

## Responding to young people disclosing sexual assault: A resource for schools

ANTONIA QUADARA

This Wrap provides information about young people's experiences of sexual assault, the barriers they face to disclosing such experiences, the process of disclosure for young people, what you and your school can do to support somebody who has disclosed sexual assault and why it is so important to provide positive and supportive responses.

Australian schools have made a significant commitment to reducing violence, including sexual assault, in schools and supporting students who have been victims of violence. For example, the *National Safe Schools Framework* (Department of Education Science and Training [DEST], 2003a, 2003b) prioritises young people's safety as a whole-of-school issue. It can also be seen in the efforts of states and territories to provide guidance to schools in responding to sexual assault in schools. This Wrap aims to supplement these national and state and territory initiatives.

### The sexual victimisation of young people

The sexual abuse of young people by those in positions of authority (e.g., clergy), guardianship (including family members) and care (e.g., sports coach, foster parent) have been a central focus for many of those concerned about young people's safety. Unfortunately, sexual assault between young people, for example in dating contexts or peer-to-peer social contexts has been less visible as a public issue. Sexual violence taking place in "social scenarios" such as parties, in dating relationships, or between students is often still not acknowledged. Furthermore, new technologies afforded by mobile phones, digital imaging, and the internet contribute to creating forms of sexual assault that the law and society have difficulty defining as assault.

Young people's experience of sexual violence and unwanted sexual behaviours includes:

- sexual harassment;
- sexualised bullying;
- unwanted kissing and sexual touching;
- sexual pressure and coercion; and
- sexual assault, including rape.



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The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers, service providers, and others interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

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## Contents

The sexual victimisation of young people	1
What is disclosure?	3
How do young people disclose?	4
What can schools do?	5
Supporting student disclosures: A whole-of-school response	7
Best practice in prevention education	9
Conclusion	9
References	10
Further reading and resources for schools	11

## The author

Dr Antonia Quadara is Co-ordinator of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

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Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia  
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839  
Internet: [www.aifs.gov.au/acssa](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa)

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Young people themselves rarely use the terms "sexual assault", "rape" or "sexual abuse" to describe unwanted sexual experiences and they can have difficulty naming an incident as sexual assault (Hird, 2000; Powell, 2007). This is for two reasons. Firstly, a relationship that is presumed to be based on trust and care can leave victim/survivors and those around them unable to recognise sexual assault by those within it. Secondly, commonly held myths about sexual assault can mean that even where an incident would legally classify as sexual assault, it is not seen as such by victim/survivors. These myths include the beliefs that: perpetrators of sexual assault are always strangers; sexual assault always involves the use of physical force or physical violence; a weapon would be involved; it occurs in dark, dangerous public places; or additional physical injuries are sustained.

In adolescent dating relationships, ideals and stereotypes about romance, love and sex, and "traditional" gender-role expectations influence the occurrence of pressured or coerced sex. Expectations that young men will initiate sex and "prove" their sexual prowess while young women are required to protect their sexual reputations create a no-win situation; young women cannot positively communicate their sexual desires (according to the stereotype this would make them "sluts") and yet their refusal to engage in sexual interaction may be

### Box 1. Terminology

In the literature on young people and sexual assault, a range of terms are used including sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual coercion.

"*Sexual assault*" encompasses a broad range of behaviours including rape, indecent assault and forced sexual activity that does not involve sexual penetration. The ABS defines it as "unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature directed towards a person which makes that person feel uncomfortable, distressed, frightened, threatened or harmed" in circumstances where that person has not freely agreed, consented or is incapable of consenting to that behaviour. (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2004)

"*Sexual abuse*" refers to any sexual activity between a child and an adult or older person (five or more years older) (Holzer & Bromfield, 2007). It conveys unequal power relationships between the victim and perpetrator because the perpetrator is older, in a position of power, trust or authority.

Research with young people often uses "*sexual coercion*" to describe unwanted sexual behaviour in dating relationships (for example Hird, 2000; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Jackson, Cram & Seymour, 2000).

"*Sexual violence*" or "*sexual victimisation*" may also be used to refer to the broad spectrum of behaviours from threats and unwanted sexual touching through to rape.

interpreted by young men as a hurdle to get over. This may take the form of thinking “if I just try a little bit more, maybe I’ll get her into it” (Hird, 2000, p. 74). Such a double standard “primes adolescent dating relationships for coercion” (Hird & Jackson, 2001, p. 35). Within schools, peer-to-peer contexts of sexual assault have also been unacknowledged by schools because the assault has taken place outside school grounds, and/or is interpreted as being part of the “rough and tumble” of high school life.

