

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Primary prevention across the life cycle

2024

Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is an issue for the whole community. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, the evidence clearly shows the intersection between racism, sexism, and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to suffer from violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

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Background and purpose of brief

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch, including the Commonwealth Government.

In 2021, Our Watch developed the second edition of *Change the story*, an evidence-based framework to guide a coordinated and effective national approach to preventing violence against women.

Our Watch has prepared this brief as part of its ongoing work and commitment to provide clear and accessible evidence, information and advice to inform primary prevention work across Australia. The brief was also prepared in the context of the 2024 Commonwealth Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches. It forms part of a series of five briefs, including:

- **Brief 1:** Primary prevention across the life cycle
- **Brief 2:** Settings for primary prevention
- **Brief 3:** Reinforcing factors for gender-based violence
- **Brief 4:** Whole of system opportunities for primary prevention
- **Brief 5:** Opportunities to engage with men to support primary prevention

This brief focusses on the evidence and opportunities for prevention work across the **life cycle**. It is strongly related to, and should be read in conjunction with, Brief 2, which discusses the most effective **settings** for prevention, because many of the life stages discussed in this brief (early childhood, the school years, and adults in tertiary education) are strongly associated with a particular kind of setting (early childhood education and care, schools, and tertiary education).

A lifecycle approach: an overview

Working across the life course is one of the key principles for an effective national approach to primary prevention activity. It is a useful principle across prevention activity, including prevention strategies and frameworks, policy and legislative reform, prevention workforce development activity, organisational change strategies, as well as programs and campaigns aimed at attitudinal and behaviour change.

Prevention efforts need to reach and engage everyone, at every age and stage of life. Importantly, in order to embed, reinforce and sustain change across the population, prevention must engage people not just on a one-off basis, but in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways over the course of their lives.

In addition to ensuring the population is engaged effectively across all stages of life, there are certain stages that are important transition points, or which present especially good opportunities to address the drivers of violence against women using policy, program or legislative levers. The evidence shows that these important life stages include:

- **Early childhood:** when gender roles start to become embedded and personal identities are forming, and where there are near-universal mechanisms to engage with children through kinder, day care and early childhood services.¹
- **Primary school years:** when students develop and explore understandings about key concepts relevant to prevention (for example, gender norms, roles and stereotypes, puberty, consent, bodies, gender equality, etc.) and where there are universal mechanisms to engage with children, educators and parents through the primary school setting.²
- **Adolescence:** when intimate/sexual relationships are beginning to be formed, where people are exposed to pornography,³ where students in schools explore concepts relevant to prevention (for example, media literacy, respectful relationships, consent, gender roles and norms, etc.) and where there are universal mechanisms to engage with adolescents, educators and parents through the secondary school setting.⁴
- **Young adults:** when independence increases and people transition to post-secondary education or the workforce, opportunities arise for teaching of safe and healthy relationship skills including social-emotional learning and relationship skills as well as settings/sector-based approaches to prevention in TAFE, higher education or workplaces.⁵
- **Pregnancy and the early stages of first parenthood:** when gendered social practices become more entrenched and where parents can revert to more stereotypical gender roles, with negative implications for long-term equality within their relationship. Prevention efforts to address social norms, government policy settings, workforce structures and workplace policies and cultures are useful at this life stage.⁶

- **Adults:** in adulthood, people are consolidating their personal, family and professional lives, and some are moving into positions of significant power or influence in workplaces, in their local communities, and in society more broadly. As such, there are critical opportunities for adults to take responsibility for progressing prevention goals, using their influence to pursue or support policy, institutional, organisational, social and cultural change, and role modelling prosocial behaviour – both to other adults and to younger generations.⁷
- **Older age:** older people may have had limited engagement with primary prevention activity, given the relative newness of the field and they are less likely to be engaged in settings where prevention activity is becoming common (for example, schools, universities/TAFEs, workplaces, sports clubs, etc.). As part of the life stage approach, it is important that prevention efforts include a focus on influencing older people's attitudes and behaviours and supporting older women's independence.

