

Evidence Paper

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Respectful Relationships

Education in Schools

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Contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Methodology	5
3. What is the problem?	6
4. What is primary prevention?	7
5. Why schools?	9
6. Why now?	11
7. What is Respectful Relationships Education?	12
8. Core elements of Respectful Relationships Education	15
1. Address drivers of gender-based violence	16
2. Have a long term vision, approach and funding	18
3. Take a whole school approach	19
4. Establishing mechanisms for collaboration and a coordinated effort	21
5. Ensure integrated evaluation and continual improvement	23
6. Provide resources and support for teachers	25
7. Use age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum	27
9. Conclusion	29
10. Acknowledgements	31
11. Appendix: A timeline of selected Respectful Relationships Education developments in Australia	32
12. Bibliography	35

1 Executive summary

The recent inclusion of Respectful Relationships Education in the Australian Curriculum represents an unprecedented opportunity to create positive change for a whole generation of young people and across the education sector. It coincides with announcements from several states and territories to strengthen their education systems' capacity to address and prevent gender-based violence.

This paper – produced by Our Watch with support from a Technical Advisory Group – aims to support policy makers and education departments in the design, implementation and evaluation of their policy and practice, as they deliver on these welcome commitments.

As a relatively new field, varying understandings of what constitutes good practice Respectful Relationships Education prevail both here and internationally. In this paper we suggest the following definition best reflects evidence-based understandings to date:

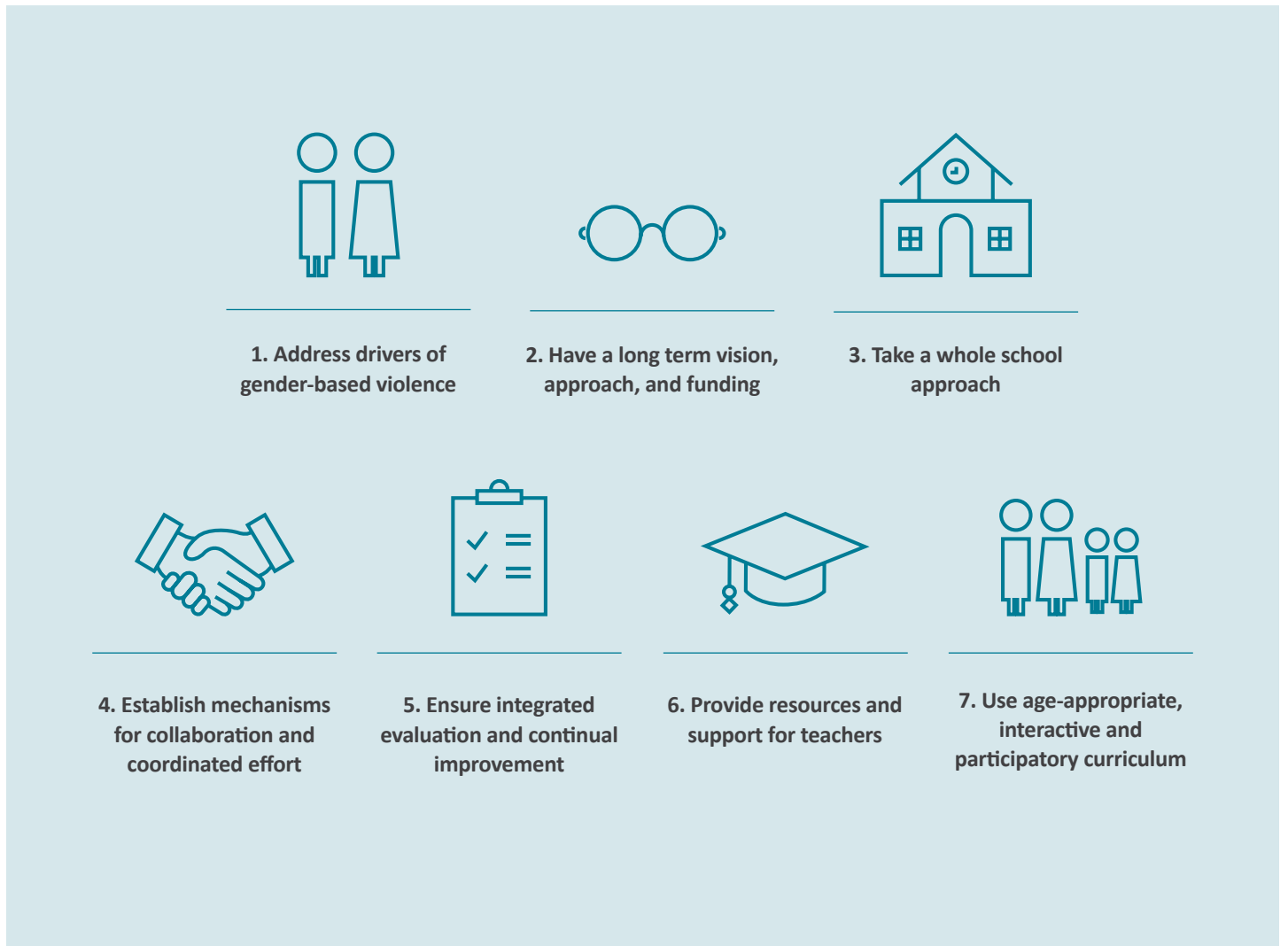
Respectful Relationships Education is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence. It uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence.

The paper goes on to distil existing international and national evidence into seven core elements for good practice Respectful Relationships Education:

1. Address drivers of gender-based violence
2. Have a long term vision, approach and funding
3. Take a whole school approach
4. Establish mechanisms for collaboration and coordinated effort
5. Ensure integrated evaluation and continual improvement
6. Provide resources and support for teachers
7. Use age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum.

Properly embedded in education systems, and with the appropriate support to teachers, schools and their community partners, the benefits of Respectful Relationship Education have the potential to reach 3.7 million students across Australian primary and secondary schools, as well as a workforce of over 250 000 teachers. However, as a relatively new field, no transferable systemic model for Respectful Relationships Education currently exists in the Australian context that can guide policy makers and education departments. This paper suggests that by drawing on the seven core elements above, and building on recent commitments, Australia has the opportunity to invest in the establishment of such a model so that schools across the country are supported to create cultures and futures free from violence.

**Figure 1: Respectful Relationships Education Core Elements
(Based on existing evidence from Australia and abroad)**



2 Methodology

In September 2015, Our Watch commenced an in-house rapid review of the international and national literature on Respectful Relationships Education. The purpose of the review was to synthesise the key literature, identifying the core elements of effective or good practice schools-based interventions to prevent violence against women and their children.ⁱ A panel of technical experts (Technical Advisory Group) provided overall guidance and review for this paper, as well as informing the identification of research and literature for review.

