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Questions on Notice

**INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE**





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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

It is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth service sector.
2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy to shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services.
3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers.
4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services.
5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them.
6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services.
7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.

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Questions on Notice

In your testimony you referenced a Victorian education model on gender equality and respectful relationships. Can you please provide us a copy of this model, or if one is unavailable, further information about the model?

In Victoria, OurWatch is currently piloting a new approach to respectful relationship education in secondary schools through a whole school approach. The model is based on strong evidence from international programs and the trial is currently being evaluated.

This model has most recently received the endorsement of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The Royal Commission into Family Violence has handed down recommendations to the Victorian Government, including “Mandate the introduction of respectful relationships education into every government school in Victoria from prep to year 12. It should be delivered through a whole-of-school approach and be consistent with best practice, building on the evidence of the model being tested by the Department of Education and Training through Our Watch.”¹

Youth Action recommends that the NSW government undertake a pilot of a whole school approach in NSW, as it is the strongest evidenced model for prevention. The proposed pilot would not only support approximately 30 schools but generate a NSW specific evidence base.

We note that schools are an effective institute for primary prevention work, but we also need to consider how we equip the youth sector to do this work for those who are outside of the formal education system.

¹ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, Royal Commission Into Family Violence - Landmark Report Will Improve The System. 2016. Web. 12 May 2016.

This model is based on a range of evidence both nationally and internationally, which is outlined below.

Gender inequality is of serious concern in Australia. Violence against women and girls is prevalent, and is primarily driven by gender inequality - further exacerbated by numerous other factors.²

Violence against women and girls is preventable, and young people provide NSW with an unprecedented opportunity to effect large-scale generational change. Young people provide significant opportunity to prevent and break cycles of gender inequality, due to qualities relating to their stage of life. Throughout adolescence and early adulthood young people are beginning to form ideas, beliefs, and an understanding of relationships, and therefore behaviours in intimate relationships.³ For this reason, this stage in the life cycle provides one of the strongest prospects to counter the 'factors' that are associated with gender inequality. This is a finding that is supported over three decades of youth specific violence prevention research and programs: violence prevention education for young people works.⁴

² See, for example, European Commission (2010) Factors at play in the perpetration of violence against women, violence against children and sexual orientation violence: A multi-level interactive model; World Health Organisation (2010) Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence; UN Partners for Prevention (2013) Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific; VicHealth (2007) Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria;

³ M Sety, op.cit., p. 4

⁴ M Flood, L Fergus, & M Heenan, 'Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian secondary schools', Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, 2009, accessed via <http://www.xyonline.net/sites/default/files/Flood,%20Respectful%20relationships%20education%2009.pdf>

A review of interventions found that school-based programs have the strongest evidence of effectiveness, a finding that has more recently been shown in a recent systematic review of approaches to prevent violence against women in girls.⁵ Moreover prevention approaches in schools can reach the intended recipients relatively efficiently and cost-effectively.⁶

Internationally, there are evaluated programs that have shown the potential for prevention in schools, as outlined by the following two case studies, sourced directly from Our Watch:⁷

⁵ VicHealth, op.cit., p. 18; M Ellsberg, D.J Arango, M Morton, F Gennari, S Kiplesund, M Contreras, & C Watts, 'Prevention of violence against women and girls: What does the evidence say?', *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 2015, pp. 1555- 1566, accessed via [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)61703-7/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)61703-7/fulltext)

⁶ M Flood, L Fergus, & M Heenan, op.cit.

⁷ Our Watch, 'Submission to Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence: Part One', op.cit.

Example A – Safe Dates

Safe Dates is a US school-based program involving a 10-session curriculum for years 8 and 9. It aims to increase students' knowledge about what constitutes a healthy or violent dating relationship, the causes and consequences of violence; to equip them with effective communication and conflict resolution skills; and to provide them with the tools they need to help a friend who may be experiencing violence in a relationship. It also involves parents and carers by providing resources about the topics covered in Safe Dates to encourage discussion at home.

