

Respectful relationships education in schools

Evidence paper

2021



**Our
WATCH**
End violence against
Women And Their Children

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Executive summary

As education institutions, workplaces and community hubs, primary and secondary schools are widely recognised as key settings in which to promote respectful relationships, non-violence and gender equality. During their schooling, children and young people are in their formative years, during which gendered roles and expectations are heavily reinforced and adolescents often experience their first intimate relationships. At the same time, students can be impacted by attitudes, structures and practices at school that perpetuate gender inequality that manifest and intersect with other forms of discrimination such as racism and ableism. To equip students to deal with the inequalities they can face in their daily lives and to raise the next generation to form healthy relationships, schools are therefore important settings for the prevention of gender-based violence.

Respectful relationships education is a holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence that aims to comprehensively address the drivers of violence and create a future free from it. There are varying understandings of what constitutes good practice respectful relationships education in Australia and internationally. This review of national and international evidence on violence prevention in schools, published since 2015, finds that short-term and ad hoc inputs in classrooms and schools tend to be unproductive in bringing about change. Conversely, the evidence demonstrates that gender inequitable attitudes, among the most consistent predictors of violence, can shift positively through approaches that feature the core elements outlined below.

Core elements of effective respectful relationships education in schools

1. Address the drivers of gender-based violence



Evaluations of school violence prevention approaches in Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States demonstrate increases in students' ability to identify rigid gender roles and violent behaviour as well as decreases in students' intention to use violence in relationships. These changes, which address the underlying drivers of violence, have the potential to bring about further positive change. Approaches that prompt students to identify, question and challenge the attitudes, behaviours and structures that underlie violence and frame it as an endemic social issue – rather than as a problem of individual deficiencies – were found to be effective.

2. Take a whole-of-school approach to change



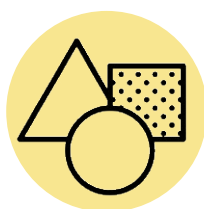
School communities that enable students to critically reflect on their own beliefs related to gender were found to provide positive environments for changing attitudes and behaviours among both teachers and students. Another feature of these school communities is that they engage all aspects of the school culture – from leadership, policies and teaching and learning through to support for staff and students as well as involvement of families and communities – to establish a shared vision for, and approach to, ending gender-based violence among the entire school community.

3. Support the change by developing a professional learning strategy and providing ongoing professional learning



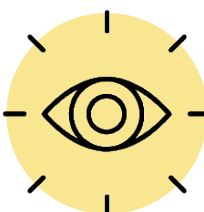
Global guidance on school-based violence prevention programs advises that ongoing professional learning for both teaching and non-teaching staff helps ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to implement respectful relationships education. Quality professional learning was found to promote three main outcomes: safety of students, wellbeing and confidence of teachers in undertaking prevention work; and the sustainability of progress in reducing the drivers of gender-based violence.

4. Use age-appropriate curriculum that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence



The research included in this review consistently recommends that three fundamentals are central to an effective respectful relationships curriculum: early, age-appropriate and continued learning; emphasis on participatory design of materials and peer learning in delivery; and content that directly engages learners in identifying and addressing the drivers of gender-based violence.

5. Sustain and commit to the change by having a long-term vision, approach and funding



Schools cannot undertake respectful relationships education in isolation – the entire education system must enable the implementation of comprehensive whole-of-school approaches. As found in countries such as Sweden and Wales, this includes government leadership in gender equality through to policies and budgets to support implementation at the school level, as well as reinforcement of positive gender attitudes in the community, such as through the media and sporting groups.

6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination



The research confirms that for the education system to function cohesively in the move towards the shared goal of creating a violence-free future, appropriate coordination mechanisms are necessary. Collaboration and coordination are required among authorities with direct oversight of schools as well as those who have other responsibilities that relate to children and young people such as child protection, gender equality, sport, health and social services. When a coordinated and collaborative approach is established, access to resources such as professional learning, rigorous research and messaging to collectively challenge norms that support violence will likely be consistent.

7. Evaluate for continuous improvement



Through increasing attention to the evaluation of respectful relationships education, changes in knowledge and attitudes that underpin gender-based violence are being measured. However, further evidence is required to understand the extent to which school initiatives impact upon reductions in violence. For this evidence to be established, school programs that address the gendered drivers of violence need permanency. Long-term studies of the contribution of school programs to violence reduction are rare, yet could shed light on whether and how observed changes persist into and through students' schooling as well as on which aspects of programs are most effective, and for whom.

The available evidence suggests that, delivered in alignment with the core elements identified in this review, respectful relationships education in schools is a very promising intervention in efforts to prevent gender-based violence, a serious and widespread problem in Australia and around the world.



***Our Watch
education
website***

Our Watch's education website has tools and resources to support implementation of respectful relationships education in schools, including:

- the whole-of-school approach toolkit
- implementation resources for primary and secondary schools
- templates for gender equality self-assessment and school policies

To access these materials, go to education.ourwatch.org.au

Introduction

Violence against women takes many forms, including physical, sexual, financial, image-based, and emotional violence, abuse and harassment. This violence is not inevitable but is preventable. By addressing the underlying drivers of gender-based violence at all levels of society, primary prevention approaches contribute to the long-term social transformation that is needed to make a future where women and their children are free from violence a reality.

*Change the story: A shared national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*¹ identifies education settings as a priority sector for this work. Properly embedded in education systems, and with the appropriate support to teachers, schools and their community partners, the benefits of respectful relationships education have the potential to reach over 4 million students across Australian primary and secondary schools, as well as a workforce of over 290,000 teachers, and the non-teaching staff and communities of over 9,500 schools.²

Since the 2015 publication of Our Watch's first evidence paper on the topic, Our Watch has led pilots of respectful relationships education in secondary schools (Victoria) and primary schools (Victoria and Queensland); supported policy development and implementation of this work in several Australian jurisdictions; and supported information sharing and coordination of best practice policy and practice nationally, including by convening the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Group (2017–2020).

In this time, there has been growing interest and activity in Australia from a range of government and non-government stakeholders, schools and communities to develop, implement and embed primary prevention in our education settings. It is crucial that this increasing activity continues to be informed by the best available evidence.

To this end, Our Watch has reviewed international and national evidence on violence prevention in schools published since 2015.ⁱ In this period, a more extensive body of evidence has emerged from more geographic locations, including more types of initiatives. There has also been more of a focus in the evidence on how initiatives are experienced by different groups of young people in the context of the different forms of discrimination that they face. During this period there has also been stronger global leadership on violence prevention in schools from multi-lateral organisations such as UN Women, UNESCO and the World Health Organisation, including the issuing of technical guidance.

This evidence paper summarises the findings of the literature to guide future actions by education systems in their efforts to end violence against women.

i All literature reviewed for this evidence paper has been published since 2015, with the exception of a 2013 evaluation of the South Australian *Yarning On* program (by Osborne and Laris for Shine SA) which was included because it provides valuable evidence of a program for young Aboriginal people.

