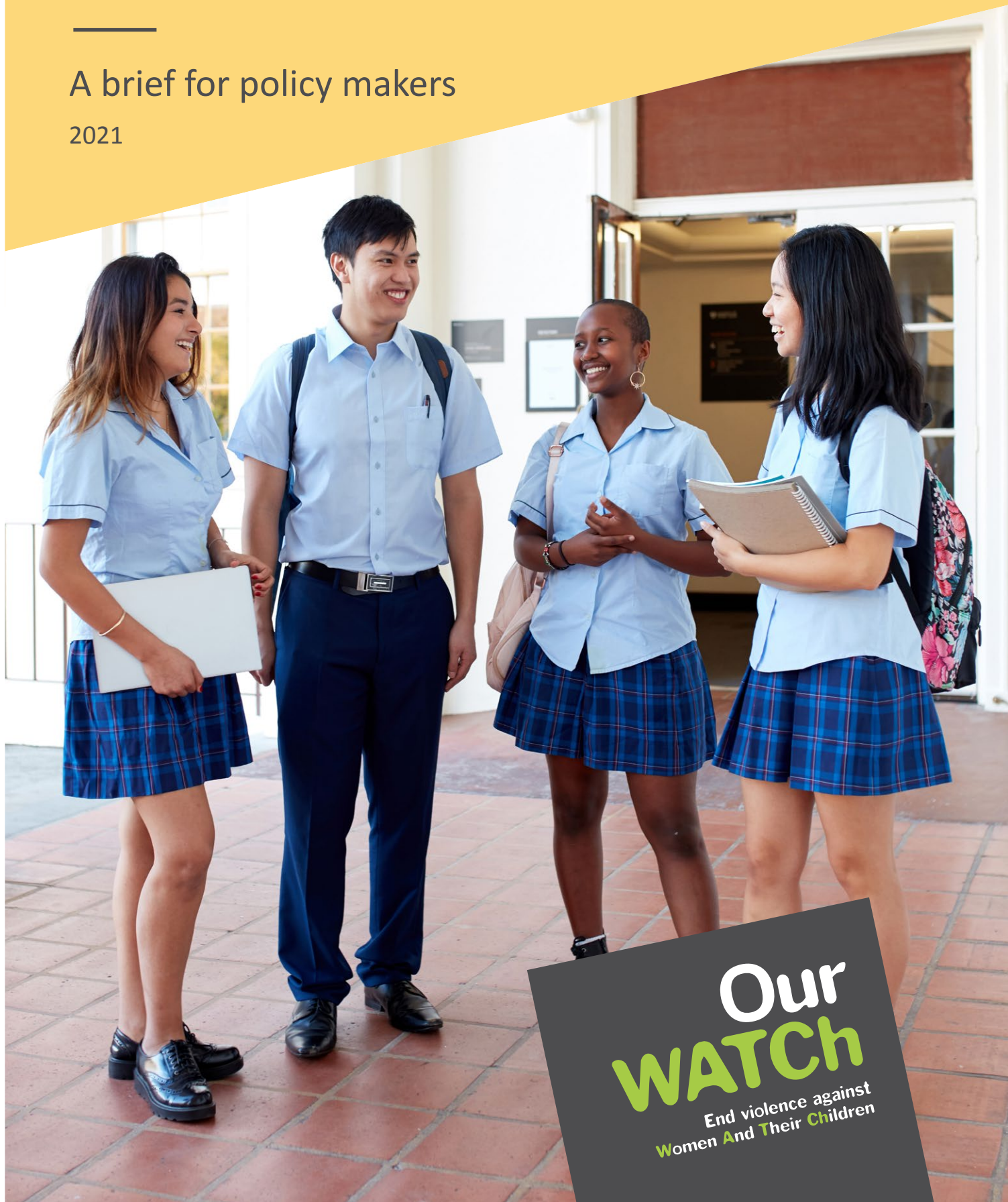


Respectful relationships education as part of a national approach to preventing gender-based violence

A brief for policy makers

2021



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

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Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We work to embed gender equality and prevent violence wherever Australians live, learn, work and socialise. Our vision for an Australian community free from violence against women and their children is shared with the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*, and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993).

Respectful relationships education is a key area of focus for Our Watch. We have led pilots in secondary schools (Victoria) and primary schools (Victoria and Queensland), and supported policy development and the implementation of respectful relationships education in several Australian jurisdictions. Our Watch has also supported information sharing and coordination of practice and best-practice policy nationally, including by our convening of the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Group (2017–2020).

