Respectful relationships and violence education in NSW government schools

Assisting children and young people to develop understandings and skills for establishing non-coercive and respectful relationships is an integral component of addressing violence within communities. Part of this is the development of students’ attitudes and behaviours that are based on equity, respect and responsibility.

Purpose of the document

This document includes information on:

- the importance of respectful relationships and violence education
- policy and legislation relevant to respectful relationships and violence education in NSW government schools
- best practice principles for teaching and learning in respectful relationships and violence education
- references and resources for teachers and principals.

Respectful relationships are characterised by non-violence, equality, mutual respect and trust. A focus on fostering respectful relationships among children and young people can result in lasting effects on their relationships now and in the future.

Violence includes domestic and family violence, relationship violence, assault, sexual assault, rape, under age or forced marriage, trafficking or coercion, harmful traditional or cultural practices including female genital mutilation or honour killings.

This document will focus on curriculum delivery within the framework of safe and supportive learning environments.

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The importance of respectful relationships and violence education

School education is about preparing young people for healthy, fulfilling adult lives, including respectful and equal relationships. Adolescence is a crucial period for the formation of respectful, non-violent relationships later in life.

Violence prevention education must change not only individual attitudes and community norms, but also behaviours, social and sexual relations, and the structural conditions that perpetuate exclusion, abuse and violence, including peer, family and community attitudes and gender expectations.

Programs should provide students with the tools to think critically about real-life situations, and assess and adapt their own values, attitudes and behaviours.

Respectful relationships and violence education is the responsibility of the whole school community and is most effective as part of a whole school approach.

The development of a school ethos and culture that models respectful practices and is consistent in dealing with incidents of bullying and violence is as important a teaching tool as the formal curriculum.

What do students learn about respectful relationships and violence in NSW government schools?

The Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards, NSW (BOSTES) sets the learning requirements for each stage of schooling for government and non-government schools. The Board’s syllabuses state what must be learnt in each key learning area.

The NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) syllabus provides guidance on the skills, knowledge and understandings in relation to personal health, safety and wellbeing including interpersonal relationships, own and others’ behaviours and interactions with others.

PDHPE is mandatory for students in Kindergarten to Year 10.

Through PDHPE students learn about rights and responsibilities in relationships and how to develop and maintain respectful relationships. Students learn to recognise and respond to abuse and violence and develop help-seeking skills and strategies to access support for themselves and others.

In primary school, students learn about the roles and responsibilities in positive relationships and the effects of actions such as bullying and violence on the disruption of relationships. Students learn to form and maintain relationships through developing skills in communication, conflict resolution and strategies for coping with changes in relationships.

Within the PDHPE 7-10 syllabus there is a significant focus on teaching about gender issues and developing in students a commitment to, and skills for, challenging the abuse of power.

This is central to the development of students’ attitudes and behaviours that are based on equity, respect and responsibility.

The syllabus promotes a commitment to equality between females and males and values the diversity of individuals and their relationship to society. Students learn to recognise and respond to situations of power imbalance and abuse, including bullying, homophobic bullying, domestic and family violence and relationship and date violence.

Senior students in NSW government schools also learn about respectful relationships, including protection against violence as part of the mandatory 25 hour Crossroads course.

Students learn how to establish and maintain positive and non-violent relationships and are empowered to challenge and change attitudes and beliefs about gender, assault and relationship violence.

Good-practice programs include activities focused on skills development. Skills development should include conflict resolution, negotiation and interpersonal skills in order to empower students to negotiate personal relationships.

Education in violence prevention and respectful relationships is more
Creating a supportive learning environment

Respectful relationships and violence education can be confronting and sensitive for some children and young people. Teachers need to create a supportive learning environment so students feel safe to learn and ask questions.

There are number of steps teachers can take to ensure their classroom environment is a safe place for all students when talking about bullying, abuse, violence and respect.

Students should be made aware at the beginning of educational programs that disclosures that indicate they may be at risk of harm will be reported to the school principal in all instances. This includes personal disclosures related to instances of abuse or sexual activity under the legal age of consent.

It is important to enable students to withdraw if they find issues personally confronting and to protect them from making harmful disclosures.

Equally, it is important that teachers are prepared for issues that arise as a result of a student making a disclosure.

Create ground rules

It is important to set consistent classroom rules as well as reinforce positive behaviours.

Establishing and maintaining guidelines and boundaries for students will encourage mutual respect and allow for positive relationships to develop in the classroom.