As the studies summarised in Table 1 demonstrate, sexual assault is common among young people. Further, contrary to the myth that perpetrators are strangers, the majority of perpetrators are known to victim/survivors. The Personal Safety Survey found that less than 10% of young women who had experienced sexual abuse before 15 years of age were abused by a stranger (ABS, 2006). This is replicated in other research with young people (see Table 2).

### What is disclosure?

Disclosure means telling another person about an incident of sexual abuse or assault. This may be a recent incident, or it may have occurred in the past, or be ongoing. Disclosure is about support-seeking. Disclosing should be seen as distinct from making a report or allegation (even if sometimes they are

one and the same event). Reporting to police and making allegations are formal mechanisms to bring an incident to the attention of law enforcement and other agencies. Reflecting on her research with victim/survivors of sexual assault, Lievore observed that:

**Disclosure was not always a conscious decision or planned action and not all survivors had a clear objective in disclosing. Those who did were primarily motivated by the need for safety, protection and support; not wanting to be alone; or were seeking information to help them clarify their understandings about the nature of the assault. (2003, p. v)**

Recipients of disclosures, including family members, peers and teachers have a crucial role in supporting victim/survivors (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, & Wasco, 2007; Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). A young person who tells about an assault is often seeking information to help them choose the most appropriate way of responding to the assault/s. They may be seeking help in how to define what they see as an ambiguous experience, and to determine what to do next or what choices are available (Lievore, 2003, p. vii). The reactions of others can strongly influence a person’s decision-making process around these matters. For example, a negative reaction which conveys that the assault was not that serious (when

**Table 1. Prevalence of sexual assault among young people**

Study	Behaviour	Age of respondents	Female	Male
Young People and Domestic Violence (National Crime Prevention, 2001)	Rape/sexual assault	12–20yrs	14%	3%
Personal Safety Survey (ABS, 2006)	Sexual abuse before 15 years	18+	956,000	337,400
Recorded Crime (ABS, 2004)	Sexual assault	15–19 yrs	3,496	457
International Violence Against Women Survey 2002 (Mouzos & Makkai)	Sexual abuse before 16 years	18+	18%	N/A
National Survey of Adolescents (Hanson et al. 2003) (n = 4023)	Child sexual assault	12–17	254	71

Source: ABS (2006)

**Table 2. Relationship of the perpetrator to the young person**

Study	Parent	Other relative	Family friend	Acquaintance/ Neighbour	Other known person	Stranger
Young People and Domestic Violence (National Crime Prevention, 2001)					(Boyfriend)	
<i>Female</i>					14%	
Personal Safety Survey (ABS, 2006)	(Father/Stepfather)	(Male)				
<i>Female</i>	16.5 %	35.1%	16.5%	15.4%	11%	8.6%
<i>Male</i>	5%*	16.4%	15.6%	16.2%	27.3%	18.3%
International Violence Against Women Survey 2002 (Mouzos & Makkai)		(Male)	(Friend/family friend)			
<i>Female</i>	2%	33%^	20%^	17%^	14%^	13%^
National Survey of Adolescents (Hanson et al. 2003)	(Father/Stepfather)			(Unrelated acquaintance)		
<i>Both sexes</i>	4.3%	17.5%		52.8%		23.6%

\* Statistic to be used with caution

^ Percentages based on the 16% of respondents who said they had been sexually abused by a non-parent

it is), was not a sexual assault at all (when it was), or that the victim/survivor was partially to blame, such as by being drunk or alone with the perpetrator at the time (when the victim is never to blame) can have a negative impact. For example:

**When Fatima was 15 years old, she was held down; her breasts were exposed and touched by a male student on the school oval during recess. A number of other students witnessed the assault. Fatima reported the assault to the principal and year level coordinator. She was not offered specialist support or counselling nor was she offered the option of speaking to the police. Fatima was highly distressed and requested to see the school counsellor. The principal told Fatima the counsellor “did not have time for such petty things”. Fatima subsequently left school. (CASA House submission, cited in Victorian Ombudsman, 2006)**

Reactions that validate the experiences of victim/survivors can encourage reporting to police and utilising available support services. They can also help a victim/survivor recover from the sexual assault/s.

