



24 hours 7 days a week

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Womens Domestic  
Violence Crisis Service

13 March 2014

*In support of the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children  
submission to the 2014 review of the Australian Curriculum*

## Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum

Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service (WDVCS) is a voice for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and children in Victoria. Working collaboratively with the police, criminal justice system and other agencies to prevent domestic violence, we offer a range of quality services to support women and children. As the only state-wide domestic violence telephone crisis service in Victoria, WDVCS is the central access point for women to receive information and support immediately via the 24 hours 7 days phone service, while also serving as a gateway for women to access specialist crisis support, case management, refuge accommodation and outreach support. WDVCS values underpin the way we deliver services and engage with those who access support: non-violent; feminist; ethical and respectful; collaborative; authoritative and evidence-based.

In order to make a real and sustained reduction in the levels of violence against women, we must work together across Australia to look into the long term, building respectful relationships education and working together to increase gender equality to prevent violence against women. By targeting institutions and industries that have a lead role in influencing and shaping young adults attitudes and beliefs, *it is possible to reduce violence against women and its associated impost on our economy.* While students' learning is not restricted to the time they spend in schools, the school system is particularly well placed to create meaningful and sustainable influence to prevent violence against women, forming partnerships between young people, parents, teachers, counsellors and so on. Evidence shows that 'whole of school' programs that integrate respectful relationships and gender education into the curriculum, teacher training, school policies and protocols, supported by strong leadership on the issue, is the most effective model to reduce violence supportive attitudes and behaviours (as cited by Flood et al., 2009). The 'whole of school' is a vital point of intervention in forming and developing healthy relationships that enable positive outcomes while reducing rates of domestic violence and financial burden on the economy. The Australian Curriculum is the critical point in which to educate and prevent domestic violence from eventuating by ensuring that respectful relationships education is woven in the fabric of the 'whole of school' to support a healthy and safe development for Australians into the future.

There is a wealth of evidence that today shows that violence against women and their children is caused by the fact that men and women are unequal in Australia, where men experience many advantages to the exclusion of women (VicHealth 2009). This ultimately manifests in rigidly defined gender roles and unequal access to resources, power and ultimately choice, leading to a cultural acceptance of violence against women and their children (WHO 2013).

Across Australia, one in every three women have experienced physical violence since the age of fifteen (Mouzos & Makkai 2004), and almost one in five have experienced sexual violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey 2006). UNICEF (2006) estimates that between 75,000 and 640,000 Australian children and young people live with domestic violence at any given time. Furthermore, the National Crime Prevention (2001) shows that one in four Victorian children has witnessed family violence against their mothers. These high rates of violence against women and their children have an immense impact on the Australian economy, recently estimated at \$14.7 billion each year (KPMG, 2013).

Across Victoria there has been a 72.8 per cent increase of family violence reported incidences over the past 10 years. Whilst the demand for justice and family violence responses remains high, these rates are expected to continue increasing annually, giving no indication that the rates will plateau in 2013/14 police crime statistics. This is because family violence still remains underreported; where BOSCAR (2012) found that only one in two women experiencing family violence had reported incidents by the police. Having such a high reported rate of family violence, Victoria is experiencing unparalleled backlogs throughout both the human and community services sectors, which often creates further barriers for women and their children to adequately recover and break the cycle of abuse. As long as women are increasingly feeling safe to seek help, these statistics will continue to grow.

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children ('the Plan') outlines the Federal Government's commitment to bring attitudinal and behavioural change through cultural, institutional and relational/individual levels to prevent violence against women and their children. The Plan states that to do this they require a whole-of-government response to violence against women and their children. The Plan's first Action Plan 2010/13 highlights an action to support evidence-based best practice respectful relationships education in schools. The Select Council on Women's Issues have stated their commitment to work with the Department of Education to create real and positive changes to the culture within schools to support and foster structural and individual change.

The rationale for respectful relationships education is evidenced by an abundance of Australian and international research that find respectful relationships education changes the attitudes and behaviours that lead to violence against women and their children (as seen in Flood et al., 2009). The school setting provides a unique opportunity to foster healthy and respectful attitudes, behaviours and cultures, providing targeted education at the most influential junction of people's lives. The success in programs that work with children and young people is evidenced by its lasting effects in every relationship throughout the participant's lifetime (Fergus and Heenan, 2009). Experience in prevention programs addressing violence, substance abuse and delinquency among young children suggests that schools are particularly well placed to facilitate, or be the site for, partnerships between young people, parents, teachers and others such as social workers and counsellors.

