

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Respectful Relationships Education: A blueprint for preventing gender-based violence through education systems

Gender-based violence is a serious and pervasive issue in Australian schools, impacting both students and staff. This violence is preventable and an evidence-based approach to respectful relationships education (RRE) is part of the solution.

Evidence tells us that gender inequality drives gender-based violence¹ and that RRE which engages schools as workplaces, education institutions and community hubs, offers the most promising approach to embedding gender equality and addressing the drivers of gender-based violence through education settings, including bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools.²

Strong leadership and sustained commitment from governments is essential in building the foundations required to ensure that evidence-based approaches to RRE are embedded throughout education systems and school sectors across Australia.

In conjunction with a comprehensive program of activity across other settings, evidenced based and adequately funded RRE embedded in education systems and sectors across Australia can help create the generational change needed to free Australia from gender-based violence.

What is the purpose of this brief?

Our Watch has developed a new resource, *Respectful relationships education: A blueprint for preventing gender-based violence through education systems* to provide a robust and actionable policy guide for how to design, implement and monitor respectful relationships education across Australian education systems and school sectors.


This brief is intended to provide a short and accessible summary of the RRE blueprint.




What does gender-based violence look like in schools?

Schools strive to be places of equality, opportunity and learning for all students and safe, equitable and inspiring workplaces for staff. Unfortunately, gender-based violence persists for students and staff across Australia, with bullying, discrimination and harassment occurring in schools.³


The gendered and sexualised nature of bullying in education settings

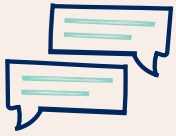
 Research into **bullying** has found it to be a **highly gendered behaviour**, particularly amongst adolescents.⁴


 **Young men with supportive attitudes towards rigid forms of masculinities** (such as being tough, stoic and hypersexual) are much **more likely to have perpetrated** physical (54%), verbal (66%) and online (56%) bullying in the last month.⁵


74% of **young trans people** aged 14-25 have reported **experiences of bullying, discrimination and gendered violence**.⁶

Tech-facilitated abuse and young people

1 in 4  **young women** aged 18-24 have **experienced image-based abuse**.¹⁰


Girls are twice as likely as boys to feel **pressured or blackmailed into sexting** (16% vs 8% of boys).¹¹ 

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 14-17) **have been exposed to potentially harmful online material** such as violent images or sexual content (76%).¹² 

Teens with a disability are **more likely to be asked for sexual information** (26%) and **sexual images** (15%) compared to the national average of 18% and 11%.¹³ 

Sexual harassment in schools

1 in 2 **young people** have experienced **sexual harassment**, with young women aged 16-19 most at risk.⁷

 Emerging evidence demonstrates the **increase in sexual harassment, sexism and misogyny perpetrated by some boys** towards not only their peers, but also women teachers.⁹

40% of **16 to 17 year olds** experienced **sexual harassment in a place of study**.⁸

Why do we need a blueprint?

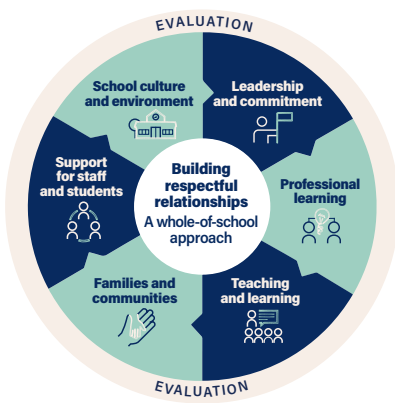
The blueprint has been developed in consultation with government and non-government school sectors as well as other relevant peak bodies.

The blueprint is intended to provide practical guide for governments and school sectors on how to lead and embed an evidence-based approach to RRE. It emphasises the importance of establishing strong foundations and clear

actions required to ensure schools are supported, by governments, to embed RRE and to play a role in preventing gender-based violence before it starts.

The blueprint shows us how we can create a violence-free future for all young Australians within schooling systems.

What is respectful relationships education (RRE)?



Best practice definition of respectful relationships education:

RRE 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, both as education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence.

National and international evidence indicates that a whole-of-school approach to preventing gender-based violence, is the most effective mechanism for school-based prevention of gender-based violence.¹⁴ A whole-of-school approach aims to drive change at different levels, changing the structures, norms and practices within our education system to ensure gender equality and respect is embedded, promoted and role modelled across all aspects of school life.

A whole-school approach to RRE creates a supportive and enabling environment for educators by ensuring they have access to professional learning, feel confident to

deliver classroom materials, can safely and appropriately respond to disclosures of violence and importantly are supported and empowered by strong school leadership and commitment.

RRE supports children and young people to establish equitable attitudes towards gender, enabling them to avoid or challenge limiting or harmful stereotypes, and develop positive personal identities and interpersonal relationship skills, which supports their overall wellbeing.

An evidence-based approach to respectful relationships education can play a key role in ending gender-based violence.

What can governments do?

A best-practice and sustainable model of respectful relationships education requires all stakeholders – from government policymakers to school sector leaders and individual schools – to lead the way in supporting an evidence-based, consistent and unified approach to RRE.