Primary prevention of violence against women

Violence against women is recognised as a serious and widespread problem in Australia, with enormous individual and community impacts and social costs.

While improving responses to this violence is important, it is only effective *primary prevention* strategies – those that address the underlying drivers of the violence – that will stop it happening before it starts. Because these drivers are embedded in our social and cultural fabric, addressing them requires a national, whole-of-population approach to prevention. Prevention efforts must be sustained over the long term, and must reach everyone, at every stage of life, and in the many diverse settings where people live, work, learn and play. Many different strategies are needed to contribute to this population-wide approach.

Tertiary prevention or response

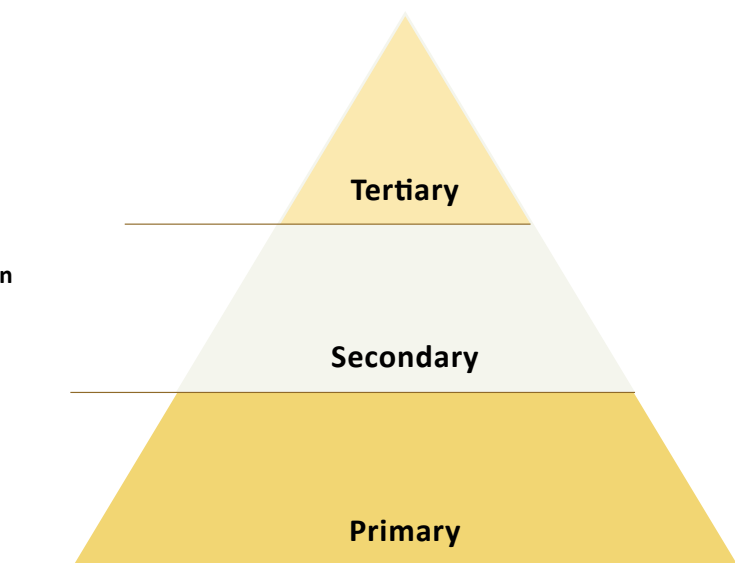
Supports survivors and hold perpetrators to account (and aims to prevent the recurrence of violence)

Secondary prevention or early intervention

Aims to ‘change the trajectory’ for individuals at higher-than-average risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence

Primary prevention

Whole-of-population initiatives that address the primary (‘first’ or underlying) drivers of violence



Australia’s shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children, *Change the story*, identifies that gender inequality sets the necessary social context for this violence.³ There are particular expressions of gender inequality that national and international evidence shows to be the most consistently associated with higher levels of violence against women. *Change the story* describes these as the ‘gendered drivers’ of violence against women, and outlines key actions that we can take to address them (see figure on following page).

Change the story shows that, while gender inequality is always influential as a driver of violence against women, it cannot be considered in isolation, nor is it experienced in the same way by every woman. Other forms of systemic social, political and economic inequality, discrimination and disadvantage influence and intersect with gender inequality in complex ways, and at all levels of the social ecology.

Gendered drivers of violence against women



Essential actions to reduce the gendered drivers of violence against women



Gender inequality sets the necessary social context for violence against women.

This means that in prevention work, gender inequality needs to be considered and addressed alongside and together with a range of other factors that may be significant in some cases, such as racism, homophobia, the impacts of colonisation, and ableism.ⁱⁱ A holistic approach involves challenging not only gender inequality, but other kinds of structural inequalities, negative stereotypes and discrimination, including those based on Aboriginality, disability, age, class and socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and refugee status. For example, in the education system, this might mean including strategies to address gendered racism that can impact on teachers' expectations of students and students' experiences of peer and teacher exclusion.

As part of a national approach, evidence-based and well-resourced respectful relationships education can help to create the generational change needed to free Australia from gender-based violence.

ii For further information:

- Our Watch (2018) *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*, Our Watch, Melbourne, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-picture>
- J. Chen, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (2017) *Intersectionality matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*, <https://www.mcwh.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Intersectionality-Matters-Guide-2017.pdf>
- Women with Disabilities Victoria (2017) *Inclusive planning guidelines for the prevention of violence against women with disabilities*, https://www.wdv.org.au/documents/Inclusive%20Planning%20Guides_print.pdf
- Rainbow Health Victoria (2020) *Pride in prevention evidence guide*, available at <https://rainbowhealthvic.org.au/research-resources>

Why schools?

As education institutions, workplaces and community hubs, primary and secondary schools are widely recognised as key settings in which to promote respectful relationships, non-violence and gender equality.⁴ With over 9,500 schools, over 4 million students and over 290,000 teachers across Australia,⁵ our education system provides near universal reach to children in their formative years and to adolescents creating their first intimate relationships. In conjunction with a comprehensive program of activity across other settings, evidence-based and adequately funded respectful relationships education throughout the national school system could create the generational change needed to see an Australia free from gender-based violence.

Schools can also be sites in which beliefs, attitudes, social norms, structures and practices that perpetuate gender-based violence manifest. These factors can impact staff and student wellbeing: both staff and students are affected by gendered violence. Aspects of children and young people's schooling such as students' peer relations and educational outcomes can be affected by these inequalities. Initiatives that address the drivers of gender-based violence, such as respectful relationships education, are also urgently needed to equip students to deal with the inequalities they can face in their daily lives.

Education system-wide prevention of gender-based violence is important in raising the next generation to develop attitudes that neither support nor condone violence and to support the development of healthy relationship skills, as well as create sustained change to the drivers of violence across the community.

Results from the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) reveal that attitudes regarding violence against women and gender equality among young people aged 16–24 were similar to those of the rest of the population.⁶ The results show that knowledge and attitudes to violence against women and gender equality in Australia are gradually improving. However, some areas of concern remain, including lower levels of support for gender equality in *private* life as opposed *public* life, mistrust of women's reports of violence, and attitudes disregarding the need to gain sexual consent.⁷ These results highlight the importance of whole-of-population initiatives (including whole-of-school approaches to respectful relationships education) that reach children, young people and adults across the course of their lives.

However, the NCAS shows that young people aged 16–24 are more likely to be classified as having a low level of understanding of violence against women, and one in three young people say that they would not know where to secure help regarding a domestic violence matter.⁸ This highlights the importance of a specific focus on developing young people's knowledge of gender-based violence and help-seeking.

Peer relationships and experiences of gender-based violence and bullying

It is not uncommon for school students to report experiences of sexual and dating violence.⁹ The 2018 6th National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health of over 6,000 Years 10–12 students across Australia found that 16% of male and 37% of female respondents reported having had unwanted sex. The survey also revealed different ways in which male and female students experience pressure to both have sex and abstain from it, as shown below in Table 1:¹⁰

Table 1: Selected results – 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018

	'A lot' of pressure to have sex		'A lot' of pressure to abstain from sex	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
From partner	12.1%	3.7%	–	–
From peers	8.2%	11.2%	2.5%	5.7%
From parents/ guardians	–	–	12.9%	22.8%

The finding that young women are more likely to experience both unwanted sex and ‘a lot’ of pressure from partners to have sex compared to their male peers corresponds with the results of a study of R4Respect, a violence prevention program delivered in schools and community agencies in the Northern Territory and Queensland. The research found that even after receiving 4 hours of respectful relationships content through the program, 41% of the 45 male students surveyed were unsure about, or in agreement with, the statement that men should take control in relationships.¹¹ (See [‘Why is long-term vision, approach and funding important?’](#) on page 26 for further discussion about program duration.)