Over 60 reports, evaluations, papers and articles were reviewed for this paper. A full list is available in the Bibliography on [page 35](#). The literature collected and analysed for this paper and can be summarised as:

- meta-analysis, literature and practice reviews of education-based prevention of gender-based violence and child protection initiatives published after 2009
- evaluations of Australian-based externally-delivered programs and approachesⁱⁱ
- frequently cited international externally-delivered programs and approaches
- curriculum and curriculum guidance from Australia or comparable high income countries
- literature on scaling up school-based interventions.

The paper represents a snapshot in time of evidence on Respectful Relationships Education, noting that there are new findings and learnings continually emerging in this field.

ⁱAs an emerging field with limited randomised control trials, a systematic review or meta-analysis was not appropriate.

ⁱⁱThis paper makes a shift from calling Respectful Relationships Education activity as programs to approaches. This is in recognition that programs can be short-term, not sustainable and limit the ability to embed the activity within the education system. As the evidence on Respectful Relationships Education practice increases, there has been a shift away from programmatic response to systematic approaches.

3 What is the problem?

In Australia, an average of one woman a week is murdered by a current or former partner, and thousands more are injured or made to live in fear. One in three women has experienced physical assault and one in five women sexual assault¹, while one in four has endured violence by an intimate partner². This paper, consistent with the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*³, and also *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children*⁴, uses a broad definition of violence against women that encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, cultural/spiritual violence and financial abuse, whether occurring inside or outside the domestic setting.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the context of Respectful Relationships Education, the term *gender-based violence*^{iv} is often used in place of ‘violence against women’, as it is considered to better encompass the experiences of young people (and so is also used here). The term ensures that prevention of violence against girls and young women is included – such as dating violence, sexting and revenge porn – as well as the prevention of violence in young people’s future adult lives. It is also inclusive of and extends to violence experienced by the lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer and intersex communities.^v

ⁱⁱⁱThe United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender based violence that causes or could cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life’. This definition encompasses all forms of violence that women experience, including physical, sexual, emotional, cultural/spiritual violence and financial abuse, that are gender based.

^{iv}Gender based violence is violence specifically ‘directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately’.

^vHomophobic and transphobic violence shares some gendered drivers with violence against girls and women, and also has distinct drivers.

4 What is primary prevention?

Gender-based violence is not inevitable. Research shows violence against women is significantly higher in countries where women's economic, social and political rights are poorly protected. It is consistently worse in areas where power and resources are unequally distributed, as illustrated for example by an under-representation of women in parliament and corporate boards, a pay gap between men and women, and a gender gap in superannuation. Evidence reveals that the 'constants' in predicting higher levels of violence against women relate to structures, social norms and organisational practices supporting gender inequality, in particular the following manifestations:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence, in public life and relationships
- rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity, and
- male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women.⁵

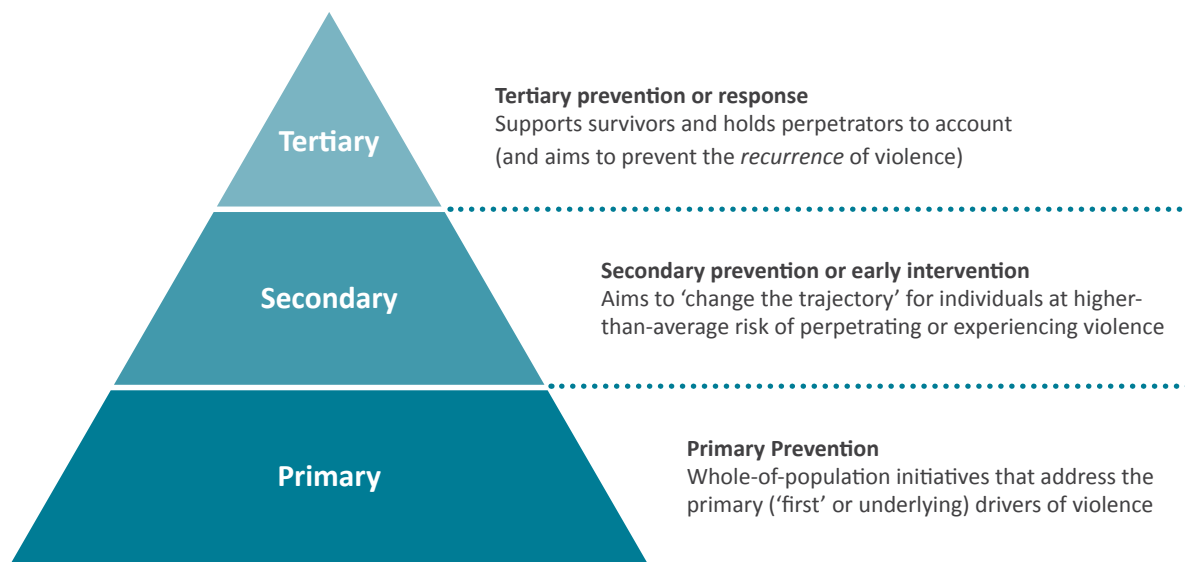
These are known as the *drivers* of violence against women: factors that – on the weight of the international evidence – most consistently and significantly predict higher levels of violence against women, and which therefore need to be addressed if we are to prevent such violence.^{vi}

Just like other major social and health issues such as tobacco and alcohol use, gender-based violence can be prevented through a primary prevention approach that:

...[changes] the social conditions, such as gender inequality, that excuse, justify or even promote violence against women and their children.[...] A primary prevention approach works across the whole population to address the attitudes, practices and power differentials that drive violence against women and their children.⁶

^{vi}There are also a number of reinforcing factors that work in interaction with the gendered drivers to – in some cases – exacerbate violence against women. These include: condoning of violence in general; the experience of, and exposure to, violence; weakening of pro-social behaviour (especially harmful use of alcohol); socio-economic inequality and discrimination; and backlash factors (when male dominance, power or status is challenged). See Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth (2015) for greater detail.

Figure 2: The relationship between primary prevention and other work to address violence against women



A primary prevention approach needs to be society-wide, using multiple approaches across multiple environments or settings, reaching a variety of age groups, demographics and communities.

5 Why schools?

The education system is just one of the many settings for primary prevention, but it offers powerful leverage. With over 9,500 schools, 3.7 million students and 250,000 teachers across Australia, our education system provides near universal reach to children in their formative years and to adolescents creating their first intimate relationships. In conjunction with a comprehensive program of activity across other settings, evidence-based and properly funded Respectful Relationships Education throughout the national school system could create the generational change needed to free Australia from gender-based violence.

Engaging young people

Recent evidence shows young Australians are exposed to and influenced by gender-based violence and gender inequality, and have more violence-supportive attitudes than the general population.⁷ Young people are recognised as a key cohort to change attitudes - because violence prevention among children and young people has been shown to work.⁸

Schools have a chance to build cultures where stereotypes are challenged, gender-based discrimination is not tolerated and gender equality is promoted and modelled. In addition to teaching young people how gender-based violence manifests and how it can be prevented, they can also promote and model gender equality across age groups and the broader school culture.

All three education sectors, government, independent and Catholic, now have an enabling environment for Respectful Relationships Education through the Australian Curriculum.

