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SCHOOL-BASED EDUCATION FOR LONG-TERM PREVENTION

High-quality sexuality and relationships education is crucial to development of healthy attitudes around gender and to preventing family violence in the long-term.

The ASXP recommends that the Victorian Government implement a new Sexuality and Relationships curriculum in Victorian schools that is *comprehensive, compulsory* and *universal*.

Comprehensive: The curriculum is based on the findings of *Respectful relationships education* (2009) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD) current Sexuality Education curriculum.

Compulsory: The curriculum should be a core and stand-alone component of primary and secondary school education, from Prep-Year 10.

Universal: The curriculum should be adopted by *all* primary and secondary schools, whether public or independent.

Rationale

By now, we are all familiar with the findings contained in the VicHealth report, *Australians' attitudes to violence against women* (VicHealth, 2014). It found that 1 in 5 people believe a woman is at least partly responsible for being raped if she was affected by alcohol or drugs. It also found that between 9% and 22% of people believe domestic violence is excusable under certain conditions (e.g., if the offender regrets their actions, was under a lot of stress at the time or was, themselves, a victim of child abuse).

One of the groups most likely to hold these beliefs is young people aged 16-25, especially young men. The prevalence of these violence-supportive beliefs tells us our current education around sexuality and respectful relationships is not adequate. This may be a result of the artificial demarcation in Victorian school curricula between sexuality education and respectful relationships education.

In 2009, the DEECD published *Respectful relationships education*, a report on the use and effectiveness of violence prevention programs in Victorian schools. The report provides comprehensive guidelines for implementing effective school-based violence prevention programs.

The 2013 editions of *Catching on* and *Catching on later* (DEECD) document the Sexuality Education curricula for Victorian government primary and secondary schools, respectively. Respectful relationships are not included in these curricula. At the Year 9-10 level, 'power, violence, rape and sexual abuse' are noted as 'controversial topics' for discussion, but not as core learning areas. Also at the Year 9-10 level, it is suggested that the learning sequence about 'pressure, power and sexuality provides an excellent grounding to explore issues of gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and assault, family and domestic violence, homophobia and issues related to pornography' (p. 193), however no curricula on these topics is provided.

Sexuality and respectful relationships are treated as quite separate issues in Victorian school curricula. This does not reflect the reality of family violence where 1 in 6 women have experienced sexual or physical violence from a current or ex-partner and 1 in 4 have experienced emotional abuse from a current or ex-partner (Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, n.d.). We would like to see a **comprehensive** curriculum

developed that brings together the findings of *Respectful relationships education* (2009) and the current Victorian Sexuality Education curriculum. The curriculum should:

- ▶ Teach students about respectful relationships, whether romantic, familial or social;
- ▶ Teach students to recognise abusive relationships and respond in a respectful and safe manner;
- ▶ Explore the nature of both online and offline relationships;
- ▶ Include discussion of safety, pleasure, decision-making and the emotional aspects of sex and sexuality;
- ▶ Help students understand and value the various kinds of attraction, friendship and relationships a person can experience;
- ▶ Ensure students understand the centrality of consent in any legal, respectful sexual activity;
- ▶ Celebrate the natural diversity of sex, sexuality and gender expression; and
- ▶ Promote awareness and intolerance of: shaming, homophobia, discrimination, harassment, coercion and bullying around issues of sex, sexuality and gender expression.

We strongly feel that this new Sexuality and Relationships curriculum should be **compulsory** from Prep to Year 10 and delivered as a stand-alone component of the broader curriculum in the same way that maths and English are. Embedding this content among several learning domains (as is the current practice) means students have to piece together the parts of the curriculum themselves. This reduces the educational impact on students and undermines the importance and seriousness of the topics covered.

Respectful relationships content should first be delivered in the early years (Prep-Year 2) of the program when attitudes around family, gender and difference are forming. It is vital that we use this brief window to establish the foundations of healthy, respectful interactions before harmful attitudes and gender stereotypes become set. Leaving discussion of family violence until the final years of compulsory schooling will be too late for many children.

Perhaps most importantly, the new Sexuality and Relationships curriculum must be **universal**. We would like to see the curriculum made compulsory for *all* schools, whether government or independent. Legal concepts around family violence are universal to all Victorians and independent of personally held beliefs, values and attitudes. The new Sexuality and Relationships curriculum should accommodate the specific needs and sensitivities of different ethnic, cultural and faith communities, however, the quality and comprehensiveness of the program should not be compromised as a result. We do women and children a great disservice when we provide only *some* of our students with a factual, evidence-based and comprehensive respectful relationships education.