### **What are the barriers to disclosure?**

Disclosure is rarely a matter of simply “speaking up” about an event clearly perceived as sexual assault; it involves overcoming a series of complex issues. The research literature points to several factors that act as barriers to young people disclosing, including:

- *Relationship between victim and perpetrator:* Knowing the perpetrator well is consistently related to delaying disclosure. Victimisation in the family home by a carer or by a family member is an especially strong predictor of delayed disclosure (Alaggia, 2005; Kogan, 2004).
- *Fear of not being believed or being blamed for the assault:* Concerns about how others will react, and especially the potential for disbelief or blame are two of the most significant barriers to telling someone (Crisma, Bascelli, Paci, & Romito, 2004).
- *Cultural factors and values:* Traditionalist cultural and/or family values can act as deterrents to disclosure as victim/survivors may fear being cut off from their cultural community if they speak out (Alaggia, 2005, p. 457).
- *Concerns about how disclosure will impact on significant others:* One study found that how disclosing child sexual abuse would affect others (such as family members, or the integrity of the family) was of particular concern to women, but not men (Alaggia, 2005, p. 463). Disclosing intrafamilial sexual assault (for example, from a sibling, father or step-father) can result in family separation.
- *Expectations and attitudes about what is “normal” for young men and women in heterosexual relationships:* For young people in particular, stereotypes about how men and women “should” behave in relationships can make it difficult to identify sexual

activity as sexual assault (Powell, 2007). Conversely, other research has suggested that pressure to have “equal” relationships can inhibit young women from speaking out about violence within them (Chung, 2007).

- *Being a male victim/survivor:* Increased risk of stigmatisation for admitting being a victim and/or fears of being named a homosexual can inhibit disclosure. While the majority of perpetrators of sexual assault against boys are male, this does not mean perpetration or victimisation is related to homosexuality (see Boyd & Bromfield, 2006).

### **How do young people disclose?**

Disclosure is not a static, one-off event, but a process characterised by uncertainty—about the nature of the incident, who can be trusted, what the consequences will be and the benefits of reporting to police. Disclosure is the end point, rather than the beginning of a range of considerations.

As already mentioned, one factor that young people might wrestle with internally is the naming of an incident as sexual assault (Lievore, 2005; Harned, 2005; Kelly 1988; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005):

**He told me he loved me; it was the best sex he ever had, and wanted to marry me so he could have sex with me all the time. He called me every day and acted like it was normal, like it was no big deal, so I had a hard time calling it rape. (Sudderth, 1998, p. 579)**

Another factor that young people assess before telling someone about sexual victimisation is the potential for negative reactions and other risks such as:

- being blamed or made to feel responsible for the assault occurring;
- being accused of making false allegations;
- gossip among peers;
- threats to personal safety;
- disruption to relationships with family, friends and boyfriends/girlfriends; and
- withdrawal of support.

The process is not linear but cyclical, “a neat, coherent and timely disclosure should be regarded as the exception rather than the rule” (Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). Children and adolescents commonly delay, partially disclose, retract, affirmatively disclose, accidentally disclose, recant and reaffirm (Alaggia, 2004, 2005; Chung, 2007; Crisma et al., 2004; Irenyi, 2007; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005). This is understandable given the silence that surrounds sexual violence, the persistence of rape myths and the lack of belief about the experiences of victim/survivors.

### **Patterns of disclosure for young people**

Although few survivors report sexual assault to police, many eventually disclose to someone such as friends, family, or another informal support network. Lievore (2003) estimated that only approximately 15% of

sexual assaults are reported to police. By contrast, about two-thirds of victim/survivors disclose to someone in their informal support networks (Ahrens, 2006; London et al., 2005). In addition to not bringing sexual assault to official attention, many survivors delay disclosing. A US survey with 1,958 adolescent women found that although 24% disclosed within 24 hours, the majority either delayed, or did not disclose at all:

- 19% disclosed within a month;
- 12% disclosed within a year;
- 19% waited more than a year; and
- 26% had never disclosed until the survey (Kogan, 2004).

Age is an important factor in disclosure patterns. Older adolescents (i.e., those between 14–17) are more likely to tell someone about sexual assault (Kogan, 2004; London et al., 2005). Friends and mothers are the most likely confidants (Hanson et al., 2003; Kogan, 2004).

### *The process of disclosure*

As stated, young people’s disclosures of sexual assault are an ongoing process, rather than a clearly marked event. The table below draws on the disclosure literature to describe the key stages of disclosing sexual assault. The table offers a general summary and is not designed to be representative.