In addition, a growing body of research recognises the overlap of sexual violence, adolescent relationship abuse and bullying behaviours. In a study of middle school students,¹² young people who reported bullying their peers also reported using violence against their dating partners compared to students who did not engage in bullying. Homophobic name-calling of peers in middle school was found to be another predictor of future sexual violence perpetration against male and female students.¹³ In somewhat of a contrast, students’ attitudes to gender equality may not necessarily influence participation in homophobic teasing, which can be seen as a form of acceptable, possibly even pro-social, interaction with peers.¹⁴ Transgender students report experiencing elevated levels of harassment, bullying and physical or sexual violence in school,¹⁵ predominantly perpetrated by classmates. In research with transgender students in the United States, 77% reported experiencing some form of verbal (54%), physical (24%) or sexual violence (13%) while in primary or secondary school.¹⁶

Young people’s experience of harassment and violence reinforces the importance of creating safe schooling environments, including cultures of non-violence, and embedding violence prevention efforts from an early age.

Gendered educational outcomes

In all OECD countries girls outperform boys in reading: in Australia girls have reading scores that are 4% higher than boys' scores in Grade 4 and 6.5% higher at 15 years of age.¹⁷ These outcomes tend to be reversed for girls and boys in mathematics.¹⁸ While there is no panacea to reduce these disparities, research suggests that equal engagement of boys and girls in all core subjects must be ensured.¹⁹

Students' understandings of themselves as learners appear to play a part in gender differences in educational outcomes, of which masculine and feminine identities are an integral part.²⁰ As learners, students tend to subscribe to identities that are often connected to stereotypes.²¹ A study of Australian boys' transitions from school to university²² found that 'averageness' is a key part of the dominant masculine learner school identity. A similar phenomenon was found in an OECD study of gender inequality within the Programme for International Student Assessment (often referred to by its acronym, PISA), which concluded that boys' identities tend to be marked by a relative lack of interest in school.²³ Sport, however, is a subject in which boys are often expected to excel within a dominant masculinity.²⁴ For girls, educational engagement may be impacted by performance of overriding femininity that typically ties girls' value to beauty and desirability.²⁵

Gendered learning identities and educational outcomes appear to influence considerations of future occupations, whereby Australian school students have been found to express strongly gendered interests.²⁶ Although girls are more likely than boys to expect to attain a university degree,²⁷ they are less likely to indicate interest in becoming a 'leader'.²⁸ These gendered interests have been seen to play out starkly in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, with the OECD reporting that among Australian students who are accomplished in STEM subjects, one in three boys expects to work in a STEM career by the age of 30, while about one in five girls expects to do so.²⁹

School structures and practices

Beyond the social attitudes and beliefs that shape students' gendered learning identities and outcomes, schools can be influenced by social and cultural norms related to gender that permeate structures and practices such as curriculum, teaching, classroom management and school policies.³⁰

Curriculum

The educational outcomes noted above are, in part, reflected in traditional ideas about curriculum which can be shaped by gendered norms about learning for males (sciences, mathematics and technology) and females (languages, humanities and the arts).³¹ These norms could influence the school curriculum in a number of ways. For instance, international evidence argues that school textbooks often fail to profile female STEM professionals, which would otherwise be an opportunity to feature role models for girls, a factor associated with improved subject performance.³²

An analysis of 360 texts that appeared on the Victorian senior English curriculum text lists between 2010 and 2019 found that the representation of female and male protagonists became almost equal by 2019.³³ However, choice of works by female creators for some text types such as film and poetry were as low as 20%.³⁴ While the analysis found improvements in gendered aspects of text choices, there had not been a shift in representations of diverse sexuality.

The authors concluded that text selection in English curricula is important in exposing students to perspectives that may differ from their own, including those related to gender equality and sexual diversity. Another implication of text choice was found in research of senior drama studies in Western Australia, in which gender binary representations in scripts tended to constrain the role choices of girls studying the subject.³⁵

Teaching practices

Like all people, teachers are often shaped by and invested in beliefs that can inadvertently affirm gendered and gendering practices.³⁶ A study of high school students in Canada reported inequalities in the quantity and quality of teachers' interactions with female and male students, with boys being reprimanded verbally more often than girls.³⁷ A key international report on the global gender disparity in STEM subject performance found that teaching strategies that support girls' achievement are not routinely employed in the classroom.^{iii, 38}

Implicit gender stereotypical norms intersect with other forms of discrimination such as racism, an aspect of inequality that is at times overlooked in school education.³⁹ In research with Australian students of South Sudanese heritage in Years 6–8, students conveyed experiences of peer and teacher exclusion, with the perception among some students that 'the boys didn't really have any problems with racism, only the girls did'.⁴⁰ Another study of trainee and experienced teachers found that their academic expectations of Aboriginal, Anglo-Australian and Asian-Australian students often aligned with community stereotypes. This finding is of concern if teachers' perceptions of their students influence their behaviour towards their students, as research suggests.⁴¹ Moreover, negative teacher expectations tend to impact girls and students in ethnic minority cohorts, as compared to other groups of students.⁴²

A study of learning support services in various countries found an overrepresentation of males from ethnic minority, immigrant and Indigenous populations, which is another example of the connection between attitudes of gender and ethnicity.⁴³ This observation has been attributed to differing expectations of classroom behaviour for males and females and assessment tools lacking in culturally appropriate measures to interpret ability, achievement and behaviour consistently across diverse student groups.⁴⁴

The extent to which a lack of gender diversity among teachers affects gendered teaching practices and educational outcomes for boys and girls is subject to debate. However, the decline in the representation of men in the teaching profession is unabated and yet to be subject to targeted policy interventions in Australia.⁴⁵

School policies

In myriad ways – from behaviour management to uniforms – school policies can have gendered impacts upon students. For example, although the use of school suspension and expulsion policies to address behavioural issues are likely to decrease student disengagement, research has indicated that boys are disproportionately affected by them.⁴⁶ Marginalised students are more likely to be subject to suspension and expulsion, even though policy alternatives such as collaboration between students, families and their communities to develop strategies to improve students' behaviour can be effective.⁴⁷

iii Research by the OECD (see endnote 18) has found 'cognitive-activation' teaching approaches – in which students are asked to focus on problem-solving strategies rather than the answer itself – support girls' performance in STEM subjects.