Current prevention work and opportunities at four life stages

Prevention in early childhood

A child's first 2,000 days of life (from conception to the age of five) are a critical period of development and an effective area of focus for health promotion initiatives and primary prevention activities.⁸

Our Watch's recent scoping review of primary prevention in the early years found primary prevention in early years settings may be effectively integrated into existing service systems, allowing for multiple prevention strategies to be delivered concurrently. This integration was mirrored in findings from the program mapping, whereby most activities targeted early years educators, or provided resources and support through parenting programs often run alongside maternal and child health services.⁹

Prevention in early childhood – practice examples

- Sydney's Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre's [ALL IN program](#), is a whole-of-service project that engages early childhood educators, leaders, centre directors and families to give them the skills, knowledge and confidence to take action to challenge rigid, harmful gender roles and stereotypes that impact children in their care. Building on early years prevention approaches, ALL IN offers the opportunity to explore how children's play, language, resources, and storytelling can promote positive messages about gender, inclusion, and respectful relationships.

- The '[Girls Can, Boys Can](#)' Project, developed by Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group in Alice Springs, provides early childhood services and educators with resources, lesson plans and activities that challenge rigid gender stereotypes, promote equal and respectful relationships between girls and boys and demonstrate the strengths of Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Gaps and opportunities for prevention in early childhood

- Efforts to embed and strengthen prevention practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings can be strengthened where they are systematically embedded through policy, practice and structural change. Early years service providers work within a range of frameworks under the National Quality Framework (NQF) that focus on the holistic development of the child. These frameworks are largely gender neutral. Updating relevant components of the NQF – including the NQF objectives and principles, the National Quality Standards (NQS), and the National approved learning framework *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, and aligning these changes in the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* – would embed principles of primary prevention across ECEC settings and support educators to undertake prevention work.
- Professional learning is a key component of primary prevention practice in early years settings. There is scope to strengthen the development of, and potentially standardise, nationwide professional development content for early childhood educators on this issue. Undergraduate programs that lead to employment in early years settings – for example in education, nursing and social work – lend themselves well to primary prevention content. The development of stronger content for such courses could draw on Our Watch resources, including the [Educators' guide to upskilling pre-service professionals to support the prevention of gender-based violence](#).¹⁰ There are also examples of primary prevention education currently available at the Vocational Education and Training (VET) level, including a course in Gender Equity and in Contributing to Primary Prevention of Family Violence and Violence Against Women, both registered on the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) that could be picked up and delivered nationally by VET providers of qualifications for early childhood education.
- There is substantial potential for respectful relationships education (RRE) to be expanded into ECEC settings. While there are factors that increase complexity of implementing a whole-of-setting, best practice approach to RRE in ECEC services (including for example privatisation of ECEC services and different jurisdictional regulatory schemes), there are opportunities for the Commonwealth Government to provide national resources, guidance and regulatory support. Our Watch suggests a phased approach, which may begin with investment in pilot projects to be delivered and evaluated by relevant experts in government-operated ECEC centres.
- There are deep-rooted gender inequities embedded into early years systems, such as the devaluation of a largely feminised ECEC workforce, highlighting the need for gender transformative structural change. Raising the status of early childhood educators by supporting wage increases (acknowledging recent important commitments and decisions by the Commonwealth Government) as well as opportunities for professional development, clear pathways for career progression and sustainable work conditions are all important ways of ensuring the sector does not continue to reproduce gender inequality.

- Healthy and positive role models are critical to a child’s development, and witnessing and experiencing positive interactions between men and women supports young children to develop healthy understandings of gender roles and relationships. However, men are vastly underrepresented in ECEC settings. There are opportunities to consider development of targeted strategies to attract and retain men in the ECEC workforce.
- Removing structural barriers to women’s access to the opportunities, resources, and power associated with workforce participation is integral to achieving gender equality and preventing violence against women. Childcare is one of the greatest enablers of women’s workforce participation, but where ECEC services are expensive or difficult to access, women’s choices and opportunities are restricted.

Our Watch’s recent scoping review of primary prevention in the early years also identified the following practice-based opportunities:

- Given that over half of the identified examples of early years primary prevention practice were found to be based in Victoria, there is an opportunity to expand early years primary prevention activities in other parts of the country, including, where relevant, by building on the approaches developed and lessons learned in Victoria.
- While the review found that primary prevention programs in this setting addressed rigid gender stereotyping, there were also examples of practice that reinforced and reproduced rigid gender stereotypes. This suggests there are further opportunities to highlight more explicitly how rigid gender stereotypes contribute to the perpetration of violence, and how the underlying social context for this violence must also be addressed.
- There are considerable opportunities for the development of empirical research and evaluation to better support primary prevention work, including that currently being undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Prevention in the school years – Respectful Relationships Education (RRE)

Schools are mini communities that play a central role in teaching children and young people what gender-based violence looks like and how it can be prevented. Respectful relationships education is the holistic approach to the school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence. The approach can be implemented in both primary and secondary schools.

