

**INTRODUCTION
& OVERVIEW**



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Violence prevention and respectful relationships education is an important focus of the Victorian Government's Action Plan to prevent violence against Women and their Children 2012 – 2015 and the Federal Government's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

What is the Building Respectful Relationships resource?

Building Respectful Relationships: Stepping Out against Gender-Based Violence is a set of sequential teaching activities to educate secondary school students about gender, violence and respectful relationships. It is one part of a larger strategy to assist schools in meeting state and federal initiatives to prevent violence against women. The resource is designed to provide curriculum advice as part of a whole-school approach to preventing gender-based violence and building respectful relationships.¹

Gender-based violence is a term used throughout this resource. It refers to any violence that has a gender basis, and includes violence against women, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Why do we need the Building Respectful Relationships resource?

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) commissioned VicHealth to develop a research report, *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools*.²

This report recommends educating school students about violence, on the basis that 'schools may be sites of violence perpetration and victimisation'³, and states that schools are high-risk locations for gender-based violence because of peer influence and a climate and culture of acceptability.

The report argues that there are five powerful reasons to focus efforts on young people:

- Adolescence is a crucial period in terms of [the] formation of respectful, non-violent relationships.
- Many children and young people experience violence in their homes.
- Young people are already being subjected to, and perpetrating, violence themselves.
- There is already a degree of tolerance for violence against girls and women.
- Violence prevention among children and youth has been shown to work.⁴

What is the extent of gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence is often hidden, rarely discussed and often perpetrated by someone known to the person. Evidence shows that:

- One in three women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15 (National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2009).
- Almost one in five women have experienced sexual assault since the age of 15 (National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2009).
- One in four children and young people in Australia witness or live with family violence in their home (Australian Institute of Criminology 2001).
- Girls and young women aged 15 to 24 are the most likely of all age groups to experience sexual assault (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006).
- Women are mostly assaulted by men they know, often in their own home, in circumstances where they may well be subject to repeated assaults over time (National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2009).
- Approximately 78.1 per cent of Victoria Police family violence incident reports involved men who had used violence. Men's use of family violence is overwhelmingly directed towards women (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2004).

- Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to ill-health, death and disease for Victorian women aged 15 to 44 (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2004).
- Gender-based violence was estimated to cost the Australian economy a total of \$13.6 billion in 2009 (National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2009).
- According to police reports, there were 17,964 incidents of sexual assault nationally in 2002. However, according to the *ABS Personal Safety Survey (2006)*, there were 65,700 incidents of sexual assault against women in 2002.
- For same-sex attracted young people (SSAY), 44 per cent reported they had been verbally assaulted, 16 per cent reported they had been physically assaulted, and 74 per cent of the assaults were reported to have happened at school (Hillier et al. 2010).
- Although there has been some attitudinal change towards violence against women, there are still key community attitudes that indicate a level of acceptance (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2010).

An effective approach for schools

The key to preventing gender-based violence is the development of a whole-school approach that provides schools with:

- a common framework for understanding and responding to respectful relationships
- effective curriculum delivery
- relevant, inclusive and culturally sensitive practice and reflection
- evaluation of the impact of strategies on the whole-school community.⁵

Figure 1 represents the elements of a whole-school approach. These elements are not new: schools have been developing and working successfully within whole-school approaches and health-promoting frameworks for decades.

The model represented by Figure 1 is based on the recommendations of the *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools* report.⁶ It was trialled in four secondary colleges during 2010, with an emphasis on schools addressing gender-based violence in the context of local needs and circumstances.