About this brief

This policy brief provides guidance to education policy makers and bureaucrats as well as other interested stakeholders on how to design, implement, coordinate and monitor evidence-based respectful relationships education. The brief:

- draws on the findings of pilot projects in Australian primary and secondary schools, as well as the national and international literature as set out in Our Watch's evidence paper on respectful relationships education¹ to summarise all of the elements of a holistic, best-practice approach
- outlines the documented benefits of respectful relationships education in preventing gender-based violence
- presents a synthesis of the best available evidence on developing and implementing the core elements
- sets out the different roles that federal, state and territory governments, education departments, Our Watch, school authorities, schools, and community organisations and services can play in designing, implementing and coordinating respectful relationships education (see section [Coordinated leadership – stakeholder roles and responsibilities](#) on page 14)
- complements Our Watch's suite of tools and resources to support implementation in schools



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

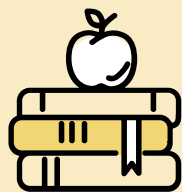
To access these materials, go to education.ourwatch.org.au

Introduction

Violence against women is recognised as a serious and widespread problem in Australia, with enormous individual and community impacts and social costs. 1 in 3 Australian women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and 1 in 5 has experienced sexual violence.² Intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor.³

While it is important to improve responses to this violence, only effective prevention strategies that tackle the underlying drivers of violence will prevent it. These drivers are embedded in our social and cultural fabric, which means efforts to address them require 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.

While many different strategies are needed to contribute to this population-wide approach, respectful relationships education is a key example of prevention work in education settings. Evidence-based and well-resourced respectful relationships education can help create the generational change needed to free Australia from gender-based violence.



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.

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.⁴ 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 expressions as the ‘gendered drivers’ of violence against women. It outlines key actions that we can take to address them:

Gendered drivers of violence against women

- 1 Condoning of violence against women
- 2 Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public life and relationships
- 3 Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- 4 Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women

Essential actions to reduce the gendered drivers of violence against women

- 1 Challenge condoning of violence against women
- 2 Promote women’s independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- 3 Foster positive personal identities and challenge gender stereotypes and roles
- 4 Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relations between and among women and men, girls and boys
- 5 Promote and normalise gender equality in public and private life

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

Benefits of respectful relationships education

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

In the short-term, respectful relationships education can challenge violence-supportive attitudes that some staff and students may hold. It can support more respectful behaviour, counter gender stereotyping among students, and strengthen schools' commitment to gender equality at the institutional level.

In the longer term, respectful relationships education has the potential to contribute to reduced rates of gender-based bullying and harassment, shift school cultures towards being more gender equitable and challenge violence-supportive norms.

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:ⁱ

- 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
- improved student classroom behaviour
- improved teacher-student relationships
- increased understanding of respectful relationships, gender equality and gender-based violence among school leadership – including principals

While a longitudinal evaluation of respectful relationships education in Australia has not yet been undertaken given its recency, international research has demonstrated that school-based prevention initiatives can reduce future violence perpetration and victimisation of students.⁵

i 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).

Communication

A key part of respectful relationships education is building awareness of what primary prevention is and why it is an important part of the education system. To support this, it is recommended that those involved in funding and implementing respectful relationships education develop an associated communications strategy for their organisations, which can be used by schools and principals. Such a strategy will support and enable clear and consistent messaging about the aims and benefits of the approach, 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 departments and school authorities can support schools by providing guidance on how to inform families and communities about respectful relationships education initiatives. They can also assist schools in this process by including information about the aims and methods of respectful relationships education, which can be readily incorporated into school newsletters, online communications and family information nights.

Communication materials about respectful relationships education can be tailored for school communities to ensure they are culturally relevant and to encourage parents and families to engage with the whole-of-school approach and process. Communication by schools with families can provide an opportunity for schools to learn, to tailor implementation and anticipate any resistance.

Core elements of effective respectful relationships education

International and national evidence on respectful relationships education shows that policy and program design must include 7 core elements to be effective as a strategy to prevent violence against women. Policy and programs should:ⁱⁱ

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 and providing ongoing professional learning
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

Respectful relationships education is characterised by a critical analysis of gender inequality and power, with an understanding of the underlying gendered drivers of violence against women. It then designs actions to directly address these drivers. Both analysis and actions should be gender transformative and intersectional.