**Table 3. Key stages of disclosing sexual assault**

Stage	What is involved?
Pre-disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of the incident as wrong</li> <li>• Seeking validation from others about this perception</li> <li>• Confusing and ambivalent feelings about the offender or the incident (for example love or concern for the offender)</li> <li>• Confusion about consent and what constitutes consent</li> <li>• Behavioural changes: rather than directly disclose, students may engage in problematic (e.g., self-harm, substance abuse) or disruptive behaviours (e.g. “rebelliousness” against authority figures, especially male teachers, disengagement, truanting) (Alaggia, 2004)</li> </ul>
Overcoming barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delaying disclosure is extremely common due to fear of disbelief, fear for one’s safety, lack of safe, confidential spaces to disclose, lack of interpersonal or institutional support</li> </ul>
First disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predominantly to friends</li> <li>• Support and belief from significant others may be the difference between further telling or recanting</li> </ul>
Withdrawal/retraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people may withdraw or retract what they have said as a result of negative reactions or fear of the consequences, particularly where the perpetrator is well-known to the survivor</li> </ul>
Fragmentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosure may take place over time</li> <li>• A young person may disclose a less serious aspect of sexual assault in order to test the response of the confidante</li> </ul>
Reaffirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where a young person has withdrawn a disclosure, they may tell anew or reaffirm their initial revelation</li> </ul>
Support-seeking strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation or confirmation about the nature of the event</li> <li>• Emotional support</li> <li>• Transfer of responsibility to help victim/survivor do something about the incident</li> <li>• The key support may not be from the criminal justice system</li> </ul>
Post-disclosure responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gossip and a chain reaction of telling can occur within school communities</li> <li>• Support must extend to others. Non-offending caregivers and significant others may need treatment and intervention to help the support the victim/survivor (see Morrison, 2007)</li> <li>• Support post-disclosure is long term</li> <li>• Emphasis on returning control to victim/survivors</li> </ul>

## What can schools do?

Schools have a key role to play in primary sexual assault prevention. Schools are where respectful relationships can be most effectively promoted (VicHealth, 2007). New national policy poses schools as key sites in the prevention of sexual assault in Australia; and the new national plan to eliminate violence against women and children, currently in formation, is likely to focus on the role of schools (Rudd, 2008). A further important role for schools lies in responding to disclosures of sexual assault from their students. This is a “tertiary prevention” strategy because it deals with offending after it has happened.<sup>1</sup> However, how “tertiary prevention” happens is very important, and sends a powerful message to the school community about its commitment to violence prevention. Positive responses to a student’s disclosure are an integral element of prevention strategies for two important reasons. Firstly, prevention education can generate more disclosures by students and schools

**How “tertiary prevention” happens ... sends a powerful message to the school community about its commitment to violence prevention.**

<sup>1</sup> “Primary prevention” refers to whole-of-population strategies to prevent violence before it happens, such as education on sexual consent in schools.

will need to be prepared for this outcome. Second, poor responses implicitly or explicitly communicate and legitimate rape-supportive attitudes to a school community, undermining any prevention strategies. Research also shows that negative reactions to disclosure are extremely hurtful to victim/survivors and carry a greater impact than no response (Ullman, 2003).

### Current frameworks

The current national approach to addressing young people's safety emphasises a whole-of-school strategy (DEST, 2003a). Whole-of-school approaches are considered the most effective way of responding to violence in school environments. They involve the inclusion of what constitutes appropriate social behaviours and respectful relationships in formal curriculum, in teaching practices, school policies and procedures. Whole-of-school approaches involve all members of the school community and work across all the areas of school life (DEST, 2003c, Appendix 4). A whole-of school approach is:

**a considered and consistent approach [that] will reduce the possibility that aspects of the co-curricular life of the school, or of management and practices in the non-teaching and learning parts of school life might be at odds with the messages of a program confined only to one part of the school's operations. (DEST, 2003c, Appendix 4, p. 21)**

The *National Safe Schools Framework* (NSSF) (DEST, 2003a; 2003b) aims to ensure that all Australian schools are safe and supportive environments. It is a resource for schools that: outlines key elements of best practice in preventing violence and supporting students; suggests approaches schools can take to achieve this; and provides an implementation

manual guiding schools through these steps. Bullying, harassment, violence and child protection are the four broad areas targeted by the framework. Primary prevention through education and the promotion of respectful relationships is a key principle informing the role of schools in providing safe and supportive environments. Responding supportively to incidents and disclosures of victimisation is also a key element of good practice.