There are many ways the education system can work to address the key drivers of violence against women.

For example:

- Exploring, as an employer, gender equality in the workplace, including a gender audit to ensure equal opportunities for women and men, such as flexible working hours. This may result in actions and processes to address the structural inequality experienced by women in the workplace.
- Use curriculum in the classroom to challenge rigid adherence to gender stereotypes.
- Undertake research to better understand how schools reinforce gender roles, norms and stereotypes when interacting with parents/ carers and the community.
- Ensuring teachers across learning areas are drawing on literature, case studies and examples that challenge gender stereotypes and examine power relations (for instance, do history lessons look at the role of women?).

The school as a workplace

Effective school-based initiatives should also focus on staff and organisational cultures and structures, as much as on students and the achievement of learning outcomes.⁹ Schools are workplaces as well as places of learning, and research has highlighted the importance of workplaces as settings for the primary prevention of violence against women,^{vii} because:

- violence, even when occurring in private, can impact on the public and professional lives of those who experience, witnesses and perpetrate it
- employers have a legal responsibility to create a safe work environment
- positive workplace cultures that promote staff wellbeing, respect and equity are less costly and more productive
- workplaces are influential parts of our lives within our communities.¹⁰

Data from a cross-section of Australian primary and secondary schools shows approximately 70% of the total workforce is female but less than 50% of management positions are held by women.¹¹ In addition to recognising that policies, practices and activities have the potential to reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes and gender inequalities in the workplace, the influence of informal cultures and practices also needs to be considered.¹²

Working with schools to prevent gender-based violence makes sense. Australian schools offer an existing structure to use as catalyst for promoting gender equality and respect to prevent gender based violence. Using schools as a setting offers two main population groups to be reached by this work: students who are a critical age for forming their attitudes and knowledge and a diverse teacher and non-teaching workforce.

Schools and the wider education system are one part of a jigsaw of approaches and techniques for primary prevention activity. Primary prevention activities that are isolated, ad hoc and uncoordinated will fail to create positive cultural change.

To prevent violence against women in Australia **we need a coordinated effort from many aspects of society to address the drivers of gender-based violence** and promote equality and respect.

For more information see **Change the story: a shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia**

^{vii}For more information see Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia at [http://www.ourwatch.org.au/What-We-Do-\(1\)/National-Primary-Prevention-Framework](http://www.ourwatch.org.au/What-We-Do-(1)/National-Primary-Prevention-Framework) and VicHealth's Preventing Violence Against Women in the Workplace: An Evidence Review at http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~/_/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/Economic%20participation/2012%20workplace/CHW_PVAW_Full_Web_Final.ashx.

6 Why now?

In 2015, growing community awareness of violence against women and increasing political momentum for effective primary prevention measures have resulted in a number of announcements and commitments:

- State and Commonwealth Education Ministers, on 18 September 2015, strengthened the position of Respectful Relationships in the Australian Curriculum with specific content in the Health and Physical Education learning area and through the personal and social capability across the learning areas.
- The Commonwealth Government announced, on 24 September 2015, \$5 million in funding over three years to provide resources for teachers, parents and students on Respectful Relationships on the Safer Schools website.
- The Victorian Government, on 21 August 2015, announced that Respectful Relationships Education will be included in the curriculum from 2016 in Prep through to Year 10 as part of Victoria’s ‘Education State’ reforms.
- The Tasmanian Government announced, on 13 August 2015, \$350,000 to encourage the delivery of Respectful Relationships Education in all Tasmanian schools from Kindergarten to Year 12 as part of the Tasmanian curriculum.
- The New South Wales Government, on 3 July 2015, announced the explicit inclusion of domestic violence prevention in the mandatory NSW Year 7-10 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) syllabus from the start of the first school term in 2016.
- The Australian Capital Territory Government announced, in June 2015, funding of \$615,000 for 2015-16, which will support public school delivery of social and emotional learning programs to help young people learn about the importance of respectful relationships and provide students with accessible support services.

7 What is Respectful Relationships Education?

In Australia, Respectful Relationships Education is a relatively new term that first emerged in the 2000s. It draws on theory and practice for preventing various forms of gender-based violence through strategies and approaches for children and young people.¹³ As a relatively new field, varying understandings of what constitutes good practice Respectful Relationships Education prevail both here and internationally. In this paper we suggest the definition shown in Figure 3 best reflects evidence-based understandings to date.

The term Respectful Relationships Education is also used in broader community settings including sporting clubs and community groups. However this paper, and the definition above, is centred solely on the education setting.

Respectful Relationships Education is often considered as only what is delivered in the classroom, however evidence shows that to achieve maximum effectiveness, Respectful Relationships Education should be realised through a whole school approach.¹⁴ This means addressing the overlapping domains that shape the social climate surrounding students and staff, including:

- the curriculum across all subjects or learning areas
- school policy and practices
- school culture and ethos
- the working conditions and culture experienced by staff, and
- the relationships modelled to students by their school community including staff, parents and community groups.

Figure 3: Definition of Respectful Relationships Education



The aim of Respectful Relationships Education is often associated with multiple areas of educational outcomes for students. Delivery in classrooms can complement or align with content across a number of areas such as sexuality education, awareness raising on the nature of family and domestic violence, online and digital safety issues, child protection, and work to address other forms of violence and bullying that might not necessarily be seen as gendered.^{viii}

The existing delivery of classroom-based learning in these areas can lead to the false assumption that Respectful Relationships Education is ‘already being done’. But Respectful Relationships Education is broader than the delivery of classroom-based learning in these areas. What sets Respectful Relationships Education apart is that it explicitly centres on addressing the drivers of gender-based violence.

As such, Respectful Relationships Education goes further than raising awareness of violence and promoting protective behaviours and is characterised by a critical analysis of gender and power.^{ix} While alignments with other areas of work (such as sexuality education) are desirable, Respectful Relationships Education requires a stand-alone focus and investment, with attention to (and monitoring of) the creation of more gender equal and respectful attitudes, behaviours, structures and practices across the school culture.

^{viii}See Core Element 3.

^{ix}While out of scope for this paper, it is worth considering how such a gendered analysis could also strengthen approaches to issues such as child protection and bullying.

8 Core elements of Respectful Relationships Education

International research tells us that the impacts of school-based programs – if implemented correctly – can be profound. A recent systematic review of approaches to prevent violence against women and girls in The Lancet ascribed school-based activity the highest marker of effectiveness.¹⁵

Two longitudinal studies of programs in America and Canada have demonstrated that these approaches can reduce future violence perpetration and victimisation of students.

