

## Policy Brief 5

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# Working with children and young people



**This policy brief outlines approaches for working with children and young people – from early childhood to young adulthood – to prevent violence against women and their children, and explores the opportunities and challenges of this work.**

#### **Key points**

- Prevention work with children and young people is about building their skills – at an early stage of life – to decode and challenge violence-supportive and gender-stereotyping norms and practices that they are likely to encounter as they mature, and to build equitable, safe and respectful relationships of their own.
- Evaluations of good practice schools-based programs (internationally and in Australia) are strong. Participating students have demonstrated positive attitudinal and behaviour change immediately following such programs, and longitudinal studies have shown reductions in future violence perpetration and victimisation. Schools have reported positive changes in their classroom and workplace cultures and practices.
- Research and practice evaluations show that effectiveness of schools-based prevention lies in whole-school approaches. This involves engagement of school leadership, parents and community organisations, as well as classroom-based learning across curriculum subjects, teacher training and supportive school policies.
- Australia has a strong programmatic base for such work in secondary schools, but it is largely driven by community organisations with limited funding and reach. There are fewer examples of such programmatic work in primary schools, although this is a growing area. Promising programs have also been developed in early childhood settings and others are emerging in non-school or tertiary education settings.
- State/Territory education departments are critical in ensuring support for good practice whole-school approaches if they are to move beyond an ad hoc ‘school by school’ model and become the norm.

## Why work with children and young people on prevention?

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Many children and young people witness or experience violence at home, and may experience or even perpetrate violence in their own intimate relationships. And all children and young people are, from an early age, exposed to harmful messages that can support violence or discrimination, and stereotype men and women, boys and girls. Exposure to negative messages about gender, consent and violence means that some young people accept violence as normal in their daily lives. This can take the form of victim-blaming or thinking that some violent acts are not serious.

Prevention initiatives working specifically with children and young people aim to shape positive and equitable attitudes and behaviours at an early stage of life. They aim to give children and young people the skills to decode and challenge the violence-supportive and gender-stereotyping norms and practices they are likely to encounter as they mature. This helps them build respectful, equitable relationships of their own. Quality initiatives can further unlock the potential for children and young people to act as agents for change, building skills for them to advocate for gender equality and non-violence, and exercise a positive influence on their societies and future generations.

Unlock  
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# Violence in the lives of children and young people

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Violence, discrimination and stereotyping may already be present in the lives of children and young people – to greater or lesser degrees – from the earliest age.

Many children and young people are living in homes where domestic violence is occurring. The 2001 National Crime Prevention survey [Young people and domestic violence: National research on young people's attitudes and experiences of domestic violence](#) found that one in four children and young people had witnessed violence against their mothers or step-mothers. Australian research, [Children, young people and domestic violence](#) (Laing, 2000), and a 2006 study for UNICEF, [Behind closed doors: The impact of domestic violence on children](#), emphasised how children and young people are 'pulled in' to violence against their mothers in a way that is beyond mere witnessing, and a form of victimisation in itself. These studies also described the atmosphere of fear, distress and uncertainty created.

Physical and sexual abuse of children is also more common in households where there is domestic violence. The 2001 National Crime Prevention survey found that up to one in 10 young people report living in households where the male carer has hit them and/or their siblings for reasons 'other than bad behaviour'. Well over half of these young people also reported domestic violence occurring in the same household. This is more than double the rate for the sample as a whole.

A study of sexually abused children in Scotland, [Literature review: Better outcomes for children and young people affected by domestic abuse – Directions for good practice](#) (Humphreys *et al* 2008), found that 40 per cent were also living with domestic violence. The impact on children and young people of witnessing domestic violence against their mothers, and of them experiencing direct child abuse (whether physical, emotional or sexual abuse and/or neglect) is similar – and in both cases profound and cumulative.

Children and young people living with violence are also exposed to negative relationship models that can influence their own present and future behaviour. The WHO 2010 report, [Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women – Taking action and generating evidence](#), notes this may shape their attitudes to violence in their own intimate relationships – and may increase risk of future perpetration for boys and young men. Yet, numerous studies, such as the 2001 Australian Institute of Criminology, [Young Australians and domestic violence](#), have found that prior exposure to violence is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the future perpetration of violence.