Effective policy and program design and implementation:

- supports schools to recognise and understand the role of gender inequality – and other forms of intersecting discrimination, such as racism and sexism – in driving and reinforcing gender-based violence
- supports schools to promote and model gender equality and respect

Education departments, school authorities and schools should consider how a wide range of policies, practices, activities and behaviours have the potential to reinforce existing gender inequities, and what can be done to change these aspects of education systems. Best-practice approaches seek to:

- build understanding about the multiple ways in which the drivers of violence against women can manifest in schools as educational institutions, workplaces and community hubs
- provide departmental, school-authority and school-based staff with the skills and knowledge to implement whole-of-school strategies to address these drivers

ii For further information on the evidence underpinning these core elements, see Our Watch's evidence paper on respectful relationships education, available online at <https://ourwatch.org.au>

What might gender inequality look like in schools?	What might strategies to support gender equality look like in schools?
Aggressive behaviour of boys is minimised through statements such as ‘boys will be boys’, or by suggesting that other children move away from the ‘rough boys’.	Conduct an audit with students of school environments, classrooms and outdoor spaces to identify opportunities to improve gender equality.
Curriculum and resources that portray male and female characters in narrow or stereotyped ways are used without critical analysis in the classroom.	Conduct a review of school-led activities, curriculum materials, resources and communication materials (including newsletters and websites). Take steps to ensure these reflect gender equitable commitments and ideas.
The school does not have a gender equality policy for staff and students. Staff and students experience distinct structural inequalities.	Develop and implement a gender equality policy that covers staff and students, and all aspects of the school business.

Gender transformative primary prevention

Gender transformative prevention work intentionally questions and challenges (rather than inadvertently reinforces) rigid and hierarchical gender roles and stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity. It actively promotes alternative norms, structures and practices that are based on gender equality and respect.⁶

Intersectional primary prevention

Intersectionality refers to the interconnections between systems and structures of inequality. 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.⁷ There is a need to consider gender inequality together with other forms of social discrimination and disadvantage, such as racism, ableism and homophobia.⁸ An intersectional approach focuses on the social systems and structures, norms and practices that contribute to discrimination and privilege, and influence perpetration and experiences of violence. As such, it is an approach that can strengthen and improve the effectiveness of our overall primary prevention efforts.

The implementation of intersectional approaches to preventing violence against women across the Australian population is a key action identified in *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*, including. This approach:⁹

- includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as audiences and/or participants in ‘mainstream’ prevention work in all settings
- addresses the intersections between sexism and racism, and between the impacts of gender inequality and the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people

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

A whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education understands that schools are not only educational institutions but also workplaces and community hubs. It involves engaging not only students but also school staff, families and the wider school community in the process of cultural change. It undertakes actions across the school in an ongoing, coordinated and mutually reinforcing way. This approach helps to embed and sustain positive cultural change.

A whole-of-school approach requires commitment from leaders in schools and departments of education to assess and improve current culture in relation to gender equality and respectful relationships by:

- driving and championing change
- prioritising resources
- developing actions to create change

This approach also focuses on school readiness and ongoing capability building through the provision of professional learning, and through ensuring gender equality is embedded in pedagogical practices and curriculum materials.

As part of the whole-of-school approach, schools are encouraged to consider how respectful relationships education can be linked to other work within their school such as Reconciliation Action Plans, cultural safety and inclusive education initiatives. By doing so, schools can address other forms of disadvantage and privilege that intersect with gender inequality, which will contribute to preventing violence against all women.

Transformative cultural change is often associated with a level of discomfort. Leaders who drive this work can sometimes experience perceived or actual resistance to change. This discomfort presents an opportunity for learning and also demonstrates that the school community is engaged. A well-managed response to this resistance can be an effective part of the process.

It is also critical that schools work with relevant local community organisations to enable and support staff to respond safely and appropriately to disclosures of experiences of violence (of any kind) from staff and students.

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

The development of a professional learning strategy for all departmental, teaching and non-teaching staff is a best-practice approach to support the development of professional skills, knowledge and confidence in respectful relationships education. This includes instruction in relation to key concepts, including gender-based violence, primary prevention and intersectionality. The professional learning strategy aims to support teaching staff to develop their knowledge of and confidence in the delivery of relevant curriculums. This support includes strategies for tailoring a delivery that responds to the diverse learning needs of students – including students with disability, students who do not speak English as a first language, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and LGBTIQ students.

To support transformation, this strategy aims to ensure professional learning is ongoing, and provides staff with access to face-to-face learning opportunities.

It is critical for such a strategy to include approaches to:

- build departmental, school-authority and school readiness prior to implementation of respectful relationships education (this process could take 1 to 2 years). For example, by providing professional learning for staff working across curriculums, building student wellbeing, and by creating school support and regional or district support roles prior to roll-out of a whole-of-school approach in any school.
- support implementation by providing professional learning for school staff during implementation.
- consolidate and further develop the expertise of public servants, school-authority staff, and teaching and non-teaching school-based staff in respectful relationships education by ensuring ongoing access to professional learning post-implementation.