Each state and territory has developed its own policies and procedures to respond to young people's victimisation. Examples of these are listed in Table 4. Some of these reflect the NSSF at the local level. Others are specifically concerned with issues relating to child protection and mandatory reporting, anti-bullying or sexual harassment. Again, specific guidelines and information about how schools (and particularly secondary schools) respond to sexual assault are lacking, except where it is treated as sexual abuse.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has developed a resource to support school leaders in responding to sexual assault. *Responding to Allegations of Student Sexual Assault: Procedures for Victorian Government Schools* (DEECD, 2007) applies to situations where a student is alleged to be involved in an incident either as a victim or perpetrator and the allegation is:

- disclosed at school;
- occurs at schools on school premises/grounds;
- occurs on the way to or from school; or
- occurs while a student is otherwise in school care.

To date, this is the only resource directed at schools in Australia of which we are aware that specifically addresses sexual assault as an issue in its own right.

**Table 4. Resources for schools**

Resource	Description
National Safe Schools Framework	Agreed national framework for all schools, Kindergarten to year 12
Bullying. No Way!	The project is developed and managed by all participating Australian education authorities including government, Catholic and independent education systems
MindMatters	A resource and professional development program to support Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the social and emotional wellbeing of members of school communities. An initiative funded by Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing
Providing Safe Schools P-12 (ACT)	To provide clear guidelines to ACT government school principals, boards and staff. It emphasises positive student management and minimises violence, bullying and all forms of harassment. Distributed to public schools within the Territory
Anti-Bullying Plan for Schools—Procedures (NSW)	These procedures set out the requirements for dealing with bullying behaviour in NSW government schools. They include operational guidelines and a framework for schools to use to develop and implement an Anti-bullying Plan with specific strategies for identifying, reporting and dealing with bullying behaviours
Student Welfare Policy (NSW)	A framework for school communities to review student welfare, determine key issues for action and develop and implement student welfare actions and initiatives
Responding to Allegations of Student Sexual Assault: Procedures for Victorian Government Schools (Vic)	A guide for schools and principals in the event of students' disclosure of sexual assault

## Supporting student disclosures: A whole-of-school response

This section outlines principles for positive responses at three levels—the individual level, the leadership level and whole-of-school level.

### At the individual level

What should a staff member who has been told about a sexual assault do?

At the individual level, the most important elements are to listen, believe and help the young person feel safe and secure:

- believe the young person;
- provide a safe, comfortable, private environment;
- reassure them that telling was the right thing to do;
- let the young person take their time;
- let them use their own words;
- accept the young person will tell as little or as much as they are comfortable with;
- refer them to the most appropriate service (see a state-specific list of appropriate services on the ACSSA website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/crisis.html>);
- do not confront the perpetrator;
- don't make promises that cannot be kept; and
- maintain a calm, empathic appearance (Irenyi, 2007; DEECD, 2007).

Sexual assault involves a loss of personal autonomy, a breach of trust and dynamics that are often gendered. It is important to maximise victim/survivors' sense of "agency" or control over the situation. For example:

- If relevant, ask whether they would like to speak with someone of a specific gender.
- Ask if they would like to speak with the school counsellor.
- Inform them of their rights and relevant sexual assault support services.
- Consult with the young person about what support they need and what your obligations might be.
- Minimise disruption to their school attendance (e.g., it is not the victim who should be removed from class or have their learning patterns otherwise disrupted following a disclosure).

Victim/survivors may be reluctant to involve police or other official agencies. It is important that school staff consult with students about whether or not to inform agencies of the disclosure. It is crucial to support the victim/survivor's agency and decision-making capacity as much as possible and as far as practicable in terms of child protection legislation. In doing, it is essential to comply with mandatory reporting requirements in the different states and territories. These are explained in Higgins, Bromfield, and Richardson (2007).

## Effective leadership

How can principals and other leadership staff support effective responses?

Effective leadership is a second key component for positive responses to disclosure. While the positive responses of individual teachers are important, these can be undermined where there is a lack of support for, or commitment to, sexual assault prevention. In developing positive responses, effective leadership should seek to:

- establish safe, confidential spaces for students to access support;
- with the assistance of the broader school community, conduct a school safety audit which assists schools in identifying hidden sources of students' unsafety;
- support staff in responding to disclosures positively;
- support staff training around matters of sexual assault, particularly dispelling myths about sexual assault and respectful relationships; and
- support the implementation of respectful relationships and non-violence education into school curricula.