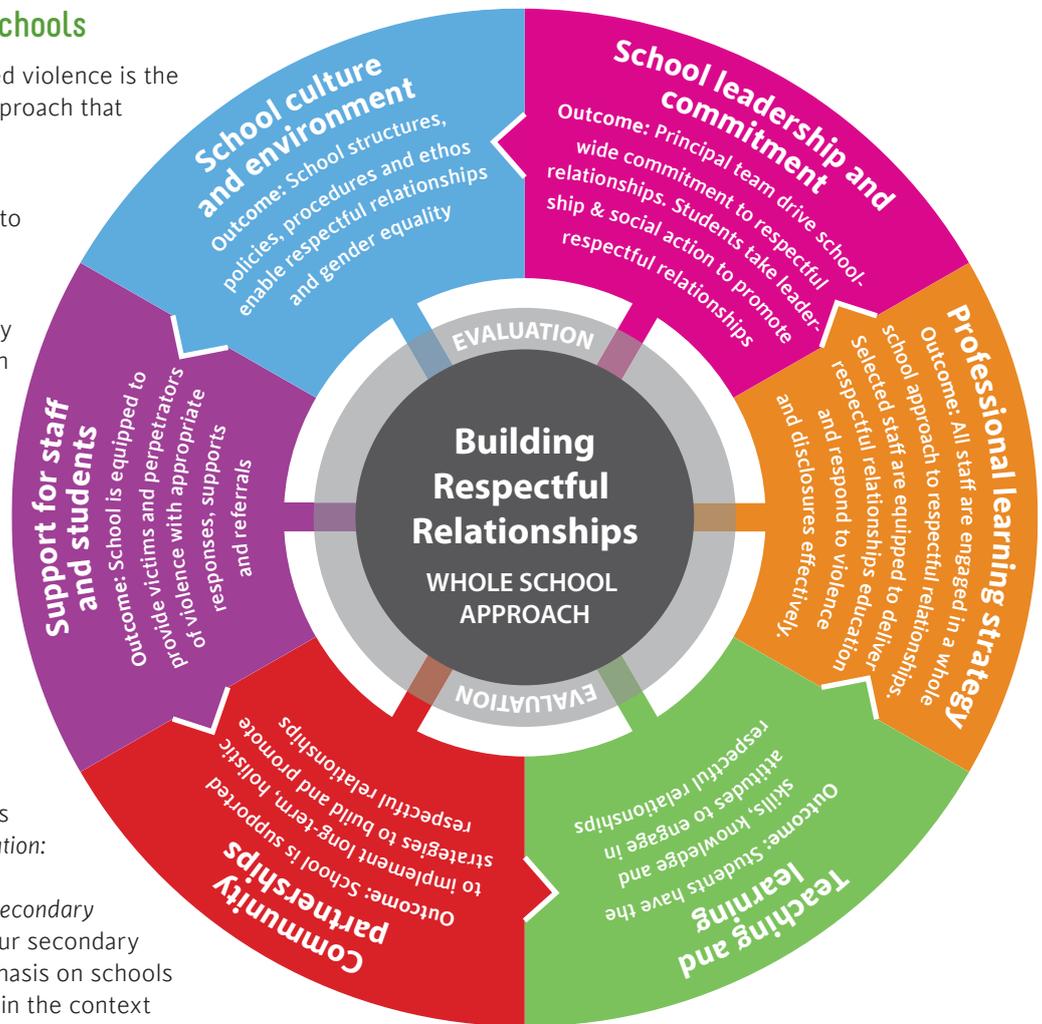


Figure 1: A whole-school approach to preventing gender-based violence and building respectful relationships

Applying the approach to particular schools

Schools will be at a range of entry points in terms of how they currently address issues related to gender-based violence and developing respectful relationships. Some may respond to student wellbeing issues, such as sexual harassment, on a case-by-case basis. Others may have explicit policies for addressing issues such as sexual harassment and cyberbullying. Many schools will already be taking a primary prevention approach, applying a health education curriculum designed to increase their students' understanding of sexual assault and domestic violence, and developing student skills in health and media literacy, sexual negotiation, and consent.

However, not all schools have comprehensive health education or trained teachers, and these schools may engage local community agencies to address aspects of this curriculum focus.

The importance of the 'informal curriculum'

Educating students on respectful relationships and violence prevention is the responsibility of the whole school community. In line with the prevention model presented in Figure 1 above, the formal curriculum is only one element of a comprehensive approach.