While it may seem inconsequential, the requirement for girls to wear skirts and dresses – an enduring policy in some government and non-government schools in Australia – restricts girls’ movements as well as their ability to participate in physical activity.⁴⁸ Related to uniform is the issue of period poverty: the inability to access sanitary products.^{iv} This deficit can affect girls’ school attendance, especially in remote locations, yet can be overcome through relatively simple measures such as installation of vending machines to dispense free items.⁴⁹

Schools as workplaces

Schools are workplaces as well as places of learning, for teaching and non-teaching staff. Workplaces are another key setting for primary prevention work, as all workplaces can influence the structures, norms and practices that support ongoing gender inequality.⁵⁰

Because students tend to learn from what they see adults doing around them, the way that school staff interact and treat each other can have broader significance. These informal cultures and practices of the workplace could directly impact on what students are learning about gender equality, respect and professional relationships. Engaging with schools as workplaces through whole-of-school approaches to respectful relationships education can support gender equity for teaching and non-teaching workforces as well as role-modelling for students, families and communities who engage with the school.

As noted above (see ‘Teaching practices’ on page 12), the teaching profession is female-dominated (see below, Chart 1) and female leadership appears to be increasing. Data from NSW government schools, the largest school system in Australia, suggest that while men previously occupied a greater proportion of primary and secondary principal positions compared to women, this is no longer the case, as shown below in Table 2.⁵¹

Chart 1: Proportion of full-time equivalent teaching staff by sex (government and non-government), Australia, 2020⁵²

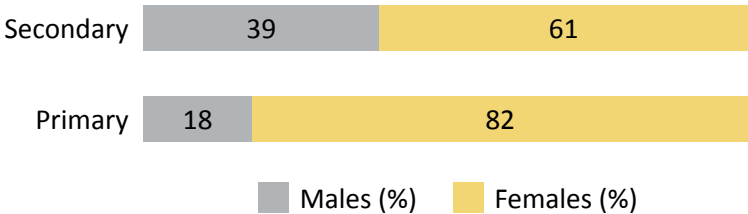


Table 2: Proportion of principal roles occupied by males in New South Wales⁵³

	Primary	Secondary
1998	66%	78%
2018	34%	52%

iv Knight (2020) describes period poverty as the inability to purchase sanitary products to effectively manage menstruation, impacting on health, comfort and engagement with school and community activities.

In addition, there are indicators of progress in regard to gender equality within the education sector:^v compared to other industries, paid parental leave is most commonly provided and the gender pay gap within the industry is lower.⁵⁴

Despite this, gendered workplace issues appear to be prevalent. The Australian Education Union and the New South Wales Teachers Federation as well as individual teachers made submissions to the recent National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces. These submissions convey that sexual harassment is not an uncommon experience among school staff, particularly among teachers who are LGBTIQ.⁵⁵

Gendered structures, practices and relations can impact on the lives of students and school staff in varied and complex ways. By holistically addressing the gendered attitudes, beliefs, norms and structures that underlie these factors, as outlined in the 7 core elements of respectful relationships education, inequalities may begin to be transformed.

v Note that the available data reported by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency refers to preschool and school education, tertiary education and adult, community and other education as an aggregate. Data are not reported separately for school education, which is the focus of this evidence review.

What is respectful relationships education?

In Australia, respectful relationships education is a relatively new term that first emerged in the 2000s. It draws on theory and practice for preventing various forms of gender-based violence through strategies and approaches for children and young people.⁵⁶ As a relatively new field, varying understandings of what constitutes good practice respectful relationships education prevail both here and internationally.

Our Watch's 2015 evidence paper suggested the following definition of respectful relationships education, reflecting evidence-based understandings of the work:



Respectful relationships education

Respectful relationships education is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence.

It uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence.

This definition continues to reflect the available international and national evidence reviewed by Our Watch to develop this updated evidence paper on the topic.

The term respectful relationships education is also used in broader community settings including sporting clubs and community groups. There is also emerging work in Australia on how to reach children and young people not engaged in formal education settings with prevention initiatives. However, this evidence paper, and the definition above, is centred solely on schools.

Respectful relationships education is often considered as only what is delivered in the classroom. However, evidence shows that to achieve maximum effectiveness, respectful relationships education should be realised through a whole-of-school approach. This means addressing the overlapping domains that shape the social climate surrounding students and staff, including curriculum, school policy and practices, school culture and ethos, the working conditions and culture experienced by staff, and the relationships modelled to students by their school community, including staff, parents, guardians and community groups.

The next section sets out the evidence relating to the core elements of respectful relationships education.

Core elements of respectful relationships education

Our Watch's 2015 evidence paper sets out seven core elements of effective respectful relationships education, distilled from an international and national literature review. Following a review of literature published since 2015, these core elements have been retained because the available evidence consistently confirms these elements as essential to the efficacy of this work. Our Watch has updated their titles to reflect the action needed to incorporate the core elements into a holistic, best practice approach.



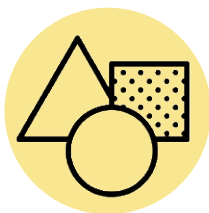
1. Address the drivers of gender-based violence



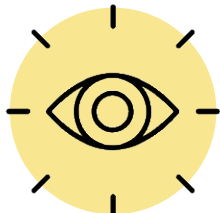
2. Take a whole-of-school approach to change



3. Support the change by developing a professional learning strategy



4. Use age-appropriate curriculum that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence



5. Sustain and commit to the change by having a long-term vision, approach and funding



6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination



7. Evaluate for continuous improvement

1. Address the drivers of gender-based violence

What are the drivers of gender-based violence?

Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, draws on international public health evidence to identify factors associated with gender inequality that are the most consistent predictors of violence. These are described as the drivers of gender-based violence. They are:⁵⁷

- condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women.

These drivers support the normalisation and justification of and tolerance for gender-based violence. Efforts to prevent gender-based violence, including respectful relationships education initiatives, cannot be effective unless they address the drivers of it.

School-based prevention must focus on increasing young people's critical thinking skills so that they can recognise, question and challenge structures, beliefs, attitudes, norms and practices that uphold gender inequality.⁵⁸ Furthermore, prevention initiatives should aim to challenge gendered inequalities that can be faced by children, young people and staff in schools (discussed below in '[Why address the drivers of gender-based violence?](#)'). As such the aspects of the school environment through which gender inequality and violence can manifest, such as policies and school governance arrangements, should be transformed to enhance respectful relationships between students, staff and the broader school community.⁵⁹

Change the story shows that, while gender inequality is always influential as a driver of violence against women, it cannot be considered in isolation, nor is it experienced in the same way by every woman. Other forms of systemic social, political and economic inequality, discrimination and disadvantage influence and intersect with gender inequality in complex ways, and at all levels of society. This means there is a need for prevention work (including in schools) to consider and address factors such as racism,⁶⁰ the ongoing legacies and impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities,⁶¹ homophobia and transphobia,⁶² and ableism alongside gender inequality. As discussed in the 'Why schools' section of this paper, these forms of discrimination can be evident in schooling environments, including in policies and practices, and as such can be addressed alongside gender inequalities as part of a whole-of-school approach.