The response of principals and their schools to a disclosure of sexual assault can have a significant long-term impact on future behaviour of students:

**Whether the person reporting the incident is believed; terminology such as "victim", "perpetrator"; how an incident is classified, such as "serious" or "trivial"; and behaviour intervention strategies adopted by the Principal will affect not only the students involved but others witnessing the events as they unfold. (Victorian Ombudsman, 2005, p. 15)**

### A whole-of-school approach

What can schools do to create a culture of effective response to disclosures?

Finally, a whole-of-school approach is crucial. This approach involves the development of policies, programs and procedures in collaboration with staff, students, and parents that emphasise respect and non-violence in all relationships, including intimate ones. A whole-of-school approach is aided by:

- agreed definitions of sexual assault;
- a statement about consequences for offending;
- clear publication of policies and procedures;
- regular reviewing, monitoring and evaluation of policies and procedures;
- the introduction of best-practice prevention programs for students, teachers and families;
- education on the long-term impacts of sexual assault on victim/survivors; and
- an emphasis on a victim-centred policies.

The Victorian Ombudsman (2005) has recommended:

- The development of a common terminology in plain language to describe the incidents involving sexual assault that takes into account the continuum of sexual behaviour exhibited by children, young people and adults, and reports on any changes in the law to ensure clarity and consistency.
- That relevant government departments, sexual assault support agencies, and police develop targeted training packages for use in schools by teachers and principals on how to respond to a student reporting sexual assault.

It can happen that a student named as a perpetrator of sexual assault attends the same school as the person disclosing the sexual assault. It can be difficult for schools to negotiate their multiple obligations to the victim/survivor, to the person/s named as the perpetrator, to family members and to the broader school community. The Victorian procedures (DEECD, 2007) for responding to disclosures of sexual assault outline the following guidelines for schools in managing these obligations and their response to a disclosure:

## Box 2: Examples of good practice in prevention education for secondary schools

### CASA House Sexual Assault Prevention Program (Vic)

An interactive program for Year 9 and 10 students that considers issues related to consent, sex and sexual assault. The program is designed to be delivered and managed by the school with liaison and support from CASA House. It incorporates contributions made by students, Victoria Police and CASA House counsellor/advocates. Teachers and support staff also receive professional development sessions.

### CASA House Peer Educator Project (Pilot) (Vic)

Based on the evaluation findings of the Sexual Assault Prevention Program, the Peer Educator Project aims to empower young people to take up leadership roles in raising awareness about sexual assault in their school community. The Peer Educator role involves two responsibilities: assisting with discussion and activities in the Year 9/10 program, and being a source of information and contact related to the issues the program raises. The training provided by CASA for this role involves observation of the Sexual Assault Prevention Program, rehearsal of the Peer Educator role, participation in the program as a Peer Educator, and debriefing and evaluation.

### Respect, Connect, Prevent (South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault [SECASA], (Vic)

This is a school-based peer educator program for Years 7–12. Single-sex workshops are run by trained educators who are closer in age to students than most teachers. The aims of the workshops are the development of harm reduction and violence prevention strategies by young people. It was recently evaluated (Fergus, 2008).

### SHARE (Sexual Health Information Network and Education, South Australia [SHINE SA])

SHARE stands for “sexual health and relationships education”. The project aims to improve the sexual health, wellbeing and safety of young people by supporting school communities to deliver education in a safe, supportive environment. SHARE is a collaborative project between SHINE SA and the Department of Education and Children’s Services, made possible with the financial support of the Department of Health. It involves a 3-year project with 15 metropolitan and rural schools where each school has committed to teach a specific curriculum of 15 lessons of relationships and sexual health education to students in Years 8 to 10. Each teacher delivering the curriculum receives 15 hours of professional development. Rather than narrowly focusing on the biology and physiology of sexual health and relationships, SHARE aims to improve the knowledge, skills and confidence of students, so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual health and the relationships they will form throughout their lives. SHARE aims to engage students in their own learning and encourages communication and participation with parents or carers. This education program has been evaluated (T Issues Consultancy, 2004)

### Developing Ethical Sexual Lives (Carmody & Willis, NSW)

This project is a joint research and education project of the University of Western Sydney and the NSW Rape Crisis Centre. This project is funded through a grant from the Australian Research Council. It aims to understand how young women and men aged 16–25, of diverse sexualities, negotiate sexual relationships and their views on the adequacy of current sexuality and sexual assault prevention education. The first stage of the project assessed whether education based on sexual ethics is useful to young people in negotiating sexual intimacy and can assist in preventing sexual assault in dating contexts. Based on their findings a 6-week education course has been developed for implementation in high schools. Experienced educators were trained to run the project and run pilot programs in their areas. Feedback from this stage will go towards further refinement of the package. This project emphasises the importance of developing young people’s capacity to negotiate and enjoy positive and respectful relationships.