In addition to being a key way to reach children and young people at important stages in their life cycle, respectful relationships education is also a **settings-based approach**, which reaches a diverse range of people who engage with schools settings, including teachers, parents and the broader school community. As such this content could also have been included in Brief 2 on settings-based approaches to prevention and should be read in conjunction with that brief.

The change necessary to prevent gender-based violence can be supported by schools taking a **whole-of-school approach** to respectful relationships education. This approach 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 violence. A whole-of-school approach not only provides in-class education, but addresses a school’s culture, policies and procedures, and

promotes gender equality among school staff. It is an approach that benefits everyone in a school community.

More information is available on the Our Watch [Respectful Relationships Education website](#).

Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) – current practice in Australia

COMMONWEALTH

In 2022, the Commonwealth Government made a significant commitment to respectful relationships education (RRE) announcing a \$77.6 million investment.

The Government indicated that the investment is designed to ensure all Australian students receive high-quality, age-appropriate, evidence-based, consent, and RRE that supports the prevention of gender-based violence and promotes healthy and respectful relationships between young people. The initiative is comprised of the following key components:

- The establishment of a [national respectful relationships education expert working group](#) (NRREEWG) with jurisdictional, non-government and expert representation. This group guides program design and advises school sectors and jurisdictions on evidenced based delivery methods appropriate to school communities.
- A rapid review of how respectful relationships consent education programs are currently being taught in schools.
- The development of a national framework or guide for schools that supports the delivery of high-quality respectful relationships education.
- A grants process to complement and support any existing consent and respectful relationships education investment by state, territory, and non-government school sectors.

The NRREEWG was established in June 2023 to lead on the other three components noted above. It is Chaired by Our Watch CEO Patty Kinnersly. As at August 2024, the development of the national framework to guide schools is in its final stages and the grants process is being negotiated with states and territories. The grants process in particular, provides a significant opportunity for jurisdictional and school sectors to build a coordinated and evidence-based approach to RRE. While each jurisdiction and school sector may be at different levels of readiness, this five-year funding opportunity provides the ideal environment to build the prevention infrastructure needed to establish RRE across every jurisdiction.

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM 9.0

The Australian Curriculum 9.0, as a framework for levels Prep to Year 10 in all Australian schools, authorises schools to teach the relevant components of RRE. While the Australian Curriculum provides a useful framing, it does not explicitly contain 'how to' guidance related to the necessary RRE curriculum content. Furthermore, comprehensive, evidence-based RRE requires a whole-of-school approach comprising many elements – curriculum is only one component of what is necessary.

The Australian Curriculum positions RRE content under the Health and Physical Education learning area, specifically the relationships and sexuality focus area. In addition, many state and territory departments of education are implementing some form of relationships, or social and emotional wellbeing, teaching and learning through the Australian Curriculum.

However, these curriculum materials do not always include an explicit focus on gender, which is a significant limitation because evidence¹¹ suggests that for RRE to be effective in supporting the prevention of gender-based violence, a focus on the gendered drivers of violence is an essential component.

Whilst curriculum materials that explicitly include content about gender, power and control in age-appropriate ways across all year levels are an essential component of RRE, they are not the only component necessary. Evaluations¹² of gender-based violence prevention programs in schools consistently note that their effectiveness and sustainability depend upon the involvement of all the stakeholders who are important in young people's lives, through a whole-of-school approach.

VICTORIA

The Victorian Government is currently undertaking a best practice approach to RRE. The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria is strongly aligned with the evidence base and the whole-of-school model, incorporating all seven of the core elements identified as essential components for effective RRE.

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence identified the critical role played by schools and early childhood education in creating a culture of respect and equality to prevent family violence. In 2016, RRE became a core component of the Victorian Curriculum from Prep to Year 12 and is currently being taught in all government and Catholic Schools and some independent schools as part of a whole-of-school approach.

Since 2016-17, the Victorian Government has invested approximately \$120 million to support the implementation of RRE in Victorian schools. RRE remains a priority for the Victorian Government through the Family Violence reform rolling action plan 2020-2023 and Free from Violence Second Action Plan (2022–2025) (Second Action Plan). The Second Action Plan has 10 key priorities that guide primary prevention work, including schools and early childhood as key settings. The Second Action Plan includes actions to:

- Further embed Respectful Relationships and consent education
- Continue to support all Victorian government schools and participating Catholic and independent schools to implement and embed Respectful Relationships.