It is one of the longest running initiatives whose effectiveness is being tested through a randomized controlled longitudinal evaluation. Four years after implementation, those students who had participated in Safe Dates reported 56 to 92 percent less physical, serious physical, and sexual dating violence victimisation and perpetration than students who did not. That is, the program has proven highly effective – on the most rigorous evaluation techniques available – in the primary prevention of violence against women.

Example B - The Fourth R

The Fourth R is a Grade 9 Physical and Health Education program in Canada, including a 21-lesson curriculum delivered over 28 hours by teachers with additional training in the dynamics of dating violence and healthy relationships. It was evaluated with a cluster randomised controlled trial design with a 2.5 year follow up with 1,722 students aged 14 to 15 years. Control schools targeted similar objectives without the training or materials.

Results indicated that physical dating violence was about 2.5 times greater among control versus intervention students. That is, teaching young people about healthy relationships skills as part of their required health curriculum reduced their future perpetration or victimisation of physical dating violence when measured against a group that didn't participate in the program, two and half years later.

Many schools across Australia have introduced respectful relationships programs to educate young people about violence including domestic and dating violence as well as sexual abuse and harassment. However, there is research to suggest that one-off programs of this nature are insufficient and ineffective, and in some cases, especially when done so through personal-development subjects.⁸ So while we have aspects of healthy and/or respectful relationships in place, there are likely missing aspects that could make such interventions effective.

⁸ M Mills, 'Issues in implementing boys' programme in schools: Male teachers and empowerment', *Gender and Education*, vol.12, no.2, 2000, pp. 221-238

What has emerged in response to an international evidence base is the 'whole of school' approach to implementing Respectful Relationships Education. Respectful Relationships Education is defined as:

[T]he holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence. [Respectful Relationships Education] 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.

While there is some confusion between existing initiatives, such as NSW inclusion of DFV into the PDHPE syllabus, Our Watch reaffirms the difference:⁹

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. 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.

'The single most important criterion for best practice in Respectful Relationships Education is the adoption of a whole school approach'.¹⁰

⁹ Our Watch, 'Respectful Relations: Education in Schools', *Evidence Paper*, December 2015, accessed via <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/4a61e08b-c958-40bc-8e02-30fde5f66a25/Evidence-paper-respectful-relationships-education-AA-updated.pdf.aspx>

¹⁰ Our Watch, 'Respectful Relations: Education in Schools', op.cit.

Supplementary Questions

In your evidence, you mentioned that with the advent of the internet, we now need more up-to-date research on what is age-appropriate educational information for young people. Are there any other focuses for research that will better inform how we educate young people in the realm of new technology?

What was clear throughout both written and verbal submissions to the inquiry, is the lack of evidence currently. Firstly, Youth Action recommends that young people are included in determining research focus and agenda.

In reference to some aspects of sexualisation, and the supplementary question regarding education and new technology, NSW would benefit from research similar to national research on sexual health. The National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health has been conducted every five years throughout Australia since 1992, and has comprehensive coverage of issues, and generally surveys around 2000 young people across Australia. There is little information to suggest young peoples involvement in the development or inclusion of questions, which may be a fault in the design of the survey if it isn't asking the questions young people need to answer. There is no evidence to suggest that young people are included in the implementation of survey findings on curriculum development in NSW and design as a result of the survey findings. The survey is also conducted every 5 years, however the rate of technology change would quickly outpace this timeframe. There is a need for research and information that engages young people and their perspective, that is contextualised for the reality of their experiences including use and experience of technology, keeping pace with technology use, and that informs NSW's approach to education. Young people should be included throughout the design of questions and changes to curriculum or programs. There is extensive evidence on the effectiveness of peer-to-peer programs and therefore we would

recommend that young people both design and deliver programs based on research. A number of issues must be examined, which at a minimum should cover:

- Young people's sexual activity, experiences and behaviour
- Young peoples use of online technology
- Young peoples experience of sex education and access to relevant and engaging information
- the impact of sexual education and information on young people and whether it is achieving its stated aims and outcomes

This needs to be underpinned by a broader research agenda that provides evidence for decision making regarding sexualisation including a definition, and a sensitive research agenda that targets some of the gaps in the knowledge base, such as sexting, use of and impact of pornography, etc.