*Note: For more information on how to access these resources, see p.11.*

- Principals and staff must not make judgements about the validity of the allegation; it is not the role of Principals or school staff to prove that a sexual assault has occurred. The responsibility for investigation rests with police.
- Once a disclosure has been made, the Principal (or delegate) must take immediate action to provide a safe space for the young person making the disclosure.
- The Principal (or delegate) must ensure that the victim/survivor and other students involved are separated and provide staff support for each student.
- In consultation with the relevant education and sexual assault counselling services, the Principal should develop short and long term strategies to support all students involved in the incident.

The procedures explain that the development of short term action plans for students involved in the disclosed incident can set out clear, timely and appropriate steps schools can take in balancing their duty of care to the young people involved. The Principal should consult with (a) the department's relevant unit for responding to student critical incidents, and (b) local sexual assault counselling services to develop Management Support Plans for young people who have disclosed sexual assault and Supportive Behaviour Management Plans for individuals who have been named as a perpetrator. This latter plan should include the setting of behavioural goals, education about appropriate behaviour, criteria to assess behaviour change and a time line for review.

Principals should consult with the appropriate departments responsible for student safety and sexual assault services to ensure they develop an appropriate management plan when a disclosure is made about another student in the school. This is not only because schools have a duty of care to both victim/survivors and named perpetrators of sexual assault. Schools also have a duty of care to ensure that the named perpetrator does not present a further risk of harming other students. This can be done by undertaking an individual risk assessment of the named student. However, it is best to view these plans as an individual-level response to a disclosure of sexual assault.

As the following section explains, a whole-of-school approach to supporting students who have disclosed sexual assault is most effective when it is integrated into sexual assault prevention education. A positive response to a disclosure puts the philosophy underpinning sexual assault prevention into practice. Delivery of such programs can involve: appropriately trained peer educators; holistic integration into school curricula; and longer, rather than shorter, programs. Examples of such programs are discussed below.

## Best practice in prevention education

Best-practice prevention programs challenge the social norms and practices in the wider community that

explicitly and implicitly legitimate sexual violence. Best-practice programs provide young people not only with a way of preventing violence, but also tools to negotiate respectful, pleasurable sexual relationships (Carmody & Willis, 2006). Best practice involves:

- primary prevention (i.e., interventions that aim to prevent violence before it occurs);
- challenging social norms that legitimate violence;
- a framework that understands violence to be the outcome of gendered power relationships across individual, organisational and societal levels (VicHealth, 2007);
- defining and encouraging pro-social, anti-violence, respectful standards in relationships to which students, staff and the broader school community can all aspire; and
- peer education.

A key finding in research with young people about sexual practices and relationships is that young people are most likely to ask each other for support and advice before speaking with adults. Further, peers can have a significant influence on attitudes to, and values towards, sexual relationships and sexual pressure (Imbesi, 2008). Imbesi argued that young people in leadership roles can more effectively encourage positive behaviours among young people.

Sexual assault prevention and respectful relationships education provides a meaningful framework for schools to draw on when responding to a disclosure (See Box 2 for some examples of such programs). Respectful relationships are those in which people can negotiate their desires and be heard; are respected by their partner; feel free to express their opinions; feel free to change their minds; and feel safe. In addition, the programs can provide an accurate representation of the nature of sexual assault; they educate individuals on their own biases and misperceptions that may result in poor responses to a disclosure; and they create a sense of safety among students that their school is a safe place in which to disclose. As part of its election platform, the Rudd Government made a commitment to introduce respectful education programs in Australian schools.

## Conclusion

The role of appropriate and sensitive responses to incidents of sexual assault is as important as prevention efforts. How we name, classify and validate an individual's experience of sexual violence sends a message to students, teachers, parents and the community about the significance of sexual assault and what we are prepared to do about it. Encouraging disclosure is the only way to intervene in ongoing abuse and an important way that victim/survivors can be referred to support services.