Table 1: International approaches with longitudinal controlled studies

Approach	Description	Impact
Safe Dates, USA (Foshee et al. 1998)	Ten-session curriculum for Years 8 and 9 (aged 11 to 17 years) to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – educate students about healthy versus violent dating relationships; and causes and consequences of violence – equip students with effective communication and conflict resolution skills – provide students with the tools to help a friend experiencing violence in a relationship – involves parents and carers by providing resources to encourage discussion at home 	Four years after implementation, those students who had participated in Safe Dates reported 56% to 92% less physical, serious physical, and sexual dating violence victimisation and perpetration than students who did not.
Approach	Description	Impact
Fourth R, Canada (Wolf et al. 2009)	21-session curriculum for Grade 9 Physical and Health Education students (age approximately 13-14) delivered over 28 hours by teachers with additional training in the dynamics of dating violence and healthy relationships.	A two and a half year follow up with 1,722 students found that physical dating violence was about 2.5 times greater among students who did not participate in the program than those who did.

It is also clear from international and national literature that there is a great disparity in the design of approaches, the methods of delivery and their subsequent impacts.¹⁶ Poor approaches include those that are:

- well-intentioned but do not yield results (or, in some cases, cause harm)
- well-designed but poorly implemented
- poorly constructed, and/or
- insufficiently funded for implementation or evaluation.

With the recent announcements of national and state/territory plans to implement Respectful Relationships Education across Australian schools, there is an opportunity to learn from the successes and challenges observed in the international and national literature on school-based prevention approaches.

The review of that literature conducted for this paper has distilled the following ‘core elements’ of effective Respectful Relationships Education:

1. Address drivers of gender-based violence

Respectful Relationships Education approaches need to start by acknowledging the power imbalances that foster gender-based violence in the first place.¹⁷ Approaches to Respectful Relationships Education must recognise the role of inequality, gender, and power in the occurrence of gender-based violence and seek to address these explicitly.

A common concern about these topics is that children and young people will be exposed to traumatic stories of violence, in particular sexual violence. Age-appropriate curriculum is critical. This might mean younger children discuss gender stereotypes or freedom of expression through toys and play.

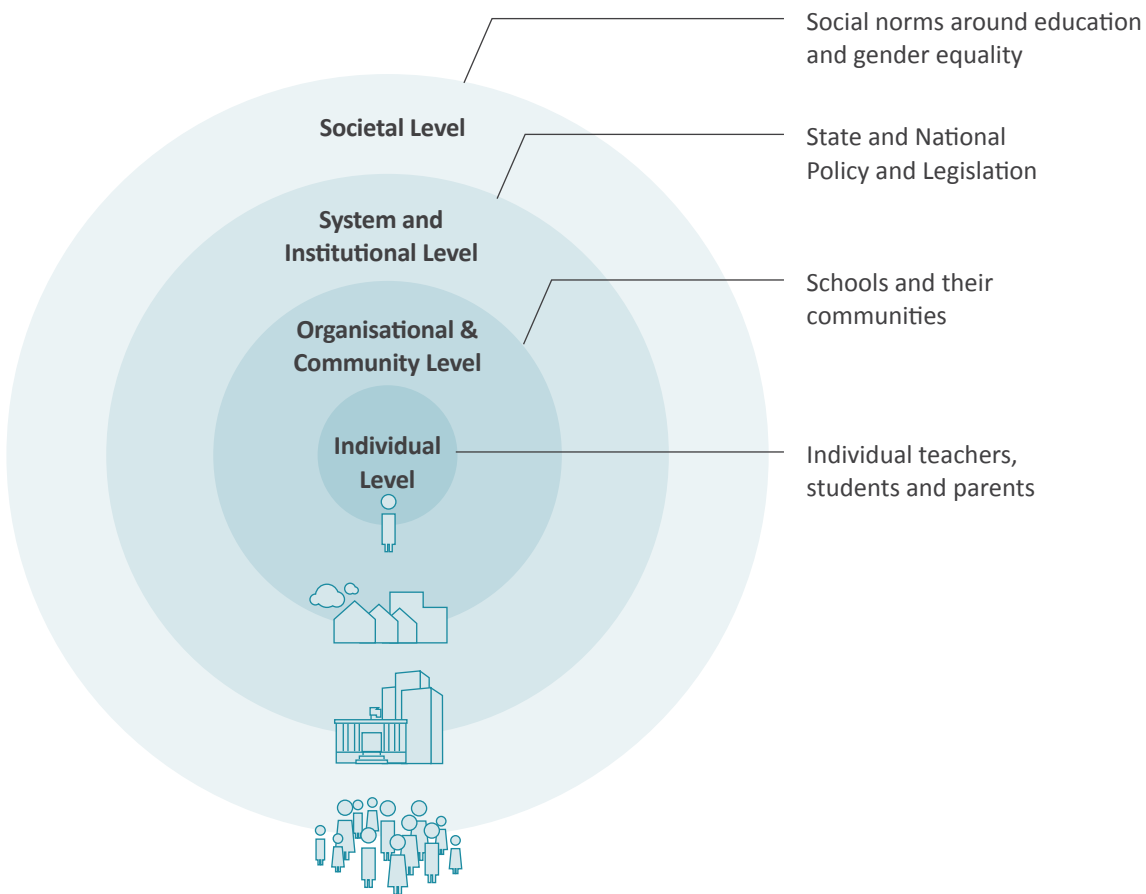
Primary prevention initiatives aimed at addressing the drivers of violence against women need robust evidence-based theories of change. Any evidence-based Respectful Relationships Education approach should be able to articulate, through a theory of change or program logic,^x how their approach addresses the underlying drivers.¹⁸ The theory of change should be demonstrated through pilots and long-term evaluation, before a program, approach or model can be considered sound.^{xi}

^xA program logic is a diagram that summarises the relationship between an intervention (an activity, policy or project) and its expected short and longer term impacts.

^{xi}Experimental study designs, such as randomised control trials (RCT), should only be applied when an intervention has been developed, piloted and where the research can be ethically designed and implemented – see Patton, M.Q. (2008). International evaluations of school-based respectful relationships approaches have demonstrated that a randomised control trial design is possible, however adequate resourcing (including appropriate support for participating schools) and expert oversight would be needed for a randomised control trial of Respectful Relationships Education in Australia.

For the cultural change required to have a future free from gender-based violence, multiple strategies across Australia need to focus on both individual and structural change. The many levels where this change needs to take place, including individual, organisation and community, system and institutional, and societal levels, are often conceptualised as the ecological model. In Figure 5, the levels are translated into those in schools and the education system.

Figure 5: Ecological model of school-based primary prevention



2. Have a long term vision, approach and funding

The deeply-entrenched nature of gender-based violence means that a long-term commitment is needed for Respectful Relationships Education to become a catalyst for generational change. Evident in the international literature is the need for more ongoing, systemic, centrally coordinated and comprehensively evaluated models for Respectful Relationships Education. Australia has a unique opportunity to lead internationally in developing such a long-term and visionary approach.

Political leadership and sustainable resourcing is necessary to build processes for such change, including the development of 'a strategy and implementation plan that considers the policy context, delivery mechanisms, resource requirements, as well as a pace of change, sequencing of activities, areas for prioritisation, monitoring and evaluation'.¹⁹ More intensive resourcing may be required in the initial establishment years to build the tools, training and infrastructure to set up a sustainable and systematised model.

