



## Teaching about healthy relationships, consent and sexual assault

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Recent media coverage of the sexual assault of young women in both workplaces and social settings has been deeply shocking and disturbing, highlighting a toxic masculine culture that goes far beyond simply 'rating' girls on their looks or singing offensive songs in public places to non consensual and criminal sexual assault, often when young women feel pressured, intimidated, scared or are affected by alcohol.

While sex and relationship education (SRE) is compulsory in England, it is not mandated in many other countries — including in Australia where the national curriculum requires that students learn about respectful relationships from Years 3 to 10. However, it is up to schools as to what topics they cover and how much detail they provide. Surveys show that many Australian students feel that these lessons do not prepare them adequately for the real world of relationships and intimacy.

Jacqueline Hendriks, a Research Fellow and Lecturer at Curtin University, argues in *The Conversation* (23 February 2021) that schools should teach consent in an age-appropriate way in every year of schooling, starting with non-sexual examples of whether to share toys or give hugs, through to discussions with senior students regarding intimate and sexual relationships. These lessons should cover what consent is, including that “it must be freely given, informed and mutual”. Girls have the right to change their mind at any time, even if they have agreed to something in the past. They also need to be clear on how the law defines “sex”, what coercion is, and that anyone who is incapacitated due to drugs or alcohol is not able to give consent.

Hendriks concludes that it is also important for older students to learn about the positive aspects of romantic and sexual relationships. “A partner who actively asks for permission and respects your boundaries,” she writes, “is showing they respect you and care about your feelings.” Healthy relationships involve communication and empathy, not disrespect and toxic attitudes.

As reported in a study led by Dr Pandora Pound (2017, p. 4), data from the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles demonstrated that young people whose main source of information about sex is school-based sex and relationship education (SRE) lessons:

- are less likely to have had unsafe sex in the past year than those who receive most of their information from other (non-parental) sources, such as via the internet,
- are likely to be older the first time they have sex, and
- are less likely to report having been diagnosed with an STI.

In addition, young women who receive most of their information about sex in SRE lessons:

- are more likely to report that both partners are equally willing,
- are more likely to use reliable contraception,
- are more likely to report that the decision to have sex was not due to peer pressure, drunkenness or drugs, and
- less likely to report coercion, distress about sex, or abortion.

These results are underlined by the *Respectful Relationships Education in Schools* report by Australian organisation Our Watch which states that international research demonstrates that “the impacts of school-based programs — if implemented correctly — can be profound” (Gleeson et al., 2015, p. 15).



In fact, the *Respectful Relationships* authors write, a review of approaches to prevent violence against women and girls published by *The Lancet* medical journal in 2014 showed that school based programs were the most effective. For example, the Safe Dates program in the United States, which provides a ten-session program for Grade 8 and 9 students, showed that four years after implementation, participating students reported 56% to 92% fewer incidents of serious physical and sexual dating violence than non-participating students. Similarly, a Canadian longitudinal study found that 2.5 years after a 21-lesson curriculum for Grade 9 students, physical dating violence was 2.5 times lower among students who participated in the program (Gleeson et al., 2015, p. 15).

## References

Gleeson, C., Kearney, S., Leung, L., & Brislane, J. (2015, December). *Respectful Relationships Education in Schools*. Evidence Paper. Melbourne: Our Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/What-We-Do/Respectful-relationships-education>

Hendriks, J. (2021, February 22). Not as simple as 'no means no': What young people need to know about consent. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/not-as-simple-as-no-means-no-what-young-people-need-to-know-about-consent-155736>

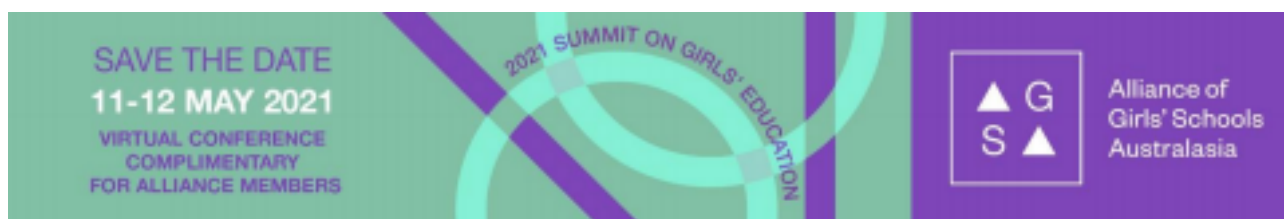
Pound, P., Denford, S., Shucksmith, J., Tanton, C., Johnson, A., Owen, J. ... & Campbell, R. (2017). What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders' views. *BMJ Open*, 7(5), e014791. DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-014791

Abstracts of the Gleeson et al. (2015) and Pound et al. (2017) studies are available in the Alliance Research Library:

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/respectful-relationships-education-schools-watch-2015/>

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/best-practice-sex-relationship-education-pound-et-al-2017/>

Note: See following page for additional resources.



Alliance of  
Girls' Schools  
Australasia

eBrief

## Additional Resources

### ***Alliance eBriefs***

#### **Issue 8/2018: “Don’t Call Me Princess”: What do we tell our children about relationships, sex and respect?**

American journalist and feminist Peggy Orenstein highlights the need for parents to speak openly with their children about sex and relationships to give them the confidence to know what a healthy and consensual relationship looks like. If parents don’t educate teens about sex, she warns, the mainstream media and pornography will.

**Issue 12/2016: Exposure to explicit online material is ‘desensitising young people’** A study conducted by British researchers has found that 53% of boys and 39% of girls who have seen pornography online regard it as a realistic depiction of sex, while 42% of older children (aged 12-16) want to copy what they have seen online. The report concludes that many teenagers are at risk of becoming desensitised to explicit material and pornography.

#### **Issue 10/2016: Respectful relationships: Preventing gendered violence against girls and young women**

While there is much talk of the need to combat domestic violence against women and children, there is another area of gender-based violence that particularly affects girls and young women: dating violence, sexting and revenge porn. In this context, education on respectful relationships — which aims to address the drivers of all forms of gender-based violence — is becoming increasingly important for schools and parents alike.

#### **Issue 16/2015: Talking to girls about love, sex and relationships: Advice from the experts**

Discussing sex with a child is one of the most difficult things a parent has to do and yet it has never been more important that young people receive good advice, not only about sex but also about love and healthy relationships. Today’s teens are bombarded with suggestive and sexually explicit messages, but while parents are focused on the dangers of porn and sexting, research shows that teenagers are well aware of the risks.

### ***Alliance Research Library abstracts***

#### **New Zealand report on adolescent relationship abuse and promoting healthy relationships (Beres, 2017)**

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/new-zealand-report-adolescent-relationship-abuse>

promoting-healthy-relationships-beres-2017/

**The harm done to children accessing pornography on the internet (Flood, 2016)**

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/harm-done-children-accessing-internet-pornography-flood-2016/>

**Adolescents and pornography: A review of 20 years of research (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016)**

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/adolescents-pornography-review-20-years-research-peter-valkenburg-2016/>

**Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools (Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, UK, 2016)**

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/sexual-harassment-and-sexual-violence-in-schools-women-and-equalities-committee-house-of-commons-uk-2016/>

**Girls' experience of sexual harassment by boys in co-educational schools (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2016)**

<https://www.agsa.org.au/research/girls-experience-of-sexual-harassment-by-boys-in-co-educational-schools-shute-owens-slee-2016/>