Greater awareness about the nature of sexual assault among young people and how this impacts on disclosing their experiences needs to be incorporated into existing whole-of-school frameworks. The

key points made here for ensuring positive school responses to a disclosure of sexual assault are:

- Young people experience sexual assault in a variety of relationships, including those with peers, dating partners, and acquaintances.
- It is normal for victim/survivors, including young people, to have difficulty naming an incident “sexual assault”; this does not mean that they are being deceitful or troublesome.
- There are many barriers to naming and telling someone about sexual assault including: fear for one’s safety; fear of the consequences; having a relationship with the perpetrator; and belief that nothing will come of disclosure.
- Disclosure is a dynamic process; immediate, coherent disclosures are the exception not the rule.
- Social reactions by friends, family and school staff significantly affect whether the disclosure is taken further, the wellbeing of the victim/survivor, including their education; and shared attitudes towards sexual violence.
- Poor or inconsistent responses to disclosures of sexual assault will undermine other prevention efforts undertaken by schools.
- Generating and supporting positive responses to disclosure is most effectively undertaken at multiple levels across a school community.
- Schools are not alone when responding to disclosures of sexual assault (in addition to the state- and territory-based resources aimed at violence prevention and child protection, sexual assault services can provide expert knowledge, support and guidance for schools).
- A disclosure of sexual assault can be an opportunity for schools to introduce holistic, comprehensive prevention education.

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## Further reading and resources for schools

### Selected reports

#### *Developing Ethical Sexual Lives Report on Stage 1.*

Summary available at: [http://www.sexualethics.org.au/Reports/BROCHURE-Developing\\_ethical\\_sexual\\_lives.pdf](http://www.sexualethics.org.au/Reports/BROCHURE-Developing_ethical_sexual_lives.pdf)

*Domestic and Dating Violence Peer Education Program: Final Report* (Women’s Council for Domestic and Family Violence Services WA, Family and Domestic Violence Unit an Department of Education and Training). Available at: <http://www.womenscouncil.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=5>

*Evaluation of Respect, Protect, Connect* (SECASA) available at: <http://www.secasa.com.au/index.php/children/1016/335>

*Evaluation of Kinks and Bends. What’s the go with relationships.* Available at: [http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/kinks\\_bends.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/kinks_bends.html)

*Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School* (2001). United States. Report available at: <http://www.aauw.org/research/hostile.cfm>

#### SHARE publications available at SHARE website:

<http://www.shinesa.org.au/go/special-projects/share>

- A curriculum outline
- Education manuals available for purchase

- Research papers
- *Having their say: The role of sexual health and relationships education after consultation with parents, teachers and school students* (PDF 266KB), Sexual Health information networking & education SA Inc. (2000)
- *Final Research Report. An evaluation of the trial implementation of the Sexual Health and Relationships Education (SHARE) Program 2003–2005.*
- *Guys talk too: Improving young men’s sexual health project report.*

### Useful education resources

#### National Safe Schools Framework (Cmwrth)

<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/nssf>

#### Safe Schools Policy Framework (ACT) Dealing with Sexual Harassment (ACT)

[http://www.det.act.gov.au/publications\\_and\\_policies/policy\\_a-z](http://www.det.act.gov.au/publications_and_policies/policy_a-z)

#### Student Discipline in Government Schools (NSW) Student Welfare Policy (NSW)

<https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policiesinter/category.do?level=Schools>

#### Responding to Allegations of Student Sexual Assault (Vic)

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/childprotection/default.htm>

#### Student Wellbeing Victoria

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/default.htm>

### Websites

#### Developing Ethical Sexual Lives

<http://www.sexualethics.org.au/>

#### Bullying. No Way!

<http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/>

#### MindMatters

<http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/>

### Sexual assault prevention education programs

#### Respect, Protect, Connect

<http://www.secasa.com.au/index.php/children/1016>

#### Kinks and Bends: What’s the go with relationships

See Promising Practice Profile at: [http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/kinks\\_bends.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/kinks_bends.html)

#### SHARE

<http://www.shinesa.org.au/go/special-projects/share>

#### Sexual Assault Education Programs, Casa House

<http://www.thewomens.org.au/SexualAssaultEducationprograms>

### Sexual assault crisis support and counselling services

For information about Sexual Assault Service Centres, see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/crisis.html>



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