Such a long-term approach to creating generational change through Respectful Relationships Education will require:

- bi-partisan support
- recognition of Respectful Relationships Education as part of core business by education departments, jurisdiction-based curriculum authorities and other bodies including the Catholic Education Office and Independent Schools Council of Australia
- ongoing resourcing from the Commonwealth Government to set a standard of quality across jurisdictions
- ongoing resourcing from state and territory jurisdictions from their education budget portfolio to ensure quality delivery
- building on earlier commitments through the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022, activities to expand, support and systematise Respectful Relationships Education through subsequent Action Plans
- resources supporting implementation of Respectful Relationships Education
- engagement and collaboration with key education stakeholders, schools, principals and teachers and the violence prevention sector.

Finally, Respectful Relationships Education is an essential piece of a collaborative national effort to change the structures, practices,

cultures and social norms that perpetuate and condone violence against women. But the evidence is clear that messages, campaigns, techniques and approaches need to be consistent – and therefore will require coordination – across different settings and contexts, including school-based activity. The Council of Australian Government’s National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022 and associated Action Plans, as well as the establishment of Our Watch and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety, provide mechanisms and support for this coordination in Australia across all jurisdictions.

3. Take a whole school approach

Formative research from 2009 found the single most important criterion for best practice in Respectful Relationships Education is the adoption of a whole school approach.²⁰ Similarly, various international and Australian-based evaluations of violence prevention and sexuality/relationships education have concluded that, in order to produce sustained and positive cultural change, Respectful Relationships Education must go beyond classroom learning.²¹

The whole school approach recognises that in order to achieve sustainable change, shifts are needed at a policy, structural, process, system and institutional level. This approach has proven effective across other school-based activity, including preventing bullying and discrimination; preventing drug and alcohol abuse; and health and mental wellbeing promotion.²²

A whole school approach means providing students with multiple exposure to key messages across the curriculum and in different areas of the school and community is more likely to result in sustained changes at the individual level. It involves engaging not just students, but school staff and the wider school community in the process of cultural change. For example, school staff, including non-teaching staff, might undergo professional learning and development around the drivers of gender-based violence and their role in prevention. Strategies to engage parents and families in supporting their children to promote equality and respect can help reinforce and maintain the skills students build at school.

In contrast to the impact of single initiatives, a whole school approach providing students with multiple exposure to key messages across the curriculum and in different areas of the school and community will be more likely to result in sustained changes in attitudes and behaviour at the individual level.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training’s Building Respectful Relationships: Stepping Out Against Gender-Based Violence curriculum guidance for Year 8 and 9 students details a comprehensive whole school approach across six key domains (See Figure 6):

1. school leadership and commitment,
2. professional learning strategy,
3. teaching and learning,
4. community partnerships,
5. support for staff and students, and
6. school culture and environment.

Figure 6: Building Respectful Relationships: Whole School Approach²³



Ensuring a whole school approach to Respectful Relationships Education involves:

- Policy and planning frameworks that help mainstream Respectful Relationships Education into annual implementation plans and school strategic plans
- Respectful Relationships Education supported through school global budgets and embedded and sustained in the school policies, programs and practice
- Enabling schools to engage appropriate expertise (e.g. gender experts to support schools in their organisational change elements of the whole school approach)
- Engagement and support from the whole school community, including school leadership, teachers, parents/carers and school staff
- Links between schools and community organisations (in particular those working to address gender-based violence and with cultural change expertise) – see below.

4. Establishing mechanisms for collaboration and coordinated effort

Individual schools cannot do this work alone and research shows that ongoing collaboration between the education and violence prevention sectors is crucial for the effectiveness of Respectful Relationships Education, whether at the school or education system level.²⁴ This may introduce sectors that have not worked together previously.

Allowing time for collaborative planning and preparation – to ensure readiness – is critical. Evidence strongly suggests that adequate pre-planning, resources and time is required ‘to set up the systems and structures that will enable the sustainability of initiatives and their adoption across the whole school culture’.²⁵ Literature highlights a number of key criteria and pre-planning that should be met before implementation of Respectful Relationships Education in a school, including²⁶:

- a commitment from the principal, school leadership and staff to the whole school approach
- adequate lead in, planning and preparation time
- an established process for responding to disclosures of violence and risks of safety by students and staff including for those who fall out of the scope of any mandatory reporting requirements²⁷
- consultation with local family violence and sexual assault response services in preparation for a potential increase of disclosures

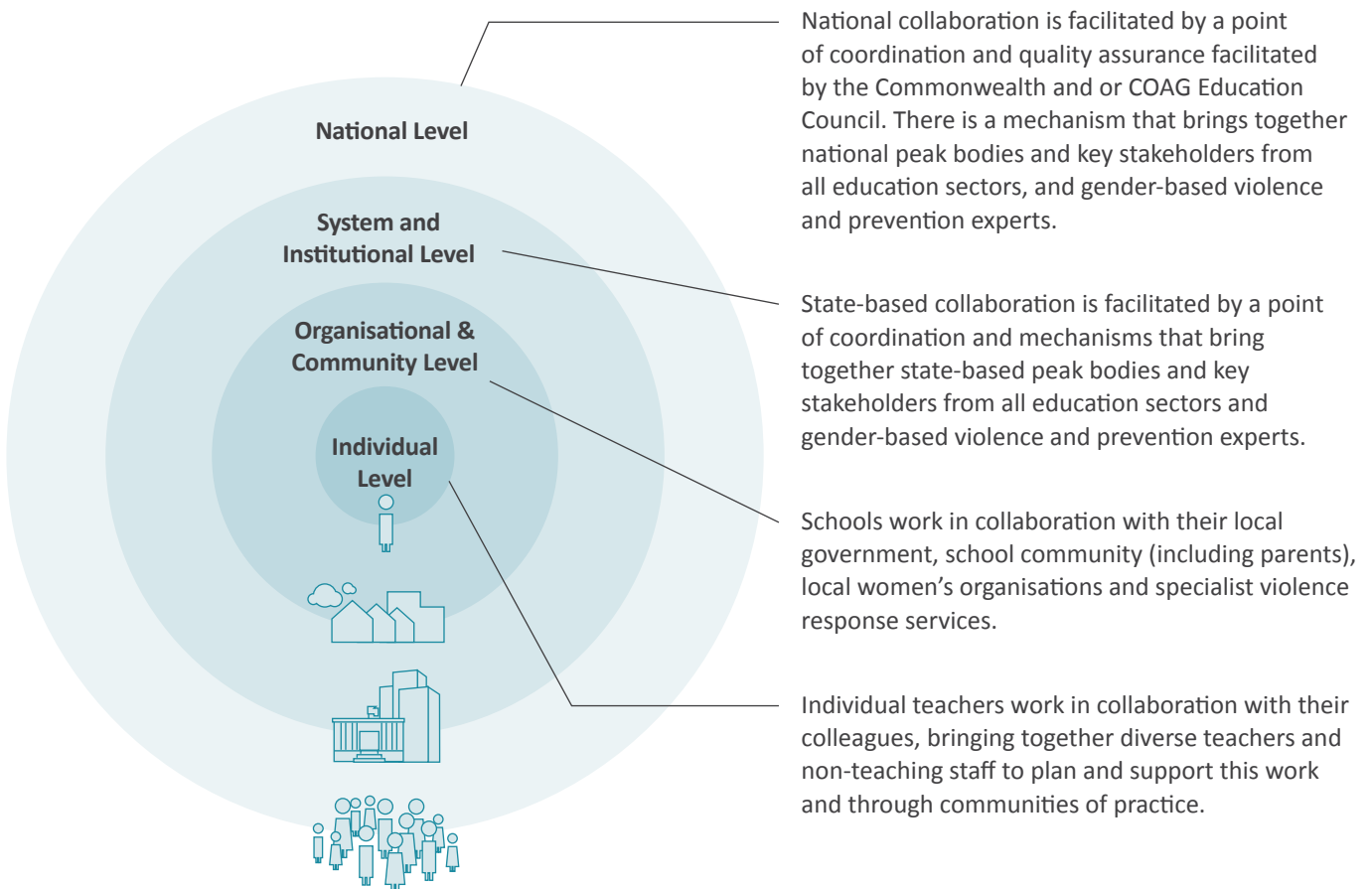
- extensive professional learning for teachers and non-teaching staff
- an appropriate and sustainable curriculum.