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

For respectful relationships education to successfully contribute to the prevention of violence against women, it is critical that curriculums include learning objectives and content specifically focused on gender and power – the underlying drivers of violence against women – and incorporate an intersectional analysis. Evidence demonstrates that respectful relationships education is most effective when it includes age-appropriate teaching that supports students to understand and critically analyse gender roles, stereotypes, norms and relations.

Teaching and learning materials are ideally developed to support the delivery of gender equality and respectful relationships content across all curriculum areas. In addition to Health and Physical Education, where content deals with wellbeing as well as personal and social capability, other learning areas such as Science, Literature and Geography can provide mutually reinforcing messages across the curriculum. Well-trained and supported teachers can find ways to highlight and proactively address the drivers of gender-based violence through their delivery of learning area materials and in their interactions with students. Such an embedding of learning across multiple areas, topics and activities supports the development of deeper understandings among students, and enhances the potential for cultural transformation.

In line with quality teaching practice and planning, we recommend learning objectives are developmental, and that students' learning is scaffolded throughout schooling by the use of consistent, age-appropriate messages across all year groups.

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

Long-term investment in respectful relationships education is required across several phases to support and sustain change. Implementation of respectful relationships education needs to take a staged approach, acknowledging there is significant preparatory work required and that schools will have differing levels of readiness for implementation.

For example, phase one may include:

- the development of teaching and learning materials, core concepts and the implementation approach for respectful relationships education, as well as the development of new or the revision of existing policies and procedures

- assessing school readiness for implementation of a whole-of-school approach
- communication about and distribution of respectful relationships education materials in and across schools and regions

Phase two may include:

- commencement of a staged approach to implementation, starting with schools that demonstrate a high level of readiness to undertake change
- provision of professional learning in the delivery of respectful relationships education in schools
- support for schools to build collaborative relationships with relevant community organisations at the local level, to enable delivery of respectful relationships education

Phase three may include:

- Embedding respectful relationships education as ‘business as usual’ within the education system
- ensuring that respectful relationships education is appropriately resourced for the long term by embedding funding in annual cycles
- providing ongoing professional learning to consolidate experience and support new school staff in delivery of respectful relationships education
- incorporating relevant measures into existing review processes and continuous improvement cycles to track progress

As the evidence for and practice of respectful relationships education evolves, strategies to maintain momentum and inform ongoing improvement will need to be developed. These strategies could include using emerging evidence to inform policy enhancements, or undertaking strategic workforce planning within the department and/or school authority to build ongoing continued expertise and capability.

6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination

Collaboration and coordinated effort are required throughout the development and implementation stages of respectful relationships education to ensure it is integrated into the education system across all levels – departmental, school authority, district or regional, school and governmental – and within the community and family services sector.

A range of mechanisms can be created to support collective effort, including:

- internal departmental mechanisms to support the integration of respectful relationships education across functions within education departments and school authorities
- coordination and information-sharing mechanisms between schools, or at district or regional levels, to ensure coordinated effort and shared practice
- cross-departmental mechanisms to ensure primary prevention initiatives in education are supported by and integrated with initiatives within other portfolios
- advisory and stakeholder groups and networks to support shared messages and the sharing of expertise between settings and sectors that are working with children and families to prevent violence against women

7. Evaluate for continuous improvement

Evaluations of respectful relationships education will provide insights if they measure change against the 4 gendered drivers of violence against women set out in *Change the story*, and examine the impact across norms, practices and structures. This approach enables an evaluation to examine how the implementation is contributing to the long-term goal of preventing gender-based violence.

An examination of process measures is also recommended as a part of any evaluation. Process measures report on the extent to which activities have been delivered as expected. By looking at how respectful relationships education is delivered, evaluations can explore trends in implementation at school, district or regional, state and national levels to understand what works and where best to focus resources.

Evaluation and monitoring beyond the school level can help governments track progress towards best practice. This is particularly important in enabling and informing scale-up and integration – for example across a state or territory education system. To facilitate evaluation and continuous improvement, education departments can connect respectful relationships education evaluation to existing state-wide school monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This will facilitate the measurement of the uptake, quantity and quality of respectful relationships education in schools. This might include measuring longitudinal change and utilising evaluation data for future planning.

Supporting staff and students

The aim of respectful relationships education is to reduce the prevalence of violence against women in the long term. In the short term, schools that introduce or increase discussion of this issue are likely to encounter an increase in disclosures from staff and students who have previously experienced – or are currently experiencing – violence and need support.