The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria aims to embed a culture of respect and gender equality via curriculum, policies, practices and the whole school environment. The Victorian Government is implementing Respectful Relationships across schools and early childhood services including:

- a 'lead and partner' schools initiative that provides intensive training and support to over 1,950 government, Catholic and independent schools
- the 'Resilience, Rights and Respectful relationships' teaching and learning materials for Foundation to Year 12
- a professional development program for primary and secondary school staff and early childhood educators
- a regional Respectful Relationships workforce that supports schools and early childhood education settings to implement RRE and strengthen referral and response to family violence.

The supportive policy environment, level of investment, and prioritisation of RRE in Victoria since 2014 has been significant. It will be important to maintain a consistent level of commitment and investment to ensure that the education system in Victoria continues to

build on the substantial system and structural reform already undertaken and continues to lead the way nationally on embedding evidence-based RRE across the education system.

QUEENSLAND

The Queensland Government is building positive foundations for an approach to RRE. Between 2017 and 2019, the Queensland Government (together with the Victorian Government) partnered with Our Watch to pilot and evaluate a whole school approach to RRE in a primary school setting. Findings and recommendations from the evaluation of this pilot informed the initial expansion of Queensland's approach to RRE.

In 2022, the Queensland Government announced a budget of \$15.469 million to support state schools to implement RRE. Funding was made available for three years and supports eight Principal Advisor roles that work in regions to support the delivery of RRE across Queensland. While providing an important foundation, due to geographical size and levels of support required to successfully embed RRE into schools, a significant increase and ongoing investment in RRE from the Queensland Government would scale up this approach across the state.

As with most jurisdictions across Australia, all Queensland state schools are required to provide health and wellbeing education, including respectful relationships education, as part of the [Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education](#).

In addition, the Queensland Government has developed the '[RESPECT program](#)' which focusses on building students' social and emotional development from Prep to Year 12. There are opportunities to build on this program to ensure greater alignment with evidence about what is most effective.

There are opportunities to build on important foundations in Queensland, including a clearer mandatory authorising environment in relation to RRE, by providing the investment required to ensure it is embedded across Queensland.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In July 2020, WA launched 'Path to Safety: Western Australia's Strategy to Reduce Family and Domestic Violence 2020–2030', which sets out a whole-of-government and -community plan for reducing and responding to this issue over the next decade.

The Strategy is supported by three action plans that outline the necessary steps to achieve the long-term vision of all Western Australians living free from family and domestic violence. The First Action Plan ran from July 2020 to June 2022. RRE formed part of this, under Key Action 18:

- Continue to deliver the Respectful Relationships Teaching Support Program to participating WA schools.

The [Teaching Support Program \(RRTSP\)](#) is a pilot program delivered to a selection of primary and secondary public schools across Western Australia. The program 'advocates for a whole-of-school approach and aims to increase teachers' skills to educate and support children and young people to build relationships characterised by non-violence, equality, mutual respect, and trust.' However, support was limited to professional learning for school staff. This is a small component of the support required by schools to embed a whole school approach to RRE. In 2021, the program was expanded to increase the number of participating schools (from 10 to 22 per year) and to extend the length of the program by four years, to 30 June 2026.

Given the number of schools in Western Australia (over 800), there are opportunities for the WA Government to commit to a planned, phased, and appropriately resourced approach to implementing evidence-based RRE across the state, including review of current coordination and governance of RRE in WA.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Northern Territory Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028 outlines key outcomes for the territory. There are three actions plans to support the strategy, Action Plan 1 '*Changing attitudes, Intervening Earlier and Responding Better, 2018-2021*' includes a focus on children and young people and prevention programs that focus on protective behaviours and healthy respectful relationships.

As with other jurisdictions, the NT has developed its own standalone curriculum in this space. The focus of the curriculum is weighted toward social and emotional learning and not the gendered drivers of violence, nor the ongoing impacts of colonisation, which is essential in addressing gender-based violence against Aboriginal women and children.