The development of a school ethos and culture that models respectful practices and is consistent in dealing with incidents of gender-based violence is as important a teaching tool as the formal curriculum. The 'informal curriculum' is in many ways a more powerful framework than that provided by the formal curriculum. Actions, messages given and sanctions imposed can often tell students more about attitudes to gender-based violence than the formal learning experiences.

The Australian Curriculum in Victoria (AusVELS)

Issues related to gender and violence curriculum primarily fall within health and sexuality education, a component of the Health and Physical Education learning area.

However, if schools are to assist in developing citizens who are respectful and can take action to address gender-based violence, students need to be equipped with capacities to ‘manage themselves and their relations with others; understand the world and act effectively in the world to prepare for success in education, work and life.’”

Although Building Respectful Relationships could also provide the opportunity to address some other discipline-based domains and interdisciplinary learning such as working in teams and communication, the table in the document **BRR: AusVELS** illustrates the relevant dimensions, focus and aspects of the elements related to activities in this resource. Refer to **BRR: AusVELS** for mapping against the AusVELS.

How should this resource be used?

Building Respectful Relationships is designed to give schools flexibility when integrating the teaching activities into their curriculum. Schools may integrate the activities into existing developmental health and sexuality education programs, in other learning areas or in less curriculum-specific areas, such as Pastoral Care, Personal Development or Life Skills programs. Schools may even decide that the activities could be used in English or as part of a Media or Drama unit. These are school-based decisions and need to reflect the local context.

Regardless of the context in which this resource will be used, the focus on violence against women and on sexuality is sensitive. This resource should only be used by experienced health education teachers or other specifically trained teachers.

Other resources

A number of excellent resources that have a focus on gender-based violence already exist. In many ways, Victoria has led the way in resource development and school-based programs in the area, and key Victorian academics and writers have been involved in development of both state-based and national resources. Some activities in this resource are new and others have been modified, adapted or reproduced with permission from resources in line with recognised best practice.⁸In this way, teachers can decide to use these additional materials as resources to support their current programs.

Focus of the teaching and learning activities

The resource has been planned around the central themes of gender, power, violence and respect. These themes have been selected to distinguish between the prevention of violence approach and the broader ‘Respectful relationships’ education strategy being developed by DEECD to address violence and build respectful schools and school communities.

Current research makes it clear that preventing gender-based violence requires a specific approach to gender and violence, one that ‘addresses the link between gendered power relations or inequalities and violence against women’.⁹These materials draw on the recommendations of this research. They provide teachers with teaching and learning activities and ideas that address the AusVELS strands and give teachers access to a range of resources that could be used to expand or modify programs.

The units

Units 1 and 2 are based on eight sessions. Unit 3 is based on six sessions. The time required for completion of the sessions ranges from approximately 45 minutes to 115 minutes. How the sessions are implemented will depend on the school's needs, the length of classes and the context in which the units are used. In some schools it may only be possible to select one activity per session; in others it may be possible to complete the activities designed for two sessions. Experience from the demonstration schools shows that schools will adapt the materials in line with their needs.

Unit 1: Gender, Respect & Relationships

Unit 1, for Year 8, is designed to provide the grounding necessary to look at issues of gender-based violence, such as sexual assault, domestic violence and homophobia. In this unit students explore and develop a common understanding of the concepts of gender, relationships and respect. They examine the implications on relationships of assumptions made around masculinities, femininities and sexualities. They begin to develop skills in communication, negotiation, deconstruction, reconstruction, reflection and media literacy.

The eight sessions within this unit are:

1. Respect and relationships
2. Gender, respect and relationships
3. The power of expectations
4. Gender positioning
5. Introducing gender-based violence
6. Understanding sexual harassment
7. Developing respectful practices
8. How to help a friend

Unit 2: The Power Connection

Unit 2 is designed for Year 9 students. It builds on the material covered in Year 8 and explores the nature of gender-based violence and the implications for respectful practice. It explores domestic violence and sexual assault in the context of power, social and institutional structures, and young people's lives. It takes a broad view of violence, covering the physical aspects as well as looking at the emotional, social and economic implications of gender-based violence, including homophobia.