Benefit to the community

At present, respectful relationships education is offered in the NMR by community and local government agencies, for example, Project Awareness in the City of Hume and the CALD Communities Family Violence Project in the City of Whittlesea. Funding for these programs is for fixed periods and is not guaranteed into the future. Relying on community and local government agencies to undertake this important work is expensive and inefficient. A comprehensive, compulsory and universal school-based Sexuality and Relationships curriculum would relieve the community and local government of this educational burden meaning their very limited resources could be directed toward identifying and supporting victims of family violence.

As the authors of the VicHealth report (2014) advise, 'we need to focus our efforts on the younger generation to teach them how to nurture equal, caring, respectful partnerships

throughout their lives' (p. 2). School-based education is one part of the solution to this complex problem, and one in which Victoria is well-positioned to lead the way.

The ASXP Victorian Education Policy can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/pdx9a3q>

SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

Implementing a best-practice funding model

We commend the efforts of the many community, local government and state agencies who serve the victims of family violence. In the NMR, family violence referrals have tripled since 2010 with no attendant increase in government resources. The region's need for family violence services is expected to increase into the future as the NMR takes in parts of two geographically large 'growth councils,' Hume and Whittlesea.

The family violence system for the NMR is critically under-resourced. For example, one organisation, Berry St Northern Region Family Violence Service, provide family violence services to the entire region. Research by Northern Integrated Family Violence Services (Women's Health in the North [WHIN], 2014) reveals that most of the family violence services delivered in this region are 'crisis responses' which address the immediate needs of victims, but not the long-term issues that have victims repeatedly returning to violent relationships.

We endorse the WHIN campaign 'Fund the family violence system: Save money, save lives' (2014) which calls for a shift from inefficient crisis responding to a best-practice model that supports affected women and children to break out of the cycle of re-entering violent relationships. A best practice model would almost halve the cost of the family violence system and greatly improve outcomes for affected women and children.

Transgender victims and offenders

It is agreed that family violence is a gendered phenomenon with the vast majority of incidents involving men using violence against women. What is less clear is the rate of family violence involving transgender women and men and how transgender individuals are accommodated in the, understandably, heterocentric and cisgendered family violence system.

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria ([n.d.](#)) has made strides in raising awareness of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships, however, little is known about the experiences of transgender victims and offenders. For example:

- ▶ Do trans women experience unique barriers to accessing family violence services (e.g., emergency accommodation, material aid, police support)?
- ▶ Do trans men experience unique barriers to accessing men's behaviour change programs?
- ▶ Are there family violence issues that are unique to the transgender community?

A specific concern in the NMR is counselling ordered by the Heidelberg Family Violence Court. This counselling 'is only available to men where the affected family member is female, and is a domestic partner, former domestic partner, intimate partner or former intimate partner of the respondent' (Court Directed Counselling, n.d.). Would a trans man be eligible for this valuable service in the Court's eyes?

Transgender victims and offenders are effectively invisible in the present family violence system. We urge the Victorian Government to direct resources toward research and support services for the transgender community.

The ASXP Victorian Equality & Reproductive Rights Policy can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/nur95xx>

PERPETRATOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The ASXP advocates for approaches to perpetrator accountability that prevent further trauma for victims and increase the potential for rehabilitation for offenders. We specifically advocate for alternatives to the adversarial system in which:

- ▶ victims' experiences are acknowledged;
- ▶ offenders take responsibility for their actions; and
- ▶ the likelihood of recidivism is reduced.

The ASXP strongly opposes victim-blaming in any form.

We applaud the therapeutic framework adopted by the Family Violence Court Division and are grateful to have the Heidelberg Family Violence Court servicing parts of the NMR.

NMR includes local government areas with some of the highest family violence rates in the state, namely, the Cities of Hume and Whittlesea. Because of geographically-targeted servicing, these two areas are excluded from accessing the offender rehabilitation programs that can be ordered by the Heidelberg Family Violence Court. This means that residents of some NMR municipalities have unequal access to the family violence system. Differential access to important services can only reduce the public's confidence in these services.

We call for the Victorian Government to add to the gazetted postcodes for court ordered counselling and men's behaviour change programs to include the Cities of Hume and Whittlesea.

At present, Family Violence Court-ordered counselling is only available to men who have offended against women. While we understand:

- ▶ that family violence is gendered;
- ▶ there are very limited family violence resources available; and
- ▶ priority should be given to cases where the victim is female and the offender is male,

we hope that the experiences and needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer individuals remain on the research and service provision agenda.

Finally, to reduce inequality in access to family violence services, we ask that the powers of the Specialist Family Violence Services (as compared to the Family Violence Court Division) be extended to include the hearing of other proceedings relating to the parties involved in an intervention order application, and the directing of respondents for counselling.

The ASXP Victorian Domestic and Sexual Violence Policy can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/oc7j8xo>

The ASXP Victorian Criminal Justice Policy can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/pfhjrrs>

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