Why address the drivers of gender-based violence?

Young people who endorse more gender equitable attitudes have lower odds of reporting several different types of violence perpetration.⁶³ Conversely, widely and firmly held gendered norms have real-world consequences for young people. Numerous studies suggest that individuals who endorse traditional gender role beliefs, for example about the roles of men and women with respect to decision-making and authority, have an increased risk of both perpetrating and experiencing dating violence.⁶⁴

Programs that centre the aims of identifying, questioning and challenging the drivers of gender-based violence are more effective than those that do not.⁶⁵ School-based initiatives that address these drivers have been found to contribute to an increase in students' ability to identify rigid gender roles and violent behaviour, as well as a decrease in students' intention to use violence in relationships, as seen in these examples:

- Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools, which directly targeted the gendered drivers of violence in its program design, found improvements in students' knowledge of, attitudes towards, and confidence in discussing issues related to gender equality and respectful relationships. To illustrate, the proportion of students who felt that 'slapping or pushing a partner to cause harm or fear' was a form of domestic violence increased from 70% of students in the baseline survey to 80% of students at follow-up. The proportion of students who disagreed with the statement that 'men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household' increased from the baseline of 54% to 58% at follow-up.⁶⁶
- Middle school boys who participated in the Reducing Sexism and Violence Program – Middle School Program (United States) demonstrated a decrease in support for the use of violence in relationships. Through physical activity, peer-to-peer dialogue, storytelling, role play, multimedia and group discussions, the program explored the normalisation, prevalence and harmful nature of rigid gender role assumptions with the ultimate goal of reducing sexual and dating violence.⁶⁷

- In the Netherlands, the Benzie's & Batchelor program targeted gendered attitudes as an underlying factor driving sexual harassment, aiming to prevent this behaviour among male and female high school students. The program's evaluation found participants, compared to students who did not join the program, had less intention of committing sexual harassment and a greater capacity to successfully reject sexual harassment.⁶⁸
- The Change Up Project supported 13–14 year old students in the United Kingdom to identify attitudes and beliefs contrary to the gendered drivers of violence within their social network. Through a range of activities, young people's understanding of coercive and controlling behaviours improved.⁶⁹
- Mentors in Violence Prevention, an initiative aiming to transform gender norms and stereotypes, has been implemented and evaluated around the world. Boys in the US who have participated in the program were found to have decreased support for the use of violence in relationships, diminished support for male power and increased support for gender equality.⁷⁰

In addressing the drivers of gender-based violence, all social inequalities⁷¹ should be challenged. Additionally, care should be taken not to consider gender inequality and violence in stereotypical ways whereby males are deemed perpetrators and females, victims.⁷² However, while fixed notions of violence and inequality that rigidly adhere to dominant ideas about gender should be avoided, a rigorous, gendered lens should be applied to all aspects of the curriculum. Moreover, violence should be framed as an endemic social issue that produces unequal gendered norms and other intersecting inequalities, rather than as a problem of individual deficiencies.⁷³

The RESPECT initiative in Scottish primary schools, while found to have been successful in helping students to identify gendering norms and practices, was also identified as a program that could have benefitted from a critical thinking approach underpinned by dialogue and reflection.⁷⁴ Supporting reflective and critical thinking skills can help everyone involved in prevention work to move beyond a focus on cisgender and heterosexual people to be inclusive of people who are LGBTIQ.⁷⁵

2. Take a whole-of-school approach to change

What is a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education?

A whole-of-school approach recognises schools as workplaces, community hubs and places of learning.⁷⁶ This holistic perspective involves planning and acting to create a school as a healthy setting in which to learn, work and interact within its broad institutional environment.⁷⁷ As such, prevention initiatives must engage with the overlapping domains that shape the social climate, including:⁷⁸

- school culture and environment, including school policies and practices
- leadership and commitment
- teaching and learning across all subjects or learning areas
- support for staff and students, including staff working conditions and the culture experienced by staff and students
- professional learning for staff, and
- families and communities: the relationships modelled to students by their school community including staff, parents and community groups.⁷⁹



More specifically, research establishes that a shared vision for ending gender-based violence among the entire school community⁸⁰ involves:

- modelling appropriate behaviours by demonstrating respect for colleagues and pupils through their actions, by all staff (teaching and non-teaching);⁸¹
- incorporating messages throughout the entire curriculum to reject gender-based violence;⁸²
- facilitating alliances between students of all gender and sexual identities to buffer against school-based discrimination including gender inequality, homophobia and transphobia, and to improve perceptions of safety and overall wellbeing for all students;⁸³ and
- examining all school policies and practices, which may extend to ensuring access to school facilities and safe transport to and from school, particularly in remote and low-resource contexts.⁸⁴

Why take a whole-of-school approach?

Evaluations of gender-based violence prevention programs in schools consistently note⁸⁵ that their effectiveness and sustainability depend upon the involvement of all stakeholders who are important in children and young people's lives. One study found that the role of school leaders was important in helping teachers accept the uncomfortable emotions that may arise when the messages of gender equality that underpin violence prevention sit in tension with their personal beliefs.⁸⁶ This form of support can in turn enable teachers to engage students to reflect on their own views about gender and violence. When staff have a sense that the school 'has the back' of individual teachers, fostered through strategies such

as team teaching and a strong school commitment,⁸⁷ they can support students to critically reflect on their own beliefs. Similarly, research establishes the importance of positive school communities and climates on both teacher and student wellbeing.⁸⁸

Although this core element of respectful relationships education requires a community effort, the role of school leaders in facilitating a whole-of-school approach is critical. Apart from driving school policy change, leaders 'till' the cultural soil by endorsing and encouraging conversations about relationships, equality and gender and sexual diversity.⁸⁹ A West Australian study found that school leaders who demonstrate strong commitment to this work foster learners who have the knowledge and skills to make informed and respectful choices in their interactions with others.⁹⁰

This central role of school leaders will likely involve specialist support for these leaders. The evaluation of Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools found that components of the whole-of-school approach might not have been addressed without the available support of primary prevention and gender equality experts working from education department offices. These supports kept schools 'on track' and helped them to develop strategies to support leaders to address relevant issues as they arose.⁹¹ This type of model requires commitment, leadership and resourcing from governments: see ['What is meant by a long-term vision, approach and funding that sustains and supports change?'](#) on page 25 for further discussion.

3. Support the change by developing a professional learning strategy and providing ongoing professional learning

What is professional learning in relation to respectful relationships education?

