

Reconceptualising child rights

Guest author series



A child's right to (all kinds of) information

by Katrina Marson

Relationships and sexuality education

Comprehensive relationships and sexuality education empowers children and young people to understand their bodies, pursue emotional and sexual wellbeing as they get older, and engage in respectful and healthy relationships. It is also a proven method for protecting against negative sexual experiences and sexualised violence.

Schools are a key site for relationships and sexuality education delivery for several reasons:

- Australia has a high education participation and retention rate. Most children and young people will be effectively reached through existing education engagement.
- Comprehensive relationships and sex education is a legitimate part of learning in health, science, general capabilities as outlined in the Australian Curriculum.
- The quality and accuracy of information in the peer group is improved through school-based education. Furthermore it allows for real-life application of the relevant knowledge and skills occurs within the peer group.
- Existing structures and frameworks for primary and secondary education can support appropriate consistency, regulation and evaluation of relationship and sexuality education programs, delivery and implementation.

The content of relationships and sexuality education

Comprehensive relationships and sexuality education is holistic. It includes the following interdependent themes:

- body awareness and dealing with physical contact
- setting limits and observing limits
- being aware of feelings and intuitions
- getting help from one's best friend or from adults
- learning to resist transgressions and experiencing one's own authority
- differentiating between good and bad secrets
- participation and co-determination
- age-adapted sex education
- gender roles and their diversity.

Relevant Articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 13: Children have the right to freedom of expression and can seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

Article 17: Governments should ensure children have access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral wellbeing and health.

Article 19: Governments should ensure children are protected from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Aims of relationships and sexuality education

Eight core principles define effective relationships and sexuality education:

1. An entitlement of all children and young people.
2. Is accurate, age-appropriate and comprehensive.
3. Takes a positive approach to human sexuality and promotes wellbeing, autonomy, safety, equality, inclusivity and respect.
4. Is a specialist field and should be evidence-based, expert-informed and evaluated.
5. Meets the needs of all children and young people with their diverse experiences, including those with disabilities
6. Is the joint responsibility of schools, parents, carers and communities and is an important element of young people's development.
7. Is delivered by schools, teachers and education professionals who are equipped with the relevant skills, training and means to deliver .
8. Engages parents and caregivers, as the first educators of children, at an early stage, to keep them informed and actively engaged in the learning agenda for their children.

How can relationships and sexuality education address Article 13?

All children and young people have the right to feel safe, and to feel capable to express their boundaries. They are also entitled to expect that their boundaries will be respected. These skills and capabilities must be taught. Teaching all children and young people these skills and equipping them with the information and knowledge they need to use them, contributes to a society that values respect and communication in interpersonal relationships.

Comprehensive relationship and sexuality education empowers young people to understand their bodies, pursue emotional and sexual wellbeing as they get older, and engage in respectful and healthy relationships.

How does relationships and sexuality education address Article 19?

Rates of sexual violence and harassment in Australia are alarmingly high:

- 1 in 5 Australian women have experienced sexual violence and more than half have experienced sexual harassment since age 15.
- 1 in 20 men have experienced sexual violence and 1 in 4 have experienced sexual harassment since age 15.
- 1 in 6 women and 1 in 9 men have been physically or sexually abused before age 15.

The impact of sexualised violence and negative sexual experiences carries significant health, social and economic costs. Sexualised violence can have a devastating impact on individuals, their families and communities. The traditional response to sexual violence, for example through health or legal institutions, is reactive by nature and does little to reduce the incidence of the harm in the first place.

Comprehensive relationship and sexuality education reduces sexual violence and harassment. It is also a proven method for protecting against negative sexual experiences and sexualised violence. It can assist young people recognise risky situations and help them to have the knowledge and skills to respond safely.

How can relationships and sexuality education address Article 17?

Governments are responsible for the wellbeing of the community. Relationship and sexuality education is a proven means of fulfilling that responsibility. It is a fundamental public health measure designed to promote sexual wellbeing and prevent sexual violence.

Public policy support for relationship and sexuality education is appropriate and necessary. Evidence from overseas makes clear that government buy-in is critical to the success of implementation. The unmatched capacity of government to drive policy initiatives, to resource those initiatives and then ensure they are implemented is key to creating the enabling environment for relationship and sexuality education implementation to succeed.

Prior to designing an implementation strategy, however, is government commitment. Overseas examples of government commitment to relationship and sexuality education implementation vary, with some jurisdictions (such as the United Kingdom and Germany) legislating to mandate relationship and sexuality education for children and young people.



Katrina Marson

Katrina Marson graduated from the Australian National University with a Bachelor of Arts/ Bachelor of Laws (Honours) in 2012, and was named Student of the Year in 2013.

Now a criminal lawyer, Katrina has worked for the ACT Director of Public Prosecutions since 2013. She undertook a year's secondment at Legal Aid ACT as a criminal defence lawyer, and in 2016 was named ACT Young Lawyer of the Year.

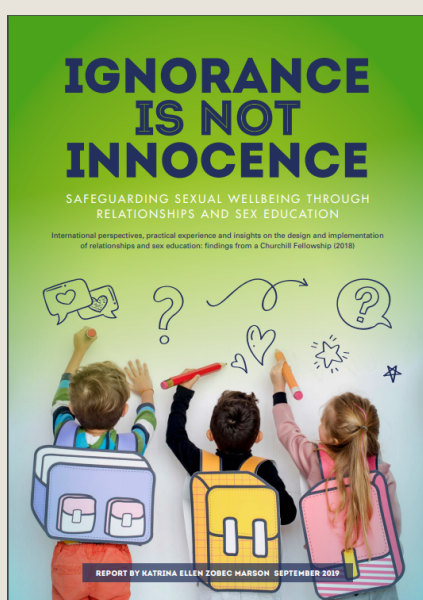
In 2018, Katrina was appointed Director of the ACT's Child Abuse Royal Commission Criminal Justice Response Team – responsible for implementing the criminal justice recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in the Australian Capital Territory.

She has since returned to work in the Sexual Offences Unit at the ACT Director of Public Prosecutions. She also tutors in Criminal Law and Evidence Law at ANU.

Katrina sat on the Governance Committee of the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre between 2012 and 2017. She is now the Lead Researcher for Primary Prevention Projects at Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy, and in 2020 established the Relationships and Sex Education Alliance in the ACT.

She was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2018, and in 2019 travelled to Europe and North America researching the use of relationships and sex education to safeguard sexual wellbeing.

Further readings



Marson, K. (2018). The Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to research new, practical and effective methods to prevent sexual violence through youth education - Germany, Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Canada, USA. (Click on report image to link to full report)