Establishing this type of readiness cannot be solely the responsibility of the individual school, and must be facilitated by Commonwealth and state-based government policy and funding that frames clear roles and responsibilities and mechanisms for collaboration.

Levels of collaboration

There are several levels of collaboration that need to be facilitated for large scale Respectful Relationships Education. In Figure 7 the levels of collaboration have been illustrated on the ecological model.

Figure 7: Ecological model of levels of collaboration



What this means for individual schools

School readiness is a key theme in the literature and highlights the need to ensure capacity, processes and policies are strengthened prior to commencement of this work to ensure that appropriate supports are provided to students and staff to avoid harm and promote sustainability. It is particularly important to consider school readiness given calls for this work to commence in relatively short timeframes. As the literature reviewed has demonstrated, this will be difficult in the absence of readily available evidence based approaches piloted in a wide range of Australian schools, long term funding commitments or professional learning strategies to support roll out.

The literature highlights the strength of approaches that are designed with dynamic sensitivity to local contexts.²⁸ Available evidence points to the need for a balance of systemic delivery and adaptability for specific communities, reinforcing the need for extensive consultation with educationalists and violence prevention experts.

5. Ensure integrated evaluation and continual improvement

Evaluation

While there is a growing body of evidence that Respectful Relationships Education is an effective form of primary prevention, the literature review indicates further evaluations are required to categorically demonstrate the most effective model for school-based violence prevention in the Australian context.²⁹

Although a large variety of violence prevention approaches are currently being funded and implemented in schools across the world, the vast majority are not assessed through structured evaluation and those that are evaluated often lack methodological rigour.³⁰ This presents policy makers and researchers with a number of opportunities to expand and improve on existing evaluations of Respectful Relationships Education, and to advance the international evidence base.

The majority of the literature reviewed for this evidence paper focused on impacts of Respectful Relationships Education on students, in particular student attitudes to violence and gender equity. While students are often seen as the primary audience for Respectful Relationships Education, the concept unites two key beneficiaries of this work: students and staff. A whole school approach highlights the importance of cultures and norms across the school community, yet staff, parents and local community organisations are usually excluded from evaluations.

For example, participants are rarely asked to reflect on how their school culture (within the classroom, staffroom, school yard and beyond) has evolved as a result of an evidence-based approach to Respectful Relationships Education. This is despite consistent recommendations from the Respectful Relationships Education literature that the school's 'social climate' is an important influence on the outcomes for children and young people.³¹

School-based initiatives do not exist in a vacuum and need to consider factors influencing the intervention, as well as less obvious factors touched by the intervention. A 'realist evaluation approach' can be used to describe the extenuating or mediating factors that influence the outcome of an intervention³² and may therefore be best suited to this form of intervention. A realist approach to evaluation is better suited to use by policy makers as it seeks to identify 'what works, in which circumstances, and for whom', rather than simply 'does it work?'

The literature provides clear guidelines for how evaluations should be conducted. Minimum standards for the evaluation of violence prevention interventions include:

- measure violence-related variables, that is, the proxy measures of change including changes to attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours
- use standardised measures (where possible) such as VicHealth's National Community Attitudes Survey
- use pre-test and post-test design, with baseline and post intervention data collection
- include behaviour change measures of perpetration and victimisation
- develop a dissemination plan, consulting with academics and service providers.³³

Theory of Change

An evidence informed theory of change provides a framework for incremental measurement and long-term data collection, maintaining momentum and informing policy changes as the evidence evolves. A coordinated data collection strategy, based on a robust theory of change, should be developed to minimise the burden placed on schools. For example, education departments could incorporate respectful relationships education data collection into existing school-based surveys such as the Attitudes to School survey.

Monitoring and tailoring for continual improvement

Evidence suggests that any school-based strategy, including school wide implementation of Respectful Relationships Education, should be continually reviewed and updated to ensure that it continues to reflect the needs, wants and practices of young people, their schools and

communities. As Respectful Relationships Education is implemented in varied contexts of community, education sectors and geographical locations, there is a great opportunity for ongoing action research (a process of continual reflection and improvement³⁴). This can clarify how the strategies and techniques are received, if it is successful and under what conditions, and what adaptations have been or will be necessary. Continual improvement mechanisms should minimise the burden on schools and take a user-centred (as opposed to ‘surveillance oriented’) approach.

The importance of follow up

A small number of international evaluations have proven the effectiveness of schools-based prevention approaches in reducing students’ future perpetration of violence.³⁵ Pivotal studies include Safe Steps and the Fourth R, however, there has so far been no equivalent longitudinal research in Australia. Longitudinal studies, which follow up participants beyond the implementation of an intervention, identify whether immediate benefits are maintained.³⁶ Data collection in the months following an intervention is necessary to clarify whether improved attitudes, knowledge or skills ‘rebound’ to their original state, are maintained, or worsen.³⁷ Longitudinal data also demonstrates the impacts of the approach on future perpetration and victimisation.

Investment in longitudinal follow up is crucial for providing definitive data on Respectful Relationships Education in Australian schools, and the longer-term return on investment that it can have for young people in their future relationships. Students’ exposure to multiple campaigns, approaches, techniques and other mediating factors should be considered. These factors can enhance or inhibit the immediate effects of an approach. Without such longitudinal data, it will remain impossible to categorically demonstrate the population level benefits that Respectful Relationships Education can have in Australia.