The Northern Territory Department of Education (DoE) currently operates two RRE specific groups to inform their approach, a NT RRE Management Group, and an RRE Working Group to coordinate the roll out of RRE across the Northern Territory. Our Watch is working with and supporting these groups to work towards developing a plan to support a phased roll out to RRE across the territory. Importantly, however due to geographical size, remoteness, and the need for a community led approach, there are additional complexities that need to be considered when developing a phased approach in the NT.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The prevention pillar of the NSW Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 identifies a key focus area as being 'building knowledge and skills in children and young people on gender-equitable, safe, respectful, and healthy relationships'. The current approach in NSW focusses on curriculum rather than a whole-of-school approach, which would embed RRE into the education system.

The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) provides curriculum materials for Kindergarten to Year 12 and is currently undertaking a review of the PDHPE curriculum as part of the NSW Curriculum reform. An updated curriculum is due to be implemented in schools in 2027.

Traditionally there has been an emphasis in NSW on external providers coming into schools and delivering content on consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education to students. While external providers can support professional learning or expertise as part of a broader embedded program, to be most effective the work to change school cultures and environments should occur as part of a whole school approach.

Importantly however, a whole-of-school approach to RRE is likely to be a priority under the forthcoming NSW Primary Prevention Strategy.

TASMANIA

The Tasmanian Government's Safe Home Safe Families – Family and Sexual Violence Third Action Plan 2022-2027, released in November 2022, outlines the following action in relation to RRE:

'Effectively embed Respectful Relationship and Consent Education in Tasmanian schools and develop a suite of resources informed by key stakeholders, and children and young

people, that builds understanding of consent, coercive control and grooming in the Tasmanian community.’

This Action has led to the establishment of a dedicated position within the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) which works with Tasmanian Government schools to embed RRE aligned to the Australian Curriculum.

Similar to other jurisdictions, Tasmania has developed its own stand-alone curriculum for students from years K-12 and DECYP is funded to deliver professional learning to teachers. However, there are opportunities to build on and strengthen these foundations and embed an evidence-based approach to RRE in Tasmania.

ACT

The ACT Education Directorate recognises that RRE is most effective when used as part of a whole school approach. The ACT Government has invested in a whole school approach to RRE to prevent domestic and family violence by creating a culture of gender equality in schools. Gender Equality Coaches work with schools to build their confidence and capability to deliver this whole school approach.

Our Watch understands that the ACT Education Directorate is currently developing a plan for a roll out of an evidence-based, phased approach to RRE which incorporates all seven of the core elements identified as essential components for effective RRE.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

South Australia is currently developing a new iteration of *Committed to Safety: A framework for addressing domestic, family and sexual violence in South Australia*. Previous versions of this framework highlighted prevention as a key pillar and schools as a key setting. However, RRE has not been a particular focus under the framework. The associated action in the school setting has been the delivery of a state-based ‘Keeping Safe’ curriculum, which has a child protection focus. There is a gap between this curriculum focussed approach and a whole-of-school approach to RRE.

There is other work underway in South Australia, for example non-government organisation, SHINE SA, has developed a relationships and sexual health curriculum for South Australian young people from year 5 to year 10. SHINE staff visit schools to deliver this to young people. However, Our Watch understands that this is not mandatory and is at the discretion of individual schools as to whether young people have access to this curriculum.

As a result, there are opportunities for further commitment to evidence-based RRE in South Australia.

Gaps and opportunities for respectful relationships education in schools

There are a number of gaps and opportunities to embed respectful relationships education in school systems across the country – many of which are noted above in the assessment of current practice in each jurisdiction. However below are some system level opportunities that could be considered by governments to support evidence-based approaches to RRE in jurisdictions:

- Governments recognise, prioritise and invest in an evidence-based, sustainable, long-term approach to RRE nationally.
- In line with national and international evidence, respectful relationships education policy and program design should include seven core elements to be effective in preventing gender-based violence.
- Long-term investment in respectful relationships education is required across several phases to support and sustain change. Implementation of respectful relationships education at the school level needs to take a staged approach, acknowledging there is significant preparatory work required at both the system and school level.
- Departments of Education across jurisdictions, in collaboration with schools, establish school level and state-wide evaluation mechanisms to monitor uptake of respectful relationships education in the education sector and to measure outcomes and longitudinal change.
- Curriculum materials that address gender and power, the drivers of gender-based violence, are an essential component of RRE. Teaching and learning materials should address the drivers of gender-based violence, across all year levels in scaffolded age-appropriate ways.
- Departments of Education, in partnerships with experts in the prevention of gender-based violence sector, develop an ongoing professional learning strategy that supports school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff to develop their professional knowledge, skills and confidence in RRE.
- Governments and Departments of Education develop a communications strategy for both their organisations and schools to support and enable clear and consistent messaging about the aims and benefits of RRE, as well as anticipate and respond to any likely misunderstandings or media misinformation. Departments and their communications experts can work together to develop clear, engaging and informative messaging based on best practice communications strategies and tools.
- Education jurisdictions engage in dialogue with stakeholders (such as parents' groups, principals' associations, education unions, and gender-based violence response and primary prevention sectors) about the goals, outcomes and benefits of respectful relationships education.