**As the Victorian state-wide crisis telephone service, we see huge demand for services for women and children that could have been preventable through appropriate, whole of school responses to violence against women and their children. As outlined above, the toll on lives, the cost to the economy and the through-put of women and children through the social service system places a strong argument for a greater commitment to primary prevention of violence against women to progress Australia forward into the future. With effective intervention in schools, we have a distinct opening to "turn off the tap" in regards the increasing demand on services, while providing students with the tools they need to grow and prosper. Embedding whole of school programs for healthy relationships throughout the national curriculum portfolios is the strongest opportunity for Australians to prevent family violence incidents and deaths and break the cycle of violence.**

While the education system is tasked with leading generations of young Australian men and women into successful academic and personal growth, it is well placed to take a leading role in the prevention of violence against women and children. Without adequate primary prevention efforts embedded into the Australian curriculum, violent and controlling attitudes and behaviours will play out across many students' lifecycles, causing significant social, health and economic costs to both themselves and their loved ones. Without respectful relationships education being part of the curriculum, Australia risks being complacent to violence against women and their children, reinforcing gender inequalities that support violent attitudes and behaviours to women and their children. This can be seen where school peers play critical roles in people's involvement in violence, for instance schools may be sites of violence perpetration and victimisation, and school climates and cultures can sometimes be conducive to violence by and among children and young people.

There is a need for greater synergy between violence prevention and the Australian Curriculum; this review provides ACARA with an opportunity to prevent violence against women right across Australia, to change attitudes and behaviours that reinforce violence against women. By strengthening the national curriculum to mandate a whole of school focus on gender inequality and respectful relationships the Department of Education and the Australian Government as a whole would be making ground-breaking progressive change that would support women and children to live full, safe and healthy lives.

WDVCS recognise and commend the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for the considerable efforts made to integrate respectful relationship education into health and physical education draft curriculum 2013. We believe that this can be built upon by a 'whole of school' approach across all disciplines, as the most effective intervention for preventing violence against women and their children. WDVCS support the evidence referenced by the Foundation to Prevent Violence Against Women and the Children in their submission to this review establishing a sound evidence base on 'whole of school' programs that integrate prevention of violence against women and children into the Australian School Curriculum, including teacher training, school policies and protocols. This serves as the most effective model for reducing violence-supportive attitudes and violence behaviour to be used as a basis for the whole of school respectful relationships and gender education.

## **Recommendations for 'whole of school' programs:**

- 1. Embed gender equality messages throughout the curriculum that address underlying forms of violence against women e.g. notions of entitlement, power and gender norms.**

*"Pedagogical and curricular approaches need to be founded on an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding violence ... addressing the links between gender, power and violence, examining violence-supportive constructions of gender and sexuality, and fostering gender equitable and egalitarian relations". Flood et al, 2009, Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, p. 10.*

- 2. Prioritise training and professional development for teachers to ensure effective delivery of whole of school programs.**

*"Implementation of gender policy is most effective when teachers are able to act on their own awareness of the problem. Effective curriculum development can only occur if teachers are involved in the properly resourced planning, implementation and evaluation of programs". Australian Education Union Policy on Gender Equity, 2008, p. 10.*

3. **Develop anti-bullying policies and strategies that are informed by the impact, nature and dynamics of gender-based violence, recognising that constructions of gender are a key factor in range of violent and abusive behaviours.**

*“Schools that do not address the problem of bullying can become breeding grounds for a process whereby the more aggressive and powerful dominate the less powerful, a process that underpins violence, domestic abuse and child abuse”. National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual, 2011, p. 7.*

4. **Allocate adequate classroom time in order to implement programs as comprehensively as possible. There is a general consensus around sufficient length and depth of interventions that are required if education programs are to generate behavioural and attitudinal change.** Dyson & Flood (2008, p. 23) address the time needed to convey a message in an educational context to make lasting change:

*“To generate sufficient ‘intensity’ to produce change, effective educational programs require both length and depth. Interventions need to be short enough to be practical, but long and intensive enough to be effective. One-off and one-hour workshops may be attractive to overburdened schools or organisations, but they are unlikely to produce substantial and persistent change ... On the other hand, while there are practical and financial constraints on lengthy and intensive educational programs, they are more likely to produce lasting change”.*



**Annette Gillespie**  
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