As is the case elsewhere in the world, Australian sex-education manuals reflect prevailing social opinion and follow the shifts and lurches of public approbation. Prior to the 1950s, sex-instruction manuals in Australia were considered primarily suitable for marriage guidance counseling, and were mostly used by members of the clergy for discussion with young couples during their engagement period. In the public world, at least, sex was best not spoken about, and sexual information was rarely directed at young people themselves, but instead was intended to be mediated by parents, teachers, clergy, or doctors. It was during and after the Second World War that sex education for young people—“teenagers,” as they began to be called at this time—came to be seen as an important part of their civic instruction, and as a prime pathway for their indoctrination into the social ethics of the time. This chapter offers some reasons for this dramatic change in thinking and analyzes some representative sex-instruction manuals of the decade, concentrating particularly upon what they had to say about and to Australian boys, and upon their underlying messages about the edification and shaping of the future man. While there were just as many sex-instruction booklets for girls, these are beyond the scope of this chapter, which chooses to focus upon the education of the undisputed “head of the household,” who was expected, even before marriage, to be responsible for the “weaker sex.”

In the 1950s many Australian psychologists and health workers advocated candid family discussions about sex, as they emphasized the unbalanced and unhealthy outlooks that resulted when young people received inadequate sex guidance. Experts working in these fields
commonly felt that widespread sexual ignorance had increased the wartime incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. The war, and the presence of foreign servicemen stationed in Australia, had caused an enormous transformation in sexual attitudes. From 1940 onward, venereal disease in particular had become such a major problem in civilian and service life that it was frequently linked with “fifth column” activities undermining the well-being of the nation, both in the present and in the future (Davis 81–82); as one sex-education manual of 1942 characteristically put it, venereal disease was the “enemy within our gates” (Bamford, *House* 26). The reasons for its prevalence on the Australian home front are clear enough: when young men, many of them only teenagers, go off to war, the possibility of a violent end often renders meaningless the traditional doctrines and codes of behavior, and lessens previously strict moral restraints. Moreover, the 1942 arrival of the American forces meant that the long-term presence of a large, glamorous foreign army further muddied the traditional mindset by offering Australian girls, in particular, numerous opportunities for illicit sexual activity. In cities such as Brisbane, which was virtually a garrison town for the last three years of the war in the Pacific, these well-dressed and wealthy foreigners, whose courteous manner toward women contrasted strikingly with the rather casual attitude of Australian men at this time, fueled many Australian girls’ desires for exciting sexual liaisons (Connors 140–63, Pace 38–40). Although many Australians still regarded the public discussion of sexual matters as indecent, the threat of a venereal epidemic was so real that one observer described it, not inaccurately, as “the worst enemy that threatens civilisation today” (Watts 93).

While escalating rates of illegitimacy, bigamy, and divorce were also responsible for inciting interest in the area of sex education, venereal disease was undeniably the prime stimulus, and the call for sex-education manuals for the young arose largely from this justifiable fear of contagion. According to widely publicized figures produced by the Australian Director-General of Health, the 1943–44 peak in venereal disease nearly tripled the prewar incidence. Data such as these caused much public alarm, promoting fears of a major public health problem (Logan 38). Although sexually transmitted diseases were routinely linked in the public mind with prostitutes and low-lives, experts declared that the majority of those who contracted and transmitted the disease were average citizens, and called for the inauguration of a Commonwealth-wide educational campaign involving the press as well as wireless broadcasts and high school lessons in an attempt to impart information in a nonjudgmental, scientific, and natural manner. Government officials