Staff professional learning^{vi} is fundamental to implementing gender-based violence prevention in schools. Ongoing professional development opportunities ensure that both teaching and non-teaching staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to undertake this work.⁹² Additionally, with complex issues such as bullying and young people's use of social media and pornography continuing to evolve, access to refresher training enables staff to keep pace with social change.⁹³ Policy research advises that both pre- and in-service teachers should be given opportunities to access and progress professional development, with scope to specialise in respectful relationships at Masters level. This pathway would build a well-qualified workforce.⁹⁴

While both knowledge acquisition and skills development are important aspects of professional development, the research tends to focus on the former. Optimal professional learning for respectful relationships education involves face-to-face practical activities, small group exercises and role play,⁹⁵ and is delivered with the support of specialist services.⁹⁶

There is a gap in the research regarding the efficacy of online learning as a sole source of training for teachers in the area of gender-based violence prevention. In the area of child safeguarding, online learning has been shown to have some promise in building knowledge. An evaluation of Enough, a one-hour online course for educators about the nature and scope of child sexual abuse, found that staff increased their knowledge of the issue through completing the course.⁹⁷ However, the evaluation recommended further investigation with larger sample sizes to test online learning for knowledge building.⁹⁸

vi Also referred to as professional development or in-service training.

Relevant literature recommends that professional learning should:⁹⁹

- provide an opportunity for school staff to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes (norms) about gender and the influence of these on their teaching practice;
- prompt exploration of how teaching practice and materials reinforce gender norms and respectful relationships;
- help teachers to integrate ideas about gender equality into the curriculum across all key learning areas;¹⁰⁰
- guide staff in identifying and addressing violence based on social, cultural and gender norms among students; and
- guide staff in how to sensitively and appropriately receive and address students' disclosures of violence.

In interviews undertaken for an evaluation of respectful relationships education in primary schools in Victoria and Queensland, teachers identified that in order to have the time to undertake necessary professional development, resourcing was needed so they could be relieved of duties.¹⁰¹

Why is a professional learning strategy and ongoing professional learning needed?

According to Australian and international research, quality professional learning can promote three main outcomes: safety of students; wellbeing and confidence of teachers in undertaking prevention work; and the sustainability of progress in reducing the drivers of gender-based violence.

Safety of students

Disclosures

Through the implementation of school-based initiatives to prevent gender-based violence, the likelihood of students disclosing experiences of violence increases, often because students feel it safe for them to do so.¹⁰² It is therefore essential that school staff are equipped to appropriately respond to disclosures to avoid inappropriate and/or harmful responses which are linked to adverse outcomes for students.¹⁰³

Classroom management

Ensuring the safety of the classroom environment is necessary for students' comfort in engaging in topics related to gender equality and respectful relationships.¹⁰⁴ Research has found that students can mask anxiety about some of the uneasiness around these subjects by using disruptive behaviour.¹⁰⁵ It is therefore important that staff have excellent class management skills and are supported to bolster this aspect of their practice as needed.¹⁰⁶

Cultural safety

To enable all students to successfully engage in respectful relationships education, schools should ensure their cultural awareness and competencies are well honed to provide a culturally safe environment. Research in the area of cultural and ethnic diversity and violence prevention in schools is limited. However, one recent US study suggests that careful implementation across different cultures is a characteristic of an effective approach.¹⁰⁷ Although the research does not elaborate what this constitutes, an example of what this may mean in the Australian context is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in the design and delivery of programs within schools, particularly in schools attended by high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁰⁸

The importance of cultural safety was found to be integral to the success of the Yarning On program, where the cultural credibility of staff was key to engaging participants in content on respectful relationships and sexual health.¹⁰⁹

Wellbeing and confidence of teachers

Discomfort

As noted previously, implementing respectful relationships education in order to address the drivers of gender-based violence is likely to prompt discomfort and even resistance in some teachers, because of its challenge to personally held gendered norms.¹¹⁰ This is an expected part of the work of challenging the drivers of gender-based violence, and can be addressed with a range of strategies such as involving leaders in initiatives (discussed further in [‘Why take a whole-of-school approach?’](#) on page 19).¹¹¹

Moreover, gender-based violence prevention programs are often delivered against the backdrop of debates about the role of education in addressing gender norms. This social context has seen teachers grapple with anxieties engendered by escalating negative debates.¹¹²

Although infrequently acknowledged in the research, a sizeable proportion of teachers will have experienced violence themselves, given the prevalence of gender-based violence in the Australian population.¹¹³ Thus more awareness and support among the school community is needed for survivors of gender-based violence, especially in the implementation of respectful relationships education.¹¹⁴ Whether having experienced violence or not, teachers need to be equipped to deal with these various sources of discomfort,¹¹⁵ with a range of supports, including access to applied professional training for carrying out this work.¹¹⁶

Sustainability of progress

Professional learning is not only fundamental in supporting teachers to deliver respectful relationships education, but it also embeds a whole-of-school approach. Research has found that when teachers have the confidence to teach respectful relationships content, schools may be less inclined to outsource to external providers on an ad hoc basis.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, content delivered with confidence by classroom teachers fosters consistency in the ways in which concepts are relayed to students.¹¹⁸

4. Use age-appropriate curriculum that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence

What is age-appropriate curriculum to address the drivers of gender-based violence?

Classroom instruction that enables students to identify, question and challenge the drivers of gender-based violence is a major facet of respectful relationships education. This work must begin early, as children and young people become aware of differences in gendered roles at a young age and are deeply affected by the gendered limits children place on themselves and others.¹¹⁹

Around the world, respectful relationships content is systematically integrated into school curricula in various ways, whether into stand-alone comprehensive sexuality education or subjects such as life skills or civics.¹²⁰ International guidance advises that content that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence can be practically embedded within existing

subjects such as health, biology and in social science subject areas as well as through counselling and wellbeing services and initiatives. However, if this approach is taken, it is paramount that content is not diluted.¹²¹

Integration of violence prevention curriculum within timetables is another important feature of an effective approach to teaching and learning. This includes delivery of this curriculum via regular lessons, facilitated within existing subjects, and through special projects and events.¹²²

Why is an age-appropriate curriculum to address the drivers of gender-based violence effective?

Research consistently advises that three fundamentals are central to an effective respectful relationships curriculum: early, age-appropriate and continued learning; emphasis on participatory design of materials and peer learning in delivery; and content that directly engages learners in identifying and addressing the drivers of gender-based violence.

Early, age-appropriate and continued learning

Relevant literature is unequivocal on the need for key topics to align with the developmental stages of students. Age-appropriate content delivery should be commenced as early as possible and should enable students to incrementally build on knowledge as they progress through year levels.¹²³ High-quality classroom instruction should therefore be delivered on a continued basis to allow for this knowledge building, as well as to ensure sustainability of outcomes.¹²⁴ See [‘Why is long-term vision, approach and funding important?’](#) on page 26 for further discussion.