This unit also helps students to understand the nature of consent and respect, and develop skills to take individual and collective action and responsibility for self and others. This unit has been designed around the critical understandings and skills developed in Year 8 (Unit 1). If that unit was not completed, it is essential that teachers read the unit and complete Sessions 1 and 2.

The eight sessions within this unit are:

1. Getting a position on gender, respect and relationships
2. If respect is free, why is it so difficult to get?
3. Sexual intimacy, respect and relationships
4. Building an awareness of gender-based violence
5. Consent and the law
6. Barriers and enablers to consent in relationships
7. The implications of gender-based violence
8. Learning respectful communication

Unit 3: Gender, Power & Media

Unit 3 is designed to address the link between sexualisation, pornography, gender and respectful relationships. The pace of technological change and increasing access to the internet means that, by the time students are in Years 8 and 9 it is possible that many of them have already been exposed to sexualised images, including some sexually explicit or pornographic materials. This can occur accidentally or intentionally, with little or no chance for them to make sense of the messages and content contained within these images.

This unit builds on the material covered in the other two units, Unit 1: Gender, respect and relationships and Unit 2: The power connection, and assumes that students have covered key issues on gender and power and looked extensively at building respectful relationships. It has a strong emphasis on building media and health literacy in line with the recommendations of ACARA (2012).

The six sessions within this unit are:

1. Getting a picture on sexualisation
2. Looking deeper into the culture of sexualisation
3. Developing a common understanding of explicit sexual imagery
4. Real-life strategies
5. 'Idealworld'
6. Developing skills to build respectful relationships

Setting up a 'safe' space

Setting up a 'safe' space is essential for the delivery of this curriculum. The space should be safe in the sense that students and teachers can share their ideas and opinions and ask questions without fear of judgment or silencing; the focus is maintained on learning and education, compared to managing disclosures or comforting students who have experienced gender-based violence; and, students can express their views on relationships and sexuality without being stigmatised or shut down.

A critical element in setting up a safe classroom space is the need to maintain a clear stance against the use of violence in any circumstances. Many of the students undertaking the units have already been working together and have experience in developing classroom rules or agreements to ensure their learning environment is safe and that respectful behaviours such as listening and allowing no put-downs are adhered to. However, some classes may be coming together for the first time. For these classes, it is essential to establish ground rules, as they provide a structure that can improve classroom management, keep students and staff safe and supported, and ensure the class works effectively. Students will be dealing with potentially sensitive issues focusing on relationships, violence and sexuality, and so a structure that allows discussion of differing opinions is essential to the success of the curriculum.

The first two activities in both Units 1 and 2, for Years 8 and 9 ('Setting the context and boundaries' and 'A respectful partner is ...'), not only enable a set of rules or agreements to be developed, but also provide an opportunity for students to practise using these ground rules while they gain a sense of the focus of the units of work.

It is important for students to be told in advance that they will be covering issues about violence to allow them to withdraw if they find these issues personally confronting. Students also need to be protected from making harmful disclosures. In other words, every student has the right not to offer an opinion.

Single sex versus co-educational

There is debate surrounding the need to provide single-sex environments for the students to cover issues of gender-based violence and sexuality-based respectful relationships education. The demonstration schools discovered that students and teachers benefited from both approaches, and that the school context and student needs best determined how to structure the classes.

For example, one school maintained that the single-sex male-only environment made it possible to challenge the students' attitudes and explore masculinities. In another school, female students argued that the discussion would have been very restricted if male students had been part of the class.

Conversely, two demonstration schools using a co-educational approach reported that this enabled a sharing of ideas and understandings.