6. Provide resources and support for teachers

Delivering Respectful Relationships curriculum

Teachers’ consistent interactions and established relationships with students, their knowledge of student wellbeing, and their professional skills mean that they are well-placed to deliver the classroom-based elements of Respectful Relationships Education activity as part of a whole school approach. Well trained teachers can proactively address the drivers of gender-based violence through *all* their subjects enhancing the potential for cultural transformation.³⁸

Why invest in longitudinal Respectful Relationships Education evaluation?

It reveals:

- Changes in attitudes over longer term periods, assessing potential ‘rebound’ or ‘relapse’
- Changed behaviour, such as reduced risk of perpetration or victimisation
- The effect of individual participant characteristics (such as protective or risk factors)
- Factors most significantly associated with future perpetration or victimisation

Skilled external educators can at times provide advantages such as specialist knowledge of, and comfort with, the topic. This can relieve pressure on teachers to handle disclosures and potentially embarrassing material; and to link children and families living with violence with appropriate services. However equipping teachers to deliver Respectful Relationships Education curriculum and understand the whole school approach will have an impact on the wider school culture that is unlikely to be achieved or sustained by external educators alone.³⁹

There are three relatively small-scale qualitative studies in Australia that explore teachers' experiences in delivering relationships and sexuality education in schools.⁴⁰ These show teacher capability is supported by a high quality curriculum grounded in contemporary educational principles (see Core Element 7), professional learning with an analysis of gender and power, and ongoing support.⁴¹

Professional learning to support a whole school approach

Quality curriculum materials are a necessary prerequisite for effective Respectful Relationships Education, but cannot alone guarantee the success of the approach.⁴² A large-scale workforce capability package will be required to reach the 250,000 teachers across 9,500 schools in Australia. This is of particular importance for Health and Physical Education teachers who, under the content and achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum, need to meet learning outcomes specific to Respectful Relationships Education.

In the literature there are a variety of approaches for such a large scale capability-development package. Some evidence suggests this could be provided to new teachers in pre-service training,^{xii 43} however in-service training will also be required to reach the current existing workforce. To date, there is no evidence that online training is adequate to prepare teachers to deliver content on gender, violence, sex, sexuality and informed consent. Accreditation processes for the delivery of training may be an option, as used in child protection curriculum delivered in South Australia.⁴⁴

In line with the whole school approach, professional learning to support deeper understandings of gender, power and violence should not be limited to staff delivering Respectful Relationships Education curriculum. All teachers, regardless of their subject areas, should be supported to promote gender equality in teaching and interactions with students. Teachers need sufficient time to explore the in-depth notions of gender, power and violence required for respectful Relationships Education and to prepare for potentially challenging conversations with students and others on topics such as sexuality, violence and consent. A review conducted in New Zealand highlighted that:

^{xii}An example is the approach being undertaken in Victoria at Deakin University with Sexuality Education Matters. More information is available at <http://www.deakin.edu.au/education/about/disciplines/health-physical-education>

Most new learning requires teachers to view their existing practice in new ways and, as a consequence, make changes. Research has shown this is unlikely to happen without the ongoing, on-site support and challenge of an educator with greater expertise. Workshops or PLD [professional learning and development] packages on their own are unlikely to bring about change, except for highly motivated and already skilled teachers. With support, changes are more likely to be implemented as intended and sustained.⁴⁵

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Ongoing support

Teachers and school leaders will also require ongoing support from two key areas to continually improve in their delivery of Respectful Relationships Education: services that specialise in responding to gender-based violence⁴⁶ and services that specialise in gender equality and primary prevention. This is to ensure they are responding appropriately to students and staff who disclose the experience of, witnessing or perpetrating violence. The gender equality and primary prevention expertise is to ensure they have a continual 'sounding board' and technical resource to discuss challenges and barriers that emerge in this reflective work.

In Australia, ongoing support and expertise needs to be made available to schools either from within education departments, where specialised skills and capacity may need to be assured, or through the violence prevention sector resourced by education departments. Schools will also benefit from policy and procedure reviews that reflect and incorporate the new material. In addition, the central education department will need to coordinate and provide support for schools to incorporate Respectful Relationships Education into the way they operate, both as a workplace and education provider.

7. Use age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum

Respectful Relationships curriculum should be designed to allow for the representation of diverse views that mirror the varied backgrounds and experiences of students and teachers.⁴⁷ This includes diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, (dis)ability, and gender and sexual diversity. Using teachers, rather than external specialists, to deliver curriculum supports this aim, as their professional skills and familiarity with students will allow them to tailor content.

The literature states a sophisticated, contemporary, participatory, interactive pedagogy^{xiii} is essential for effective Respectful Relationships Education. Learning materials should address cognitive, affective and

^{xiii}Pedagogy is a term used to refer to the method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept.

behavioural domains, give attention to skills development and be matched to stages of behavioural development.⁴⁸ Curriculum needs to be age-appropriate and the exploration of key topics should align with the development stages of students. For example, at the point students are forming first relationships and exploring their sexuality, content might include discussion of respect, negotiation and informed consent. The literature also notes the voices of young people should be included in the development of curriculum, ensuring relevancy.⁴⁹

Evidence clearly demonstrates that one-off sessions are neither appropriate nor adequate for effective Respectful Relationships Education. While there is no consistent minimum exposure,⁵⁰ agreed across the evidence, there is consensus that greater 'dosage' and intensity has greater potential to generate behavioural change.⁵¹ While it may be possible to change certain behaviours with a brief session or program, research suggests the complexity of gender-based violence requires a significant number of sessions to change behaviour and have lasting effects.⁵² In 2009, Australian research recommended at least five classroom length or similar sessions (i.e. 45 minutes). Since then, longer approaches have been piloted and developed in Australia. It is important to note the two approaches, Safe Dates and the Fourth R, that have been shown longitudinal impact on behaviour, had 10 and 21 sessions respectively.

The literature shows mixed evidence of sex-segregated classes as a teaching strategy. However given there are all boys' and all girls' schools in Australia, curriculum that can be tailored for single sex settings should be considered.

Practical and financial constraints require a balancing of duration, with the need for long-term sustainability and scalability, to ensure approaches are effective and produce lasting change.⁵³ However, with state or nationwide implementation and integration into the Australian Curriculum there will be economies of scale in comparison to the delivery of isolated approaches.



9 Conclusion



Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have collectively recognised violence against women and their children as a significant issue requiring collaborative national action. The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2020 emphasises the need for prevention activity across numerous settings if we are going to ‘turn off the tap’ of violence and reduce its significant social, health and economic burden on our society. Commitments, through the First and Second Action Plans, to the inclusion of respectful relationships content in the Australian Curriculum have been honoured, and the challenge now is to ensure its effective implementation.

In addition to the significant and positive educational outcomes to be gained through good quality Respectful Relationships Education,⁵⁴ it is essential if we are – collectively – to achieve the results expected from the National Plan in achieving a ‘significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children.’ Without the next generation of children and young people having the skills to recognise and reject violence, and build healthy, respectful relationships, no amount of investment in reducing violence against women and their children can be sustainable.

