

Saying 'no' to violence

Schools are playing a vital role in a national campaign against physical and sexual violence.

Report by **Carolyn Rance**

Briefly

- The Respectful Relationships program will help educate young people on ethical relationships.
- It falls under the \$41.5 million initiative to reduce domestic and sexual assaults.
- Each year violence against women is estimated to cost the Australian economy more than \$13 billion.

Studies indicate that almost one in three women experience physical violence at some time in their lives and one in five are subjected to sexual assault—usually by someone they know and often by someone they love.

Anti-bullying programs already aim to counter the verbal and physical harassment that stems from a powerful undercurrent of aggression in Australian culture.

Now schools are being asked to do more. The Rudd government's \$9.1 million Respectful Relationships program—part of a \$41.5 million initiative to reduce domestic and sexual assaults—is funding programs in schools, sports clubs and community

organisations. They are designed to educate young people about how to form ethical relationships and avoid becoming either perpetrators or victims of violence.

"There are many causes of violence against women, but there is one main cause and that is the attitude of men," Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said at the program launch last year.

Making significant progress requires a dramatic cultural shift, says Associate Professor Moira Carmody, a member of the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, who helped develop national standards for the primary prevention of sexual assault through education.

Carmody describes sexual assault as ingrained in Australian culture. It is vital to teach boys from an early age that violence is completely unacceptable, she says.

To make an impact, programs need to be firmly based on research and international best practice: "A lot of groups say they are doing violence prevention but they are really just doing awareness raising. This is not enough to prevent assault and violence.

"The federal government is attempting to address violence against women as a national priority and I'd like to see

all states make a commitment and provide more funding for primary prevention, over-stretched victim services and offender programs."

Negotiating respect

Several programs are already under way aiming to strengthen the capacity of teenagers to negotiate respectful relationships and understand and prevent sexual assault.

In the ACT, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre is running a sexual assault prevention program used in some Victorian schools. Northern Territory teachers are being trained to use the Keeping Safe child protection curriculum used in South Australian public schools. The University of Western Sydney, where Carmody is an associate professor in the Centre for Educational Research, runs a sex and ethics program with groups of young people in New South Wales.

In March, Tanya Plibersek, Minister for the Status of Women, announced 10 new programs including respectful relationships training for West Australian educators and students and a domestic and family violence prevention program to be run in New South Wales schools.

Gender and power

Issues of gender and power are at the heart of much of the violence directed against women, says Amanda Keddie, a research fellow at Griffith University in Queensland and co-author with University of Queensland academic *Martin Mills of Teaching Boys: Developing classroom practices that work.*

The book looks at how boys and girls construct their gender identity from a young age. (*continues page 30*)

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Amanda Keddie

Research fellow, Griffith University, QLD



Gai Beecher
principal,
Campbell High School,
ACT.

STEVE KEOUGH

Open doors

When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd launched the federal government's Respectful Relationships program last year, the audience included students and staff from Campbell High School in the ACT.

"Later, when schools were approached to see who would be interested in piloting a program, we put up our hands," says school principal, Gai Beecher.

Eighty Year 10 students have completed the Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools developed by Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA House) and presented by workers from the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre.

Beecher, who admits the statistics on domestic and sexual violence in Australia shocked her, says splitting the students into male and female groups facilitated open discussion.

"Students clearly enjoyed the program," she says, "and my staff say that by the time it ended everyone felt these were things that should and could be talked

about and not kept behind closed doors."

More students will undertake the program as part of the health and physical education curriculum later this year.

Indications are that the program has been changing attitudes among secondary students. "After the program there was a 27 per cent rise in understanding among young men and a 41 per cent rise among young women that someone cannot freely consent to sex if they are drunk or stoned," says Canberra Rape Crisis Centre executive officer Veronica Wensing. "There was a significant rise in understanding that making jokes about someone's sexuality is against the law and a 20 per cent rise in young women's understanding that if someone is forced to have sex in a relationship it counts as sexual assault."

Wensing, who applauds Campbell High's whole-of-school approach to the program, says Year 10 students are an ideal target: "It's where you have the largest captive audience of 14 to 16-year-olds. It is the age when people are trying

to figure out how to become sexual, so it's the time to be talking to them about consent and sexual assault issues."

All teachers at Campbell High did an intensive day of professional development and preparation before the program began. The teachers themselves decided who would do training to run the program. Eventually senior students will also be trained so the program can become self-sustaining.

Wensing says it is vital to ensure educators are comfortable with the material.

"We covered the prevalence and nature of sexual assault and how to respond to disclosure. Because of the prevalence, it is inevitable that every teacher in this country will have had a survivor in their classroom and programs often lead to disclosure."

Links between schools and sexual assault centres are valuable, she says. "The kids get to know us and know they can talk to us. Teachers know that if programs lead to disclosures we are there to pick up the pieces." ●

Respectful relationships



It offers educators positive teaching models that challenge stereotypes through critical approaches to literature and media, concepts of social justice and an examination of different models of masculinity and femininity.

Keddie believes schools should question whether the structures of authority they model reinscribe dominant constructions of masculinity and hierarchy: “Men are often in charge of discipline and behaviour issues and male-dominated subjects and sports are highly valued. Boys are allowed to dominate space in some classrooms and playgrounds. Research suggests that outcomes for boys and girls will be enhanced if differentiation based on gender is challenged.”

Keddie also urges young women to consider the risks of embracing the highly sexualised interpretations of femininity implied through sexualised discourses on social networking sites:

“Taking on these identities actually lessens their power. We need to celebrate multiple forms of femininity and masculinity but we also need to look at which identities offer young people agency and power.”

The South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services’ Keeping Safe program is an integral part of curriculum. Themes run across all levels of learning in government schools, either as part of health and physical education or English, society and environment programs.

Young children are encouraged to use the concept of fairness to explore the right to be safe and the responsibility to keep themselves and others safe. Older students consider safety in the context of dating and alcohol use.

“All the themes are designed to be age and developmentally appropriate. We certainly don’t aim to frighten children and parents but to give children and

young people strategies that they can apply. It is important that programs like these are embedded in curriculum. If they are run as add-ons there is a risk that they will be dropped off when other things become a priority,” says a DECS representative. ●

Carolyn Rance is a freelance writer.

Violence costs

Violence against women is estimated to cost the Australian economy more than \$13 billion a year, according to a study by the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

Research indicates that intimate partner violence is responsible for more ill health and premature death among Victorian women aged under 45 than any of the better known risks, including high blood pressure, obesity and smoking.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics personal safety survey in 2005 indicated that one in five women and one in 20 men experienced sexual violence after the age of 15.

One in four young people was aware of, or had witnessed, domestic violence against their mothers or stepmothers, according to the Assault on our Future report compiled for the White Ribbon Foundation in 2008.

The National Crime Prevention Survey in 2001 found that one in seven teenage boys thought it was acceptable to make a girl have sex with them if she had flirted with them.

Physical assault is the most commonly reported crime against children. ABS figures from 2004 showed that 41 per cent of reported sexual assault victims were aged under 14.

Experts say assaults on women, men and children are grossly under-reported to police and only a small proportion ever face justice.