A developmentally appropriate approach may involve topics such as positive and negative gender roles for younger children¹²⁵ through to communication and conflict resolution skills for older students.¹²⁶

Adolescence is a time in which gendered roles and expectations are heavily reinforced¹²⁷ and by middle school, students report experiences of sexual and dating violence, a reliable predictor of subsequent experiences in later years at school.¹²⁸ In a survey of Australian students in Years 9–12, students reported receiving necessary information too late, resulting in the need to seek it elsewhere, mainly on the internet.¹²⁹ It is thus never too early for students to begin engaging in respectful relationships content and it is often adults’ reticence to discuss healthy sexuality and sexual and gender identity that remains a core challenge for violence prevention.¹³⁰ The association between student wellbeing, their relationships and academic achievement is well established in the literature. This nexus adds weight to the need for quality teaching and learning to foster respectful relationships at an early stage.¹³¹

Design and delivery: participatory design of materials and peer learning

Participatory curriculum design, whereby young people contribute to the development of materials¹³² and provide feedback on them,¹³³ will tend to promote content that is relevant and relatable to students. Developed in this way, content is likely to be responsive to students’ experiences of gender inequality and how these intersect with and compound forms of discrimination such as ethnicity, sexual identity and disability.¹³⁴ Creative approaches to learning such as using drama and art to express responses to key concepts have been found to be far more beneficial than didactic methods.¹³⁵ One example of a participatory approach, from a program in Europe, found that engaging young people to produce short films was an effective way of reinforcing key concepts and values.¹³⁶

Peer-led learning is an important facet of impactful curriculum delivery.¹³⁷ A study of R4Respect, a violence prevention program delivered in schools and community agencies in the Northern Territory and Queensland, revealed that 92% of student participants agreed or strongly agreed that they should be leading learning on respectful relationships.¹³⁸ This finding aligns with another study cautioning that the power differential between teachers and students may inhibit young people's participation.¹³⁹ The Strong Family Program found that cooperative and shared learning built around family and community relationships is a relevant methodology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in learning about respectful relationships.¹⁴⁰ Further, as male students are often heavily influenced by their male peers and other male role models to engage in positive, respectful masculinities, it is important that peer learning is a feature of content delivery.¹⁴¹

However, a peer learning approach should be undertaken carefully and be complementary to classroom teaching and learning within a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education. Peer educators require support from teachers and others such as social workers to ensure that they can respond appropriately to student disclosures of violence.¹⁴²

Content: direct engagement in the drivers of gender-based violence

As discussed in the section [‘What is a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education?’](#) on page 18, all aspects of a whole-of-school approach, including curriculum, should aim for young people to acquire critical thinking skills to recognise, question and challenge the structures, norms and practices that uphold gender inequality. Curricula that engage in such content have been found to contribute to increases in students' ability to identify rigid gender roles and violent behaviour, as well as a decrease in students' intention to use violence in relationships. These are examples of medium-term changes that are necessary preconditions to reducing the prevalence of gender-based violence.¹⁴³

General content related to ‘positive development’ is inadequate to modify attitudes and behaviour among young people who support and condone violence.¹⁴⁴ The section [‘Why address the drivers of gender-based violence?’](#) on page 17 provides an overview of outcomes of school programs that clearly address these drivers, including Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools, Reducing Sexism and Violence Program – Middle School Program, Benzies & Batchies, Change Up, and Mentors in Violence Prevention.

AGENDA (Wales): A co-created resource

agendaonline.co.uk

AGENDA is a good practice example of a resource co-created with and for children and young people, comprising creative age-appropriate material for students aged 7–18, to build their knowledge of the gendered drivers of violence as they progress through their schooling.

Developed following the *Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act (2015)* coming into law, AGENDA is an open-access, Welsh/English language resource to apply the Welsh Government’s whole-of-school approach to healthy relationships education.¹⁴⁵ An aspect of the government’s approach is to encourage schools to support young people to campaign and raise awareness about gender and sexual violence.¹⁴⁶

The resource suggests visual art and social media techniques as entry points to address issues related to healthy relationships and gendered violence. An example of such strategies is the secondary student-led Lego workshop for primary school students. In the workshop students create gender-stereotype crushing machines. AGENDA aims to shift thinking from ‘what is’ – issues of gender stereotypes and gendered violence – to envision ‘what if’ – what healthy relationships could be.¹⁴⁷

5. Sustain and commit to the change by having a long-term vision, approach and funding

What is meant by a long-term vision, approach and funding that sustains and supports change?

Individual teachers, classrooms and schools cannot implement holistic respectful relationships education in isolation and without sufficient support. Just as teaching and learning related to primary prevention of gender-based violence needs to be consistent with broader school policies and culture, schools require a policy context in which gender equality and respectful relationships can be facilitated.¹⁴⁸

It is therefore essential that the education system is conducive to schools establishing and nurturing a whole-of-school approach. To that end, international guidance advises that the three levels of the system need to function cohesively in order to provide an enabling environment for respectful relationships education.¹⁴⁹ Each level of the education system has a specific role in doing so:

- Education authorities – develop and enact jurisdiction-wide policies and budgets to resource implementation. To fulfill this role, school system staff require an appropriate level of expertise in primary prevention of gender-based violence.¹⁵⁰
- Schools – incorporate measures to implement a whole-of-school approach within strategic planning processes.¹⁵¹
- Communities (families, community groups, sporting organisations, media) – reinforce positive gender attitudes and practices.¹⁵²

Long-term planning and ongoing funding are necessary for this systematisation to be achieved.¹⁵³

Why is long-term vision, approach and funding important?

The success of an integrated respectful relationships education school curriculum is attributable to government leadership in gender equality.¹⁵⁴ In Wales, as part of the implementation of the *Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act (2015)*, the government collaborated with Welsh Women’s Aid to publish guidance for educators on how to promote gender wellbeing and gender equalities for respectful relationships. The initiative has grown to develop guidance to support children and young people aged 7–18 to make respectful relationships matter in their schools and communities. For further information, see [‘Why is an age-appropriate curriculum to address the drivers of gender-based violence effective?’](#) on page 23.¹⁵⁵ Sweden offers another example of such an approach.¹⁵⁶ There, the implementation of education in schools to promote gender equality and healthy sexual behaviour has been coordinated by a national body since 1933. Since 1950, the national organisation for the rights of people who are LGBTIQ has had a key role in the implementation of this prevention work in schools.¹⁵⁷

Where a cohesive social policy environment is in place, schools can receive support to prepare to implement a whole-of-school approach, referred to in the literature as a ‘readiness’ phase.¹⁵⁸ Part of this phase involves consultation and building agreement among all school stakeholders, including parents, guardians and other members of the community.¹⁵⁹ Training for teachers and school staff should be accessed at this time, with one estimate suggesting teachers need at least 10 hours of professional development before feeling confident to teach primary prevention content.¹⁶⁰

Beyond the necessary policy and infrastructure considerations, studies have demonstrated that short-term and ad hoc inputs in classrooms and schools are unproductive in bringing about change.¹⁶¹ Ongoing effort is needed to address the pervasiveness of attitudes that support and condone gender-based violence¹⁶² and continued engagement of students has been observed to bring about meaningful change.¹⁶³

To illustrate the efficacy of a long-term and comprehensive approach, an evaluation compared two programs designed to address attitudes that support violence among young people: Dating Matters and Safe Dates. The evaluation found that over 6 points in time over 3 years, the comprehensive program (Dating Matters) resulted in between 6% and 18% less self-reported perpetration and victimisation of teen dating violence, compared to Safe Dates, the less comprehensive program.¹⁶⁴ Another review of violence prevention programs for young people concluded that it is not program length on its own that necessarily impacts positively on program effectiveness,¹⁶⁵ but rather the breadth of the program.¹⁶⁶ Table 3 below provides an overview of the components of Dating Matters and Safe Dates.