# Violence in the lives of children and young people

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The White Ribbon Foundation commissioned research on the impact of violence on young people in 2009. [An assault on our future: The impact of violence on young people and their relationships](#), found strong support across the literature that the impact of the cumulative experience of, and exposure to, violence and violence-supportive messages can limit children's and young people's capacity to imagine alternatives and build the skills needed to create respectful relationships.

But the support that children and young people receive to recover from the effects of violence, and to build skills in creating healthy and equal relationships, can make all the difference. Community attitudes surveys, including VicHealth (2006) [Two steps forward, one step back: Community attitudes to violence against women](#), show two clear pathways among adults who had experienced domestic violence as children. Some adults, consistent with 'cycle of abuse' theories, were significantly more tolerant than average of violence in intimate relationships. However a second category showed significantly less tolerant attitudes than average towards such violence, precisely because they were aware of its devastating impact.

While it is crucial that tailored *support* be offered to children and young people who already are living with violence, deficit-based prevention or early intervention approaches that isolate or differentiate children and young people who have experienced violence from their peers may not be the most effective in reducing future perpetration or experience of violence. All children and young people are exposed to a wide array of gender stereotyping and violence-supportive messages from sources such as media and advertising, but also often in local communities, peer groups or their own families. Prevention work therefore needs to challenge existing assumptions, attitudes and behaviours that might be supportive of violence, as well as promote environments and structures that are respectful, inclusive and equitable – for *all* children and young people.

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## Policy and funding context

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State and territory governments in Australia have made policy commitments for primary prevention of violence, and many of these support work with children and young people.

The [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022](#) (National Plan) includes several relevant Commonwealth-led initiatives such as *The Line* social marketing campaign which focusses on young people. The Commonwealth Government also previously funded a \$9.1 million/five-year *Respectful Relationships Education* grant program supporting 32 projects across three funding rounds.

Another key policy is in the related field of preventing child abuse: the [National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020](#). Like the National Plan above, this was released as a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed, long-term program of shared work and commitments. Like the National Plan there are initiatives outlined in the policy and associated implementation plans with an early intervention or even primary prevention focus. For example, the [Second three-year action plan 2012-2015](#), outlines actions to develop and trial programs to 'prevent sexual abuse and keep children safe, including specific programs for remote Indigenous communities, such as the cyber smart outreach program'; and to 'explore ways to respond nationally to the sexualisation of children.'

## Prevention in early childhood settings

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A life-course approach to preventing violence against women and their children involves starting at the earliest age. The evidence indicates that the best way to support a very young child to grow into a non-violent adult is to protect them from violence, and ensure that they live with positive, respectful and equal relationship models.

Programs promoting positive and non-violent parenting from the earliest stage therefore have the potential to prevent violence against children, and to build skills for, and model, respectful and equal relationships between parents/couples and in all intimate and family relationships. The WHO 2010 report found that initiatives can have a dual positive effect of strengthening couples' relationships to prevent intimate partner violence, and preventing direct child maltreatment and abuse.

# Prevention in school settings

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Schools are 'mini communities' where respect and equality can be modelled to help shape positive attitudes and behaviours at an early stage of life. They play a central role in teaching children and young people what violence against women looks like and how it can be prevented, and provide an environment in which children and young people already living with violence at home or in their relationships may receive support and appropriate referrals. Schools are also major workplaces and community 'hubs': the school culture, policies and practices can therefore influence attitudes and behaviours of staff, parents and other adults towards violence, discrimination and stereotyping.

Classroom-based prevention programs – often termed respectful/healthy/ethical relationships education – have historically focussed on young adolescent age groups in secondary schools, as a key period in negotiating ethical and respectful intimate and sexual relationships. But there is also a need to develop age-specific programs in primary schools. A 2009 study by the National Association of Services against Sexual Violence, [Framing best practice: National standards for the primary prevention of sexual assault through education](#) ('the NASASV Standards'), found that programs building skills in non-violent communication, inclusion and the rejection of gender or other stereotyping and discrimination, achieved positive results for primary school children.