In your submission and in the evidence you gave, you recommend that the NSW Government consult with young people to develop regulations that impact on their exposure to sexualising media that may affect them - what is your experience in working directly with children and young people? What concerns, if any, have they raised with you in regard to sexualisation?

Youth Action has 30 years of experience working with young people and the sector that supports them. We undertake consultation regularly on a range of issues. Young people have raised issues over time with Youth Action, the responses are not collated or focussed around questions specific to this inquiry, but have informed Youth Action's approach. The evidence submitted to then inquiry reflects our understanding of the youth evidence base and draws on research that has either

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consulted young people or place young people's experience at the centre of all inquires.

Youth Action also provides external agencies with our services from time to time to assist young people to have a voice in decisions that impact them. We have recently consulted with young people on a number of issues, including emerging and core issues, housing, and structure our consultations to avoid 'fatigue' or 'over-consultation'. Youth Action's structure enables consultation with young people who are 'hard to reach' due to our techniques and networks.

Should the committee wish to explore a particular component or issues uncovered in the inquiry, as it is important to have clear parameters, we would be happy to discuss engagement strategies or assist the committee to engage or consult young people. As recommended suggest the committee undertake to engage with young people before handing down its recommendations, and in implementation of recommendations.

Would you recommend an annual review of the State's sex education programs and materials? Why or why not?

Youth Action would support an annual review of sex education programs and materials in NSW. The context for young people, including technology use, can shift quickly, and an annual review would likely be more adept at capturing the reality and impacts of young people's context.

As sexual education programs and curricula vary across states, and indeed within states, a NSW specific annual review would give decision-makers a clear picture of the state of sexual health programs and information in NSW, including variances intra-state.

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An annual review would assist in developing an evidence base for sexual health and education programs and materials in NSW, and give a greater rate and relevance of feedback to decision makers. In particular, young peoples experiences of sexual education, and the impact of sexual health education in achieving stated aims would allow for speedy adjustments to ensure better outcomes.

The aim of the review should be targeted to achieve specific goals, and there should be an accountability mechanism and/or oversight to ensure that pitfalls, such as a 'review for the sake of review', is avoided.

In your submission you mention the 'right to information' and 'freedom of expression' for children and young people. How can these rights be balanced against the need to protect children and young people from potential harm?

This balance serves as a test or a standard against which decisions are made and implemented. It is a complex question that all governments, parent and communities deal with on an ongoing basis.

There is no hard and fast answer, but that the rights of the child is the foundation for decision making. Part of this is having the right information to contextualise and understand the realities of young people. Part of this is about taking steps towards improving young peoples access to information, and freedom of expression, termed progressive realisation. Again concepts of a persons developing capacity is considered, and testing decisions and assumptions against the lived experience and expertise of young people, especially when there are indications that something is not working.

Once example is pornography. If evidence demonstrates that young people are accessing pornography at a younger age, then the response must be balanced in terms of addressing harm, with other child rights. Such an approach might be

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identifying context has changed, that young people have access to harmful content and steps should be taken to both reduce access to pornography, while improving education and information that progressively gives them the knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe, so that by the time they are of an age at which research suggests they would have more contact with pornography its impacts are lessened.

This might be in contrast to attempts to, for example, blanket filters that may over-filter and reduce access to beneficial information.

NSW is already doing a mixture of this to an extent. We provide information in schools to children and young people about their physical and sexual health, while providing legislation and enforcing legislation to protect young people. However this needs to be relevant to the current context of young people, and steps taken to progressively improve error or out of date information and concepts.