Table 3: Overview of Dating Matters and Safe Dates components

Components of Dating Matters ¹⁶⁷	Components of Safe Dates ¹⁶⁸
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> classroom-delivered programs for students in Years 6–8 training for parents of students undertaking Dating Matters training for teachers/school personnel youth communications program local health department involved in assessing and building prevention capacity and tracking relevant policy and data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10-session curriculum for Years 8 and 9 students poster contest based on curriculum content a play performed by students

While the evaluation of Dating Matters and Safe Dates showed that positive impacts of comprehensive prevention education can be achieved, it is also apparent that change is difficult to sustain unless programs continue.¹⁶⁹ An evaluation of Yarning On, a respectful relationships and sexual health program in schools and community organisations in South Australia and the Northern Territory, cautioned that participants' progress would be short-lived unless the program continued. The evaluation found that the sensitive nature of the content, coupled with program participants living with significant, ongoing legacies of colonisation, meant 'there are no quick fixes'.¹⁷⁰ Secure and sustained funding is an important part of program longevity.¹⁷¹

6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination

How does cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination support a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education?

As discussed in the previous section, it is important that schools' work to prevent gender-based violence is embedded within the broader education system. This involves the collective efforts of education authorities, schools and the broader community (including families and the media). In order for these parts of the system to function cohesively in working towards the shared goal of creating a future that is violence-free, appropriate coordination mechanisms are necessary. Collaboration and coordination are required among stakeholders, including:¹⁷²

- education authorities with oversight of schools and government portfolios with adjacent responsibility for schooling such as child protection, gender equality, sport, health and social services;
- education authorities at each level of government and other relevant education bodies (such as non-government education sectors, principals' associations, education unions, curriculum authorities, teaching institutes); and
- social workers and experts in gender equality and the primary prevention of violence.

Working together, these stakeholders can help ensure mutual access to resources such as professional learning and rigorous research, as well as consistency of communications to collectively challenge norms that support violence and to promote gender equality.

Why is cross-sectoral collaboration and support important?

Various modes of collaboration have been found to enhance a range of school-based violence prevention initiatives. Students appear to benefit from a collaborative approach: strong cooperation between classroom teachers and social workers was key to the provision of a culturally sensitive program in schools with high proportions of Latinx students in the US.¹⁷³ Broadly, the involvement of school counsellors and, if appropriate, social workers and other specialists to safeguard students' wellbeing is critical in supporting school staff in appropriately managing disclosures and distress.¹⁷⁴ As discussed in ['Why is a professional learning strategy and ongoing professional learning needed?'](#) on page 21, the likelihood of students disclosing experiences of violence through their engagement in respectful relationships often increases because students feel it safe for them to do so.¹⁷⁵

Cross-sector collaboration is also advantageous for teachers. For example, a program delivered by sports coaches for high school athletes in the US found that the support that coaches received from violence prevention experts to engage students in program materials

was instrumental in the program's success.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, cross-school learning was found to be an important factor in facilitating schools' adoption of the Green Dot program, which encouraged students to influence one another to intervene in behaviour that supports and condones violence (termed bystander action).¹⁷⁷ Principals of schools that did not initially implement the program considered learning from principals of implementing schools as a factor in taking on the program.

The involvement of parents is another significant aspect of collaboration (see ['What is a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education?'](#) on page 18), as they are important stakeholders as members of the school community and in facilitating broader community involvement.¹⁷⁸ While parents and guardians have a critical role in influencing children's attitudes and beliefs about gender, they are not always equipped with the language or the confidence to have open discussions with their children,¹⁷⁹ and could benefit from access to school-based information sessions and workshops.¹⁸⁰

Parents' and guardians' support for primary prevention initiatives is important in authorising schools to undertake prevention work. In addition, their endorsement can support schools to implement programs that are sensitive to families' cultural and religious beliefs and preferences.¹⁸¹ To that end, engaging community leaders may be helpful in communicating the importance of school-based initiatives to prevent gender-based violence and to build trust and confidence between the parents and the school.¹⁸²

7. Evaluate for continuous improvement

What is evaluation of respectful relationships education?

Evaluating school-based primary prevention programs involves measuring any changes observed through the implementation of initiatives.¹⁸³ Changes may relate to students' and teachers' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, gender equality and respectful relationships; parental engagement; and policy development. These changes should be measured at classroom, school, education department and national levels, and evaluations may be undertaken using established frameworks¹⁸⁴ to provide validated and generalisable results. This approach can be facilitated through evaluations of programs in clusters of schools in collaboration with universities and education departments.

Why evaluate for continuous improvement?

Measuring whether change occurs is important in building evidence for what works in ultimately reducing violence¹⁸⁵ and is also needed to guide evidence-based improvement of initiatives as they are being implemented.¹⁸⁶ This is a long-term project. The widespread implementation of respectful relationships education in schools – aligned with the 7 core elements outlined in this review – along with prevention initiatives across society can result in long-term improvements in gender equality and reductions in the drivers of violence.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, the *persistence* of school programs that address the gendered drivers of violence is a prerequisite for establishing evidence for the extent to which school initiatives impact upon reductions in violence.

The body of evaluations of school-based prevention programs has grown in recent years. A recent systematic review of such initiatives found numerous relevant evaluations from around the world, reporting demonstrated significant improvements in knowledge and attitudes.¹⁸⁸

Despite this, evidence for reductions in behaviour that supports and condones violence, as well as of changes to rates of victimisation, remains limited¹⁸⁹ and long-term longitudinal studies and ethnographic field work is required.¹⁹⁰ A focus on evaluation of long-term behavioural changes would shed light on:¹⁹¹

- whether observed changes persist into and through high school
- aspects of programs that contribute to change
- whether one program's effects translate to other settings, and
- aspects of programs that are most effective, and for whom.

Conclusion

Respectful relationships education in schools continues to be a key area of interest for a range of government and non-government stakeholders in Australia who are committed to preventing violence against women.

Our Watch has reviewed available literature to update its 2015 evidence paper on the topic and found that the seven core elements outlined in both the original and updated papers continue to reflect international and national evidence on an effective approach to building student skills and creating school cultures that promote respectful relationships and challenge violence, discrimination and stereotyping.

Implementing respectful relationships education provides an opportunity to transform schools to be more gender equitable education institutions, workplaces and community hubs. This work has the potential to reach students, teaching and non-teaching staff, families and communities to address the drivers of gender-based violence and contribute to creating an Australia free from violence.

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