The RRE blueprint identifies **3 key phases** for education policy and decision-makers to consider in their approach to implementing an evidenced-based approach to RRE:

1 Build evidence-based foundations

2 Support implementation of a whole-of-school approach

3 Sustain RRE to achieve long-term change

Respectful relationships education: A model for system wide integration

Maintain momentum



Develop the pre-service workforce: initial teacher education



1

PHASE 1

Build evidence-based foundations for RRE

Establish an authorising environment for RRE



Identify mechanisms for coordination and collaboration



Establish an RRE implementation workforce



3

PHASE 3

Sustain RRE to achieve long-term change



Support the roll-out of RRE

Continue to strengthen the RRE evidence base



2

PHASE 2

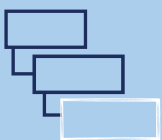
Support implementation of a whole-of-school approach to RRE



Develop a comprehensive approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning activities



Develop a professional learning strategy



Plan for a phased approach to RRE implementation



Include central elements of respectful relationships education in curriculum development



Develop a communication strategy



Ensure strong leadership and commitment

Is respectful relationships education effective?

Best-practice respectful relationships education can shift the gendered drivers of violence at individual, school, system, policy and broader societal levels when integrated effectively into the education system.

The potential for respectful relationships education to create shifts in the gendered drivers of violence within schools is evidenced in Australian evaluations of respectful relationships education.

These have found:¹⁵



Improved student **classroom behaviour**



Improved **teacher-student relationships**



Increased student knowledge of **positive attitudes towards and confidence in discussing issues** of domestic violence, gender equality and respectful relationships



Decreased **student adherence to gender stereotypical attitudes**



Increased **teacher understanding** of the importance of respectful relationships education



Increased **understanding of respectful relationships, gender equality and gender-based violence** among school leadership – including principals



Decrease in bullying, including sexual bullying¹⁶

Ending gender-based violence is a **multi-generational process** and requires a **range of strategies and interventions across all areas of society**. Evidence-based approaches to RRE are a key strategy in preventing gender-based violence in and through our education systems.

Endnotes

- 1 Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.)*. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch.
- 2 Our Watch (2021) *Respectful relationships education in schools: Evidence paper*. Melbourne, Australia
- 3 Cahill, H., Lusher, D., Farrelly, A., Calleja, N., Wang, P., & Hassani, A. (2023). *Summary of findings: A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary schools* (ANROWS Insights, 04/2023). Sydney, Australia: ANROWS.
- 4 Espelage, D.L., Basile, K.C., Leemis, R.W., Hipp, T.N., & Davis, J.P. (2018). *Longitudinal Examination of the Bullying-Sexual Violence Pathway across Early to Late Adolescence: Implicating Homophobic Name-Calling*. Journal of Youth and Adolescence
- 5 The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia*. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.
- 6 Smith, E., Jones, T., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Mitchell, A., & Hillier, L. (2014). *From Blues to Rainbows: Mental health and wellbeing of gender diverse and transgender young people in Australia*. Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society
- 7 Swami, N., Apeness, K., Andersson, C., & Hoq, M. (2024). *Experience of sexual harassment among young Australians: Who, where and how?* (Growing Up in Australia Snapshot Series – Issue 12). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- 8 Swami, N., Apeness, K., Andersson, C., & Hoq, M. (2024). *Experience of sexual harassment among young Australians: Who, where and how?*
- 9 Roberts, S., & Wescott, S. (2024). *To quell the problem, we must name the problem: the role of social media 'manfluencers' in boys' sexist behaviours in school settings*. Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 41(2), 125–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20590776.2024.2329083>
- 10 Office of the eSafety Commissioner. (2017) *Image-based abuse National Survey: Summary Report*. Australia
- 11 ibid
- 12 eSafety Commissioner. (2022). *Cool, beautiful, strange and scary: The online experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents and caregivers*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government.
- 13 eSafety Commissioner. (2023). *A New Playground: The Digital Lives of Young People with Disability*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government.
- 14 United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNESCO) (2016). *Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence*. Paris, France, and UN Women, New York, USA Fraser, E. (2022). School-based approaches to tackling violence. What Works to Prevent Violence.

Ligiero, D., Hart, C., Fulu, E., Thomas, A., & Radford, L. (2019). What works to prevent sexual violence against children: Evidence review. Washington, DC: Together for Girls.

United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). (n.d.). End school-related gender-based violence: Resources to help eliminate school-related genderbased violence (SRGBV)
- 15 These outcomes have been demonstrated in evaluations of respectful relationships education in Australia, including Our Watch's 2015 pilot in secondary schools in Victoria (evaluation supported by Dr Debbie Ollis, Deakin University and Dr Andrew Joyce, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University) and 2018 pilot in primary schools in Queensland and Victoria (evaluation supported by the Strategic Research Centre in Education, Deakin University).
- 16 Cahill (2023) see note 3.

Together we can create a future free from gender-based violence.



To access the full RRE blueprint search 'blueprint' at ourwatch.org.au or use this QR code.

For more information on respectful relationships education please visit the Our Watch website.

ourwatch.org.au/education

For more information or to arrange a briefing, please contact:

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