Regardless of the approach taken, students need the opportunity to explore the issues in a safe and supportive environment. Some research in sexuality education indicates that female students' participation is restricted when there are male students in the class.¹⁰ If the school has been developing respectful approaches and students are accustomed to working together, a co-educational environment can be very productive. However, there are a number of activities that should be run in single-sex classes or groupings and these have been identified where relevant. Schools need to be aware of sensitive cultural issues in relation to sexuality concerns that may require female-only classes.

Specific issues with boys and gender-based violence

Addressing issues of gender-based violence can at times be met with a sense of unease from staff who are concerned that the focus on men's and boys' violence against women and girls 'blames the boys'. Data collected from students following the trial of the materials gave no indication that this was of concern to the boys. Rather, the boys expressed surprise at the extent of the violence and were very positive about the activities. They could see the connection between the construction of gender and violence, and understood that it is not an individual problem, but rather a collective and institutional problem.

It is important that boys have the opportunity to explore the construction of masculinities on expectations around gender and violence, and understand the historical and institutional nature of violence against women. This can assist in alleviating feelings of individual responsibility.

Research indicates that pornography has had an impact on some boys' unrealistic view of sex, sexuality and what girls need, want and are happy to participate in sexually. This is obviously very personal and sensitive, and boys need to be able to explore these issues without developing feelings of inadequacy and blame.

There was a suggestion from some teachers that boys would benefit from exploring issues of violence more broadly. Although not the scope of this resource, there are other 'respectful relationships' resources that can help schools to do this.¹¹ Some demonstration schools adapted and expanded activities to explore violence against men, particularly in relation to homophobia.

Disclosure¹²

In any program that focuses on issues of human relationships and sexuality, there is the possibility that students may disclose personal issues. As this program focuses on issues of gender-based violence, there is a risk that students may disclose their own abuse or abuse that might be occurring in their family. To minimise harmful disclosures, teachers need to make very clear to students prior to the activities that, although they may explore personal values and attitudes around issues of sexuality, relationships and violence, they do not require students to disclose their own experiences. If teachers feel students may say something inappropriate, a useful strategy to prevent this is protective interruption, which means interrupting students before they disclose, while at the same time informing them they can talk privately with the teacher after class.

In the event that students do disclose personal issues, it is crucial that teachers be aware of school and legal procedures for dealing with disclosures, particularly those of sexual abuse.

Disclosures of abuse

In Victoria, teachers are mandated to make a report to Child Protection if they form a reasonable belief that a student is in need of protection because they are at risk of harm or neglect, or if that teacher holds a reasonable belief that a student is being subjected to physical or sexual abuse. Teachers should refer to the 'Child Protection – Mandatory reporting' section of the Victorian Government Schools Policy and Advisory Guide.¹³

Disclosure of sexual preference

As these materials cover issues around sexuality, gender identity and homophobic violence, there is a chance that if students feel safe and secure they may also disclose concerns they have about their own or a member of their family's sexual orientation. Specifically, teachers may have students disclosing that they or a family member are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Teachers need to know how to assist these students. They should clarify their own response to the issue of sexual diversity and identify appropriate procedures, including the use of community resources, to help students in this situation. Teachers are also encouraged to gain support for the student as appropriate and for themselves (if needed) from student welfare staff, such as the student welfare coordinator or the school's student support services officer.

Most importantly, teachers and student welfare staff need to be aware that disclosures of sexual orientation should remain confidential unless a student is at risk of harm.

It is important not to overstate something that is not a problem for the student. It is difficult for young people to talk about these issues and the last thing they want is for a teacher to inform other teachers or their parents. If students wanted these people to know, they would tell them. Confidentiality is critical for these students.

As with any disclosure of a personal issue, teachers must ensure that they:

- reassure the young person that they are all right
- listen patiently and carefully to what the young person is saying
- do not press the student for information.

In addition, teachers need to:

- display a positive attitude, thus affirming the student's experience
- explain that they are pleased to be told and are prepared to help if they can
- help the young person to look at the options open to them
- put the student in touch with school-based or external support services, where appropriate.

For details of all footnotes and references, please see the separate document *BRR: Notes & Bibliography*.