzewski and Kyle Minors (both 16).

Molly, who is in a relationship with Kyle, is a keen actor and dancer. She was one of five young actors who received a Newcastle Youth Theatre development grant last year at the City of Newcastle Drama Awards.

She wants to spend a year travelling in France after graduating from high school and at one point was considering becoming a builder.

The girls have their own interests and Jakub and Kyle are into music and surfing respectively.

There is no sense from the foursome, who seem grounded and happy, that they are not on an even playing field.

Besides days at the beach, the teens go to parties, movies and music festivals such as The Big Day Out in Sydney and Maitland's Groovin' The Moo.

Regular get-togethers and catch-ups are organised through Facebook and text messages. Personal updates are posted on Twitter as well as Facebook.

"I don't even have a home phone," Molly said. "We all have iPhones."

**P**ROFESSOR David Rowe, of the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, said Facebook, Twitter and texting had, for the post-1970s teenager, greatly expanded their number and range of contacts and ways of expressing themselves.

"However, as is evident in *Puberty Blues*, they still operate in quite limited social environments where direct contact actually takes place, relationships form, and so on," he said.

"So much has changed, but local interactions remain."

Most of the teens also have unlimited internet access and use their own judgment as to what is appropriate to look at online or post on Facebook.

"We've been taught what's dangerous. If people try and add me I look at the mutual friends we have before accepting them. I





**CLOSE FRIENDS:** From left, Merewether teenagers Jakub Lunarzewski, Kyle Minors, Layne Wiseman and Molly Walker.

*Picture: Jonathan Carroll*



**NEW PUBERTY BLUES:** Actors in the Channel Ten miniseries, from left, Pearl Herbert, Izzy Stevens, Ellie Gall, Brenna Harding, Tyler Atkins and Isabelle Cornish.



ask my friends 'Do you know this person?'," Molly said.

"When randoms talk to me online, I click off," Kyle added.

All of the teens are aware of "sexting" and have friends who have done it but Kyle is the first to speak up that the practice is "so stupid".

Newcastle sexologist Vanessa Thompson said teenagers sending naked photos of themselves or texting graphic messages could result in huge consequences.

"Some young boys do not understand that it is illegal to have a naked image of a 15-year-old girl on your phone," she said.

Professor David Rowe said social media had unquestionably eroded privacy, both in a voluntary sense (everyone's a minor celebrity now) and involuntarily (the consequences of compulsive availability and self-revelation are not realised until it is too late).

While the internet and the modern social media phenomenon continue to forge ahead, causing a new set of problems that didn't exist in the 1970s, sex education is still lacking.

Sex education for '70s teens, as depicted in *Puberty Blues*, is based around conversations with each other, including young men spruiking their conquests, and the odd book passed to them by a teacher.

There's more access to information about sex via the internet for teens now but sexologist Thompson believes the sources are not any more reliable.

"Back in the '70s and '80s, if teens wanted to have exposure to porn, then they might have to steal dad's *Playboy* mag. As a parent you knew what your kids were exposed to. Most parents have no idea nowadays what information their children are receiving and how they are receiving it," she said.

Primarily teens are still talking about issues such as sex and drugs among themselves rather than going to their parents.

"With parents they tend to just say 'Don't do it', whereas with your friends you get more information," Jakub said.

Thompson said the key for parents was to talk to their kids "soon and often". She recommended that parents gave not one big talk but lots of little conversations repeated.

She said while not all teenagers were sexually active, generally they were tending to have sex at a younger age now than in the 1970s.

"Most young people between year 10 and 12 are sexually active to varying degrees," she said.

In 2002, a national survey of Australian secondary students found that about one in four year 10 students and half of all year 12 students had had vaginal intercourse.

Thompson said some parents might be concerned that talking about sexuality with their children would make them go out and do it, but the fact was that talking

about sex with young people had the opposite effect.

According to the West Australian government's *Talk soon, Talk often* guide for parents, discussing "sexuality" covers growing up, love and closeness, personal values and caring for (and enjoying) yourself, your body and others.

**O**NE thing that hasn't changed since the 1970s are the double standards around sex and the judgment and labelling of women in comparison to men.

"There's still a lot of guilt and shame around sex for young women," Thompson said. "There's the pressure to have sex, but then if you have too much sex then you get labelled."

While the Newcastle teens did not necessarily agree the labelling was fair, they accepted it was part of their social environment.

"There's still that thing that boys are players and girls are sluts," Kyle said.

Some terminology such as the word slut, which is used throughout the new *Puberty Blues* series, has remained in use today.

However the teens said no one used words such as "pash", "moll", "spunk" or "nick off" any more – all terms popular in the 1970s.

Now there's "razzed" (drunk), "YOLO" (you only live once) and "tuning" (chatting someone up).

The lingo is prevalent across popular and not-so-popular groups, which are still determined around interests such as skateboarding, surfing and dedication to studies (aka "the nerds").

"Surfers sit together, skaters sit together," Kyle said.

"No one's mean about it. It's just there," Molly added.

In the first episode of the new *Puberty Blues*, Debbie and Sue try desperately to bond with cool kids Cheryl (played by Charlotte Best) and Vicki (played by Newcastle-raised Isabelle Cornish).

Since the 1970s, access to technology has grown significantly and the progression of women in the workforce has culminated in Australia's first female prime minister.

While this has affected teen attitudes and behaviour, there are still basic concerns that plague teenagers today just as much as those growing up in the 1970s.

Getting your licence, discovering sex, having good friends and achieving a decent HSC mark are among the many.

There's no doubt the Newcastle-based group of teens have some similar concerns to the characters portrayed in the book *Puberty Blues* and in the subsequent film and now television series.

But the reality is the two generations will never know just how much they have in common.

***Puberty Blues* premieres on Wednesday, August 15, at 8.30pm on Network 10. There are eight episodes.**





## REMEMBER WHEN

*Puberty Blues* was written by Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey

(both pictured at left). It was published in 1979. The story is about two 13-year-old girls from the lower middle class Sutherland Shire in

Sydney, who try to create a popular social status by integrating themselves with the "Greenhill gang" of surfers. In 1981 a movie

version was released, directed by Bruce Beresford and starring Nell Schofield and Jad Capelja (both pictured far left).



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