The NASASV report, along with the 2009 [Respectful relationships education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools](#) by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, both examined existing schools-based programs and distilled the elements of effective practice. The most effective programs – in terms of positive changes to student attitudes/behaviours and to school culture/practices – were those that used a whole-school approach. This meant that prevention of violence was integrated into the curriculum and teacher training, supportive school policies and protocols were developed and widely understood, and school leadership, parents and community organisations were engaged.

Such good practice violence prevention programs have been shown to have positive outcomes for schools on many levels. Reductions in violence-supportive attitudes and violent behaviour have been well documented in reviews and studies, including VicHealth's 2007 [Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper for the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria](#), and the White Ribbon Foundation's 2009 report on the Breaking the Silence campaign, [The school's a calmer place: Promoting cultures of respect in schools](#). Multiple and cumulative further benefits such as improved educational outcomes have been observed in the White Ribbon Foundation report and in the United States with [The effectiveness of universal school-based programs for the prevention of violent and aggressive behaviour](#).

Nationally, there are several well-evaluated examples of such good-practice schools-based programs but many existing programs do not reach good-practice standards. Most only offer classroom-based activity, and frequently in one-off sessions. While the latter approach is understandable, given restrictions on school time and the funding of the community agencies engaged in program delivery, the reality is that evaluations have shown such programs to be ineffective and in some cases even harmful. The support of departments of education for sustained whole-school approaches across geographical regions is crucial if good practice standards are to be met and ineffective practice avoided.

## Prevention in tertiary education settings

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Tertiary education presents another opportunity to engage young people at a crucial stage when attitudes and behaviours are shifting and developing on numerous fronts. Like schools, university and college campuses are 'mini-communities' with their own norms, practices and cultures. As workplaces for teaching, administrative and auxiliary staff, workplace-based initiatives to prevent violence and discrimination could be integrated with education programs. Community-mobilisation and advocacy-based initiatives, such as those driven by student organisations, can also be effectively implemented.

Fewer programs have been initiated at this level than in schools, but some promising emerging areas of work provide opportunities for expansion or embedding. Good-practice learnings from schools-based and community/place-based prevention suggests that a comprehensive 'whole-of-campus' model, with initiatives across various settings and levels, is the most likely to bring about change.

## Prevention in non-school educational settings

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The most marginalised children and young people may not be in school. Ways need to be found to support them educationally, including building their skills for healthy relationships. In Australia, there is limited evidence on how to engage them in prevention programs.

Children and young people who are outside the system, especially those who are homeless, are likely to experience multiple forms of social, economic and/or educational disadvantage. An international study in 2004, [\*An outside chance: Street children and juvenile justice – An international perspective\*](#), found that these children are more vulnerable to witnessing or experiencing violence themselves, and may have learned to use violence as a survival mechanism.

Youth services, out-of-home care and other community agencies working with children and young people have long provided early intervention and response services to those experiencing violence. There is great potential to harness their expertise and experience and build their capacity to develop and implement primary prevention initiatives.

Many programs for children and young people who are not in the school system tend to focus on conflict resolution and negotiation skills rather than skills to engage in gender equitable and respectful relationships. However, more 'upstream' respectful relationships programs for schools have been adapted for use in non-school settings.

While there is limited policy or practice data about how to support respectful and equitable relationships in these settings, the principles guiding broader violence prevention efforts suggest ways to undertake programs with young people in non-school settings. Programs should be developed with maximum flexibility in different settings, and integrated with existing life skills or non-formal education programs. It will be important to identify the places and groups where young people gather for work and recreation, and to work with leaders or peer mentors who can engage with young people.

# Prevention through social media

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Children and young people use a range of social media in their everyday lives including mobile phones, the internet and online gaming. There has been much emphasis on the use of social media for perpetrating bullying, harassment and violence in children and young people's lives, and for reinforcing attitudes that contribute to gender discrimination and stereotyping.