The seven Core Elements outlined here reflect the most current international evidence on an effective approach to building student skills and creating school cultures that promote respectful relationships and challenge violence, discrimination and stereotyping. Such an effort is well worth it – building individual capacities that can break cycles of violence, and generating educational outcomes that uphold our common purpose of building an inclusive, egalitarian and peaceful society.

Figure 8: Checklist for Respectful Relationships Education in the Australian Education System

Level	Methods and resources
 <p>Individual teachers, students and parents Classroom</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide age-appropriate curriculum guidance for all year levels covering an appropriate number of classroom sessions (e.g. weekly classes for one term at each year level) ✓ Include gender equality and power analysis in other subjects and learning areas ✓ Ensure all teachers, in particular teachers of Respectful Relationships Education, receive professional learning, potentially accredited ✓ Provide ongoing support for teachers and schools to respond effectively and appropriately
School culture and the school as a workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Aim to make the school a gender equality best practice workplace. ✓ Ensure leadership is educated and engaged to model gender equality and respectful relationships.
Level	Methods and resources
 <p>Schools and their communities Schools as a community hub</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Support collaboration with parents/carers ✓ Ensure response services are appropriately resourced, recognising that there will be a general increase in demand for services ✓ Fund and coordinate violence prevention and women's organisations to support schools and teachers in primary prevention of gender-based violence and to promote gender equality ✓ Work with wider community, such as local government, sporting clubs, local workplaces and other community organisations, to reinforce messaging

Level	Methods and resources
 <p>State and national policy and legislation State level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Prioritise Respectful Relationships Education in state and territory plans to reduce violence against women and their children, and in gender equality strategies ✓ Ensure state departments of education recognise the role of schools in preventing gender-based violence, with ongoing funding, coordination and a professional learning strategy ✓ Ensure the Catholic Education Office and independent school authorities recognise the role of their schools in preventing gender-based violence ✓ Employ gender and violence prevention expertise in state departments of education, including in regional offices ✓ Ensure state funding supports the development and continual implementation of Respectful Relationships Education ✓ Ensure the state government centrally coordinates and quality assures the delivery of Respectful Relationships Education and professional learning to support its delivery
National level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Include evidence-based Respectful Relationships Education in Australian Curriculum guidance and support across Health and Physical Education and in other subjects and learning areas ✓ Prioritise good practice delivery of Respectful Relationships Education in subsequent action plans under the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children ✓ Establish and resource a mechanism to continually improve the delivery of Respectful Relationships Education across all states and jurisdictions
Level	Methods and resources
 <p>Civil Society advocacy Societal level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Work to raise community awareness of, understanding of, and support for Respectful Relationships Education in schools ✓ Promote community attitudes and norms of gender equality in public and private life ✓ Advocate for social change to support equality and respect, and the role of the Australian education system in achieving this

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11 Appendix: A timeline of selected Respectful Relationships Education developments in Australia^{xiv}

2000
– 2005

A number of programs are developed by community organisations, delivered in schools by external facilitators, of varying quality according to current good practice standards. Notable examples include:

- LoveBites (NAPCAN, initially NSW)
- Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools (CASA House, Victoria)
- Sex and Ethics program (University of Western Sydney and NSW Rape Crisis, NSW)
- Solving the Jigsaw (EASE, Victoria)

... and many others^{xv}

2005
– 2010

Early models for curriculum-integrated violence prevention are developed and trailed, including:

- Sexual Health and Relationships Education program (South Australia)
- Kids Relate (NSW)
- And for building capacity of school leadership to take whole-school approaches to embedding respectful relationships:
- Breaking the Silence Schools (White Ribbon)

2009

National and Victorian research establishes criteria for good practice:

- Framing Best Practice: National standards for the primary prevention of sexual assault through education (National Association of Services against Sexual Violence, 2009)
- Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships in Victorian secondary schools (Flood, Fergus and Heenan, 2009)
- Increased funding for pilots announced through the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022:
- Australian Government commits \$9 million over five years for Respectful Relationships programs

^{xiv}NB – this is an indicative and non-comprehensive list

^{xv}No comprehensive national survey of Respectful Relationships Education approaches has been undertaken, but for a Victorian review see Flood, Fergus and Heenan (2009).

2010

Increased interest in moving from externally-delivered programs to systemic and embedded approaches:

- Review of the Australian Curriculum resulting in the inclusion of elements supporting Respectful Relationships Education in the health and Physical Education stream
- State/Territory announcements ([see page 11](#))
- Victorian pilot of Department of Education-supported Respectful Relationships Education in Schools across 19 schools (with associated curriculum guidance for years 8-9, professional development and support from community organisations and regional offices).

Present

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013)
2 Cox (2015)
3 COAG (2010)
4 Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth (2015)
5 Our Watch, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth (2015)
6 Ibid.
7 Flood & Fergus (2010); Harris et al. (2015)
8 Flood & Fergus (2010); Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
9 Flood, Fergus and Heenan (2009); Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2007); Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth (2015)
10 Powell & Sandy (2015)
11 Workplace Gender Equity Agency (2014)
12 Ibid.
13 Ollis (2011); Stanley et al. (2015)
14 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Stanley et al. (2015)
15 Ellsberg et al. (2015)
16 Flood (2014); Ellsberg et al. (2015); Tasker (2013); Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Fellmeth et al. (2013)

- 17 Michau, Horn, Bank, Dutt & Zimmerman (2014)
- 18 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2015); Flood (2014), Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 19 Mangham & Hanson (2010), p 87.
- 20 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009). See also: Ellis (2008); Tutty (2002)
- 21 Ibid.; Fulu & Kerr-Wilson (2014); Tasker (2013); Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014)
- 22 Stanley et al. (2015); Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014); Tasker (2013)
- 23 Department of Education and Early Childhood (2014)
- 24 Stanley et al. (2015)
- 25 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Stanley et al. (2015)
- 29 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Fellmeth et al. (2013)
- 30 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Flood (2014); Fellmeth et al. (2013); Stanley et al. (2015)
- 31 New Zealand Ministry of Education (2015)
- 32 Wong, Greenhalgh, Westhorp & Pawson (2012)
- 33 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009); Flood & Kendrick (2012)
- 34 Levin (2012)
- 35 Foshee et al. (2004); Foshee et al. (2005); Wolfe et al. (2009)
- 36 Flood (2014)
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Fulu & Kerr-Wilson (2014)
- 39 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 40 Johnson, Sendall & McCuaig (2014); Ollis (2013); Ollis (2014); Milton (2003)
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ellis (2008)
- 43 Stanley et al. (2015)
- 44 Walsh et al. (2013)
- 45 Tasker (2013), p. 21
- 46 Stanley et al. (2015); Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 47 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Stanley et al. (2015)
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 52 DeGue et al. (2014)
- 53 DeGue et al. (2014); Flood (2005-2006) referenced in Flood, Fergus & Heenan (2009)
- 54 Dyson, S, Barrett, C and Platt, M (2009)

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