A useful strategy is to engage students in the development of these ground rules. Below are some examples of rules you could use for discussion:

- listen to different ideas without ‘put downs’
- no interruptions while someone is talking
- everyone has the right to speak
- each person is responsible for his or her own behaviour
- never refer to someone by name when giving an example
- always support each other
- respect other’s cultural traditions, beliefs, values and languages
- everyone has the right not to offer an opinion.

Discourage public disclosures

Teachers can actively discourage disclosures of personal or sensitive information in public situations to prevent harm to the student and other students. Keeping discussions global rather than personal will enable all students to discuss issues more freely. Encourage students to talk in the third person, for example, “If a person... what if someone...”

One step removed

One step removed is a strategy that allows students to explore a range of sensitive issues without confrontation or personal threat.

One step removed suggests teachers use fictitious case studies, situational dilemmas or any techniques that dissuade students from talking in the first person in class discussions.

Instead of the direct "what would you do...?" approach, teachers substitute:

- "suppose this happened to someone...what advice would you give them?...what could they do?"
- "imagine someone was feeling...what advice would you give to help them in their situation?"

When exploring possible outcomes of case studies or situational dilemmas, it is important to use conditional language: such as "...this might happen" or "...this could
At the conclusion of each session, the teacher and the child or young person may decide to discuss their intention to talk about the matter. It is important to:

- tell the child or young person you believe him or her
- be aware of your own emotions in relation to what the child or young person is telling you, and keep those emotions under control
- be prepared to listen and support a child or young person when he or she tells you about an event or behaviours that indicate risk of harm
- use a calm reassuring tone and talk at the child or young person's level
- listen to the child or young person and acknowledge that it may be difficult to talk about what is happening to him or her
- not make promises you cannot keep - especially that you won't tell anyone
- offer support to the child or young person
- avoid expressing doubt, judgment or shock
- be aware of the child or young person's cultural and linguistic background and how this might impact on disclosure.

Important steps in stopping the harm and preventing further harm from occurring include:

1. Following up suspicion or belief that harm or risk to a child or young person has occurred can be the first important step in stopping the harm and preventing further harm from occurring.

If staff have reasonable grounds to suspect risk of significant harm to a child or young person, they are required to tell their principal or workplace manager.

If a student discloses information it is important to:

- tell the child or young person you believe him or her
- be aware of your own emotions in relation to what the child or young person is telling you, and keep those emotions under control
- be prepared to listen and support a child or young person when he or she tells you about an event or behaviours that indicate risk of harm
- use a calm reassuring tone and talk at the child or young person's level
- listen to the child or young person and acknowledge that it may be difficult to talk about what is happening to him or her
- not make promises you cannot keep - especially that you won't tell anyone
- offer support to the child or young person
- avoid expressing doubt, judgment or shock
- be aware of the child or young person's cultural and linguistic background and how this might impact on disclosure.

How does best practice respectful relationships and violence education comply with and reflect NSW policy, legislation and frameworks in NSW government schools?

Staff employed by the NSW Department of Education are expected to plan for a safe environment for all student activities. The safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people or students are paramount.

Student's needs and welfare are the primary concern and the primary focus of professional practice.

When planning programs, teachers should review the content of sensitive or controversial material to ensure it is appropriate to the development, experiences and cultural values of their students.

It is recommended that sensitive subjects be planned later in the school year when respect and trust has been developed between students and with the teacher.

Controversial Issues in Schools Policy

Some members of the community can consider aspects of PDHPE, such as violence and child protection education sensitive or controversial.


The school has a responsibility to inform parents, prior to the occasion, of the specific details of the program, so that parents have time to exercise their rights of withdrawing their child from a particular session on certain controversial issues. In this regard, a parent's wish must be respected.


This statement should be applied to the introduction of external speakers on controversial issues and the study of controversial material to supplement curriculum programs.

Evaluation of school programs indicates that, where parents and carers have an understanding of the program, students' learning is improved.

Where parents and carers indicate they wish to withdraw their child from a program it is useful to negotiate which parts of the program they are concerned about.

Schools should implement a consultative process to ensure parents and carers have opportunity to participate in discussions on both curriculum content and teaching and learning materials where appropriate to ascertain whether parts of the program need to be modified.

Code of conduct

Teachers continually use their professional judgement to decide on the best strategies, resources and teaching and learning methods for any given situation.