There is limited evidence to conclude that exposure to the portrayal of violence in media and popular culture plays a direct role in the perpetration of violence against women. However, the 2012 Australian study, [\*Growing up fast and furious: Reviewing the impact of violent and sexualised media on children\*](#), and the 2013 work by Crabbe and Corlett, [\*Eroticising inequality: Pornography, young people and sexuality\*](#), highlighted the increased exposure of children and young people to sexualized imagery and (often violent) pornography, and the role this plays in the socialisation that supports violence against women. Other Australian research in 2008, [\*Cyber-victimisation in Australia: Extent, impact on individuals and responses\*](#), described emerging patterns of cyber-crime and cyber-victimisation where technologies are used to perpetrate violence, particularly among children and young people.

Prevention programs need to take into account the ways in which children and young people use information and communications technologies. In 2000, the Council of Europe, *Group of specialists for combating violence against women* noted that all prevention programs with children and young people should aim to build their skills in media literacy, and to 'decode media violence, sex role stereotyping and misleading portrayals of women and men, including those in pornography.'

Social media also offers potential for positive and creative interventions to promote gender equality and challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination. Women's and crisis support organisations around the country have developed websites and Facebook pages for young people and the Commonwealth Government has invested in a major social media campaign, *The Line*, to engage young people.

# Challenges and opportunities

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Many well-evaluated examples of effective prevention practice with children and young people currently exist in Australia. These are better developed in school settings – particularly at the secondary level – where several programs have now successfully been expanded beyond their original sites. However less-than-ideal practice remains the norm, and factors such as constraints on school time and limited resources of both schools and support organisations mean that many schools struggle to implement good-practice programs. The main challenge to moving beyond a school-by-school approach is to engage state/territory education departments in fuller support of good-practice curriculum development, teacher training and policy leadership.

The new National Curriculum could provide impetus and a framework for schools and education departments to begin more comprehensive work on prevention. National-level advocacy will be important to ensure that education stakeholders understand and commit to prevention goals if new curriculum obligations in the area of respectful relationships education are not to be seen as another impost on already-stretched schools. Plain-language, sector-adapted guidelines and benchmarks might also be useful to support teachers and principals to implement the new curriculum in an effective and whole-school way (as recommended in the NASASV Standards).

Work is less developed in tertiary and non-school education settings, and in the early childhood sector. Again, while good-practice initiatives exist, one of the greatest challenges here may lie in building the ‘architecture’ to support practitioners on the ground. There are few national forums to share knowledge, build capacity and develop strategies to embed and expand well-evaluated violence prevention work. A key future challenge is development of such community of practice networks, and other capacity-building support, to enable practitioners to participate in training, attend workshops and seminars, and develop/embed initiatives in their own work areas, drawing on the support and expertise of peers.

The historical focus of work in this area with children and young people has been on responding to existing violence and (more recently) on intervening early. As a result, early intervention and response programs and systems exist in a number of settings and across jurisdictions nationwide. A key challenge and opportunity lies in ensuring a ‘joined up’ approach, so that children and young people who experience violence are not only respected, supported and encouraged in their own efforts to overcome its impacts – but that all children and young people in Australia grow up with the skills to build healthy relationships and reject violence. Education, health and social services departments can play a key role in ensuring and/or strengthening such a coordinated and holistic approach between primary prevention, early intervention and response initiatives with this age group.

One of the most important lessons from international and Australian practice has been that children and young people themselves must be involved in the design and implementation of initiatives that seek to engage them. In programming, policy and messaging, it is especially important not to see children and young people as mere ‘recipients’ of prevention initiatives, or worse – in the case of those who have experienced violence – as potential ‘problems’ to be solved. They need to be provided with the support and skills, not only to build respectful and non-violent relationships in their own lives, but to act as ‘agents of change’ – a force of influence among their peers, families and communities, creating a ripple effect for the prevention of violence against women and their children across generations.

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## About Our Watch

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Our Watch is an independent, not-for-profit organisation, working to raise awareness and engage the community in action to prevent violence against women and their children. Our Watch has four members: the Commonwealth, Victorian, Northern Territory and South Australian Governments. Remaining states and territories have been invited to join as members.

## Policy briefs

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Since its incorporation, Our Watch has commissioned a series of policy briefs to assist in the development of the strategic program. The briefs are not designed to be comprehensive or definitive, but rather to provide a 'point in time' summary of issues and evidence in particular areas. They will be published progressively.

[ourwatch.org.au](http://ourwatch.org.au)