Strategies to ensure appropriate responses to disclosures of violence, and ongoing support and risk management include:

- clarification of school policies for responding to disclosures of violence
- professional learning for school staff (including counselling and welfare staff) to build their knowledge of and confidence in responding to such disclosures and providing ongoing support
- guidance for schools about the legal context and school responsibilities in their state or territory relating to such disclosures, including regarding child protection, family law and family violence
- support for schools and regions to build and maintain partnerships with early intervention and response-sector stakeholders – such as local domestic and family violence services, youth workers, and other services) – to ensure that clear responsibilities exist at the local level for disclosures and ongoing risk management support
- guidance for schools on providing appropriate referral pathways for students and staff

Coordinated leadership – stakeholder roles and responsibilities

The deeply entrenched nature of the drivers of gender-based violence means that a long-term commitment and systemic approach are needed for respectful relationships education to become a catalyst for generational change. Political leadership and sustainable resourcing are necessary to drive such broad and long-term change, by ensuring that respectful relationships education is recognised as core business for education departments and schools. A best-practice and sustainable model to respectful relationships education requires all stakeholders – from schools to education departments and governments – to lead the way in supporting an evidence-based, consistent and unified approach. In practical terms, this may involve different stakeholders take on the following roles.

Federal government:

- express public support for gender equality and respectful relationships education that addresses the drivers of violence against women
- provide national resources, guidance and regulatory support to promote consistent policy and practice across jurisdictions in line with evolving evidence

State and territory governments:

- express public support for gender equality and respectful relationships education that addresses the drivers of violence against women
- provide appropriate resourcing to respectful relationships education in annual government budgets, ensuring education department budgets have dedicated budget lines for respectful relationships education
- include actions and measures in strategic and annual planning cycles to monitor implementation
- identify and/or create a mechanism for whole-of-government coordination of all primary prevention activities and ensure respectful relationships education is visible and supported through these mechanisms

State and territory education departments:

- establish and provide resourcing for the development of an implementation team, consisting of central and regional departmental staff to lead the implementation, and undertake monitoring and evaluation of a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education
- provide policy, guidance and appropriate resources to central and regional offices and schools to ensure all levels of the department are supported in implementing respectful relationships education
- develop and implement a comprehensive professional learning strategy about respectful relationships education for non-teaching staff in central and regional offices, as well as teachers and non-teaching school staff
- develop a communications strategy to convey clear and consistent messaging about the aims and benefits of the whole-of-school approach, as well as to anticipate and respond to any likely misunderstandings or media misinformation
- engage with key educational stakeholders to ensure respectful relationships education is implemented effectively within the specific context of each jurisdiction

Our Watch:

- continue to develop and communicate the evidence base for primary prevention of violence against women and effective respectful relationships education
- provide policy and practice advice to governments to support the development, implementation and monitoring of best-practice respectful relationships education

Regional offices, school authorities and schools:

- support school leaders and teachers to implement respectful relationships education and gender equality strategies that address the drivers of violence against women, and to communicate about respectful relationships education confidently with families and school communities
- embed a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education in strategic and operational planning and budgeting, to lead school-wide policy, procedural and practice reform
- establish a school implementation team with representatives from across the school and support this team to lead the implementation of respectful relationships education on an ongoing basis
- develop and implement a school-led family and community engagement strategy and ensure that staff who are responsible for family and community engagement are included in the associated professional learning strategy
- actively promote and support the engagement of students in respectful relationships education planning and implementation across multiple components of the whole-of-school approach

Community organisations and services, including specialist violence against women, primary prevention and response organisations:

- build relationships with respectful relationship education implementation teams to support the implementation of the whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education
- develop service preparedness to support increased disclosures of violence and work closely with schools to ensure response mechanisms are best practice

Endnotes

- 1 Our Watch evidence paper on respectful relationships education, available at <https://ourwatch.org.au>
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Personal Safety, Australia, 2016* (Cat. no. 4906.0). Canberra: ABS.
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- 6 Our Watch. (2019). *Change the story three years on: Reflections on uptake and impact, lessons learned and Our Watch's ongoing work to embed and expand the evidence on prevention*. Melbourne: Our Watch. p. 34. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/change-the-story-three-years-on>
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- 8 Department of Social Services. (2019). *Fourth action plan of the national plan to reduce violence against women and their children 2010–2022*. Canberra: DSS. p. 26. <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-publications-articles-reducing-violence/fourth-action-plan>
- 9 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*. Melbourne: Our Watch. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-picture>