In making these judgements, teachers must take into account the age, maturity, health and other characteristics of children and young people. They must also be aware that their own conduct at all times, must be keeping with that specified in the Department’s [Code of Conduct](http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/sexual_health/t_learner/supplement.htm) and of their role and responsibilities pursuant to it.
Resilience research confirms that the presence of a caring adult in aspects of their lives is important in assisting students to overcome adversity and achieve at school.

Effective teaching in PDHPE relies on positive relationships that are developed in a professional manner. The teacher is, by the nature of their role, in a position of trust, authority and influence. Modelling respectful interactions is an important part of teacher and student interactions.

Establishing a trusting relationship between student and teacher supports effective teaching and learning. This relationship should focus on the needs of the student.

Resources to support respectful relationships and violence education in NSW government schools

Schools have access to a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning. Principals and teachers make decisions about the level and type of support and resources required to support student learning and support needs in their community.

Child Protection Education: Curriculum materials to support teaching and learning in Personal Development, Health and Physical Education K-10

These resources assist students to develop skills in recognising and responding to unsafe situations, seeking assistance effectively, establishing and maintaining respectful relationships and strengthening attitudes and values related to equality, respect and responsibility.

The materials can be found at:
- Curriculum support website - K-6 PDHPE
- Curriculum support website – 7-10 PDHPE

Teaching Sexual Health website

Materials developed for K-12 assist teachers to create a supportive learning environment and address child protection content and issues of relationship and date violence as part of PDHPE. This Department website includes teaching and learning activities that facilitate student discussion of bullying, abuse, negotiating consent in respectful relationships and recognising and responding to abuse and violence. The website can be accessed as http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/sexual_health/index.htm

Crossroads

The Department’s Crossroads website provides advice for teachers and Principal’s on how to use teaching strategies to create a supportive learning environment. The website provides teaching and learning activities to deliver respectful relationships and violence education through the Crossroads content. These activities cover a wide range of relationships and abuse and violence situations. The website can be accessed at http://www.learning.schools.nsw.edu.au/crossroads/

Other resources

Other resources developed by external agencies which support respectful relationship and violence education in schools can be found at
- White Ribbon website http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/schools
- Safe Schools Hub http://safeschoolshub.edu.au

Using external providers to support teaching and learning

Teachers have expertise in teaching and learning, and knowledge of their students’ needs, abilities and the ways they learn.

They are skilled in developing teaching and learning programs that address the needs of students within a curriculum context. Principals and teachers have primary responsibility for education programs in schools.

Whilst the syllabus specifies mandatory learning for students, schools can choose to be involved in a range of initiatives or work in partnership with external providers to supplement teaching and learning and meet the needs of the school and the local community.

Participation in White Ribbon Day activities is one such activity.

While collaboration with external agencies can be beneficial to schools, this relationship should not result in external personnel being the sole source of curriculum delivery in any key learning area.

Research indicates that one-off speakers or sessions, isolated from the context of a planned approach to education, will have minimal effect in enhancing students’ knowledge and skills.

Effective programs should involve progressive learning that is reinforced over the school years.

Visiting speakers and external providers should be used only in situations where their visit adds value to existing teaching and learning practice. They should be embedded within existing programs where learning activities and opportunities for debriefing are provided before and after the event.

Principals need to consider the expertise and approaches of external providers or individuals...
carefully and make decisions about the use of these groups in an informed way. The material and delivery of the external provider should be assessed by the principal and organising teacher before the provider is engaged.

The Guidelines for engaging external providers for curriculum implementation provide support for school leaders and school communities that are considering working with an external provider for the planning, delivery or evaluation.

It is important to note that both the Department’s and the Principal’s ‘duty of care’ (and by extension, the duty of care of departmental officers, including school staff) cannot be transferred to external providers.

Working in partnership with health and community services increases students’ awareness of the range of services available and where to find them. This can assist in building students’ trust and confidence to access services and provide links between young people, the school and appropriate services.

Community services can also be used to enhance staff knowledge and understanding of respectful relationship and violence education and consequently assist in building the capacity of teachers to deliver effective education programs.

Education has an important role to support children and young people and to identify where problems arise that may put their safety, welfare or wellbeing at risk.

The Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People Policy sets out the responsibilities of NSW Department of Education employees under the legislation. All staff have a duty to recognise safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns for children and young people that arise from or during the course of their work.

Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People: Revised procedures (updated 14/3/2014) require that all staff in schools are aware of the indicators of child abuse and neglect of children and young people, their obligations to report suspected risk of harm and the procedure for doing so.

If staff have reasonable grounds to suspect risk of significant harm to a child or young person, they are required to tell their principal or workplace manager.