Prevention with adults – an approach using tertiary education settings

Tertiary education settings (including universities, TAFEs and vocational education and training organisations) provide a way to reach large numbers of young adults at a time in their lives when independence is increasing, as well as older adults who are undertaking tertiary education as mature age students.

These settings are important settings for prevention because they:

- have broad reach as places of learning, workplaces and community hubs and operate as mini ecosystems where attitudes and norms are produced and reproduced

- can proactively shape vocational norms and practices and build a future workforce that supports gender equality
- reach audiences that may have more limited connection with other settings (e.g. international students, recent migrants and refugees, young adults with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities)
- employ large workforces and have infrastructure to support organisational change
- provide thought leadership through research that can influence Australian culture, policy, economy, legislation and social norms.

Prevention with adults in tertiary education settings – current practice

TAFE

Our Watch developed the [Respect and Equality in TAFE framework](#), which helps build a TAFE environment that promotes gender equality and respect. The existing framework was developed with TAFEs in Victoria between 2019 and 2021, where there are requirements under the Victorian Gender Equality Act 2020 for TAFEs to promote gender equality in the workplace, including developing and submitting a Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP).

As the next stage of this work, TAFEs in ACT, NT, SA and Tasmania are currently participating in testing and refining the existing framework for audiences outside Victoria. This work is an emerging whole-of-institution approach, supported by Our Watch through a series of working group meetings that result in the delivery of a gender equality self-assessment and a gender equality action plan that assess performance against all the domains (departments) in the framework. The funding for this project ends in December 2024.

Victorian TAFEs have continued using the Respect and Equality in TAFE framework. TAFEs have used the framework to self-assess and implement actions against one or two of the domains.

From January 2025, it is anticipated that Our Watch will lead a national approach to supporting TAFEs to use the Respect and Equality in TAFE framework to develop and implement gender equality action plans. Work to transition to this national scope begins in September 2024 with a National Summit which will invite all TAFEs to come together for the first time.

UNIVERSITIES

As one of the five 'big reach' settings for prevention identified in *Change the story* (see [appendix 1](#)), higher education represents a key activity area for primary prevention and for Our Watch under the [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#).

The release of the *Changing the Course Report* in 2017 by the Australian Human Rights Commission, and launch of the [Respect. Now. Always](#) campaign by Universities Australia, (including a National Student Safety Survey in 2016 and 2021), provide a clear foundation for universities strengthening responses to, and prevention of gender-based violence.

Our Watch's *Educating for Equality* (EfE) framework was developed in 2021 in partnership with the Victorian Government and Universities Australia, and in consultation with universities across Australia. Drawing on national and international evidence, Educating for Equality comprises a framework and suite of tools to support a whole-of-university approach to preventing gender-based violence. The model builds on work already underway at universities to prevent violence and aims to challenge the behaviour, culture, norms and structures that drive gender-based violence.

In February 2024, the Commonwealth Government and all state and territory governments committed to a sector-wide Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education. The Action Plan includes the development of a National Code, and the establishment of a Student Ombudsman, and introduces a requirement for higher education providers to embed a whole-of-organisation approach to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

Gaps and opportunities to support prevention in tertiary education

Examples of policy, regulatory and legislative actions that could be taken to enable and support activity in this setting/sector include:

- National regulatory frameworks (such as the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence that is currently in development) should clearly define standards and reporting requirements for prevention action in tertiary education and include within their scope non-universities such as TAFEs, private institutions and student accommodation.
- The establishment of a unit within the Commonwealth Department of Education to support implementation of the National Code provides an opportunity to support this national work, build the capacity of providers to implement best practice prevention approaches, and to oversee compliance and ensure accountability.
- There are opportunities for state/territory higher and vocational education policy frameworks, with support from the relevant Minister/s, to create the enabling environment for this work by articulating the role of the setting in preventing violence against women and the importance of building non-violent, equitable and respectful communities, as well as providing guidance about what actions should be taken. This might include promoting the use of Our Watch's Educating for Equality and Respect and Equality in TAFE frameworks.
- Tertiary education regulators such as TEQSA, ASQA and other VET regulators endorsing and promoting best practice prevention approaches in the sector and offering support for providers to build capacity and competency.
- Governments reviewing training and education policies and government workforce planning (e.g. to fill skills shortages) processes to incorporate a gender lens to support women's training and employment and contribute to addressing gender segregation of the workforce.
- Governments using existing national and state/ territory funding mechanisms to invest in and support research related to preventing violence against women.

- Governments embedding evidence-based primary prevention workplace activity in university and TAFE funding and governance agreements, including using Our Watch's Educating for Equality and Respect and Equality in TAFE frameworks.
- Unions, peak bodies and professional associations developing mechanisms, partnerships and resources to support, facilitate and enable a whole-of-setting approach.

Prevention with new parents

Promoting equal relationships, and challenging gender stereotypes and harmful ideas and forms of masculinity, are all key goals of prevention as they help to address the drivers of violence against women. Prevention efforts that address these issues with new parents, as well as initiatives that address broader social norms, government policy settings, workforce structures and workplace policies and cultures are all useful at this life stage.

Practice example of prevention with new parents: Baby Makes 3

Baby Makes 3 (BM3) is an evidence-based primary prevention initiative implemented in Victoria. The program provides support to new parents and shapes attitudes and social norms by challenging outdated gender expectations of becoming a parent. The program builds understanding, appreciation and mutual respect among first-time parents to foster equal and healthy relationships that optimise collaborative co-parenting of infants and children.

Parents attend three evening or weekend sessions with their babies, with 6–12 other families. The program is co-facilitated by a male and female facilitator, who have completed specialised training. Adaptations of the program support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, culturally and linguistically diverse families, and families from rainbow and regional communities.

In addition to group discussions and activities for parents, the program includes initiatives that increase the capacity of universal settings (local governments, maternal and child health services and public antenatal services) to integrate gender equality principles, practices and structures within perinatal services.

A 2011 evaluation¹³ of Baby Makes 3 showed that participation in the program improved parents' awareness of how traditional attitudes to gender and parenting norms were shaping their new families and relationships. Participants also reported greater understanding of partners' roles and greater support for equality in their relationships. A more recent evaluation¹⁴ that involved participant interviews showed that parents positively engaged with gender-equitable parenting practices in response to the tools and resources offered in the program.

Endnotes

- 1 Our Watch. (2018). [Challenging gender stereotypes in the early years: The power of parents](#); King, T., Meehl, A., Priest, N. (2018). Building children’s resilience through respectful and gender equitable relationships: Literature review summary for the project: Building respect and equity among young children (CSRM Working Paper No. 4/2018). Centre for Social Research and Methods, ANU; Campbell, S., Smith, K., & Alexander, K. (2017). Spaces for gender equity in Australian early childhood education in/ between discourses of human capital and feminism. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(3); McLean, K., Edwards, S., Evangelou, M., Skouteris, H., Harrison, L. J., Hemphill, S. A., Sullivan, P., & Lambert, P. (2017). Playgroups as sites for parental education. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. 15(3), 227–37.
- 2 United Nations Population Fund (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education; Our Watch. (2021). [Respectful relationships in schools: evidence paper](#); Our Watch. (2021). [Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence: final evaluation report](#).
- 3 While the relationship between pornography and violence against women is complex, research suggests links between people’s pornography use and their attitudes regarding relationships, sex, and men’s and women’s roles and identities. Particular concerns arise with regard to young people’s use of pornography, due to the formative stage of their development; Our Watch’s 2018 survey of nearly 2,000 young people (aged 15–20) found that the median age of first seeing pornography is 13 for young men and 16 for young women. This research also found that 56% of young men surveyed indicated that they viewed pornography at least once per week and 17% of young men used it daily. Conversely, 15% of young women reported at least weekly usage, with just 1% of young women stating that they watch pornography every day. This data suggests that there is a significant opportunity for pornography to influence young people’s views and attitudes at a time in their lives when they are developing an understanding about sex and sexual relationships; Our Watch. (2020). [Pornography, young people, and preventing violence against women: Background paper](#).
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