

Working with adolescents in the education system

to prevent sexual assault

The high rates of sexual assault experienced by young people suggest an urgent need for prevention initiatives to be developed and focused on adolescents. Within this paper, current best-practice approaches to prevention are discussed with a focus on schools-based programs.

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The last 30 years have seen tremendous changes in the way sexual assault is understood and addressed in society. However, despite the many advances that have been made, the incidence of sexual assault remains high. This is particularly so for young women. According to police statistics, young women and girls aged 10–19 years have the highest sexual assault victimisation rate of any group in Australia (ABS 2004).

These figures suggest an urgent need for prevention strategies to focus their efforts on adolescents. Schools are therefore considered a key site for the prevention of sexual assault, not only because students are within their formative years and developing attitudes to sexual and human relationships (Urbis Keys Young 2004) but also because many students become sexually active during their secondary school years.

The results of the *Sex in Australia* study (Rissel, Richters, Grulich, de Visser and Smith 2003) indicate that for younger male and female respondents aged between 16 and 19 years the most common age at which they first had intercourse was at age 16. For older respondents, aged between 50 and 59 years, the median age of women's first experience of intercourse was 19 years and the median age for men's first experience was 18 years. This represents a significant decline in the age that young people are first experiencing sexual intercourse. Further, around 40 per cent of males and 25 per cent of females born in 1986 had engaged in vaginal intercourse before the age of 16 years.

This article provides a brief reflection on past sexual assault prevention initiatives with young women and men, and considers what direction future initiatives might take, including proposed policy changes. A review of what is currently considered best-practice sexual assault prevention in schools is provided, along with an outline of two best-practice current programs running in South Australia and Victoria.

Past and current notions of prevention

Community-based initiatives aimed at preventing sexual assault have historically focused on the responsibility of individual women and girls to "avoid rape" by adopting "responsible dress codes" and not placing themselves in risky situations. In recent years, approaches to prevention have shifted away from attributing blame to victims or in

talking to women about "risk management" (Carmody and Carrington 2000) towards targeting and educating the perpetrators or potential perpetrators of violence about what constitutes offending behaviour. The Western Australian Government's *Freedom from Fear* campaign included a media advertising campaign and a help-line aimed at men who were violent within their relationships or were concerned about their future violence.

Coinciding with a shift towards naming the perpetrators of violence as being responsible for the violence, has come increased recognition that victims of violence are far more likely to be offended against by people they know than by strangers. In the International Violence Against Women Survey, Mouzos and Makkai (2004) found that sexual assault by a stranger was less likely to occur than assault by a friend, acquaintance or colleague: 11 per cent of women had experienced sexual violence (including touching) by a stranger over their lifetime, with 1 per cent reporting forced sexual intercourse by a stranger during their lifetime; whereas 18 per cent reported sexual assault by a friend, acquaintance or colleague over their lifetime, with 3 per cent reporting forced sexual intercourse. A recognition of these facts has led to a number of recent campaigns focused on violence perpetrated by acquaintances and friends (for example, the Centre Against Sexual Assault's Right to Party Safely project).

More recently there has been acknowledgement within academic circles and the wider community that sexual violence occurs even closer to home, by those in an intimate and/or family relationship (see Heenan 2004 for a review of intimate-partner rape). Mouzos and Makkai (2004) reported that 12 per cent of women are sexually abused over their lifetime by a current or former intimate partner, with the most common type of assault reported being forced sexual intercourse (which contrasts with assault by a non-partner, wherein the most common form of assault is unwanted touching). An additional 3 per cent of women reported having been sexually abused by a relative (father, brother, uncle, etc) during their lifetime. Hence, while "date rape" is a real issue in need of attention, there is an obvious need for prevention initiatives to target sexual assault perpetrated by boyfriends and other intimate partners.

Given these results, Carmody (2003) argues that the next step within violence prevention is for the voices of those who

engage in positive and consensual relationships, whether short-term or ongoing, to be heard within the violence prevention discussions. This, she argues, will not preclude discussion of assault, but allow young people the chance to explore what they want within a relationship, rather than just exploring how to avoid what they do not want.

An understanding of how men and women negotiate ethical sexual relations is useful in informing prevention policy and programs. Carmody (2003: 199) argues that “all sexual encounters, regardless of the gender of the people involved, invite the possibility of ethical sexual behaviour”. Encouraging the development of “ethical sexuality” may be the next important step in effective prevention education, having the potential not only to reduce violence, but also to provide young people with relationship-enhancing skills.

Recent approaches to sexual violence prevention

In light of the above discussion it is interesting to explore contemporary approaches to sexual assault prevention and to discuss what is currently considered “best practice”. An important contribution to the field is the report by the consulting group Urbis Keys Young (2004), which is the first national attempt to develop a policy framework for national sexual assault prevention. This report provides an overview of what is known about sexual assault prevention, with schools-based initiatives being situated as critical to the task.

The framework developed by Urbis Keys Young draws on what is currently known within violence prevention circles about ways to work effectively with young people. It is acknowledged that peers are highly influential at secondary school age and that positive programs are deemed to be ones that are long-term, using single sex groups and trained peers.

The authors of the Urbis Keys Young report also note that planning and delivery of programs is extremely resource intensive and that current approaches nationwide are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis, with most intervention occurring as a one-off session. Further, they report that there is no systematic application of programs and no efficient method of using the existing evidence regarding when to intervene, and little evidence as to what constitutes effective program design and delivery formats. The need for evaluations of the effect of programs over time is thus called for.

Finally, the authors suggest that a schools-based approach is limited to young people attending school and excludes those who have left school. This is particularly of concern for Indigenous youth who not only experience high levels of community and family violence but also have elevated school withdrawal rates. Other groups that also need extra consideration during the design of prevention programs are migrant and refugee youth who bring both positive and negative experiences related to violence and relationships, and who may not have had any assault prevention in their previous country, and who may be older than the average student.

Within the Urbis Keys Young report it is suggested that schools-based programs should be made compulsory and that national standards or guidelines be developed in association with individual states and territories.

The proposed schools-based guidelines would include a “whole of school” approach that recognised that sexual assault education occurs within the context of sexual/human relationship education, which begins in primary schools (this is based on the knowledge that rape-supportive attitudes are often held by young boys before high-school age). The

approach would recognise that discussion of sexual matters is often taboo in many cultures, and that the limitation of heterosexual-focused education inhibits young people from “coming out” and from talking about homophobic violence and same-sex sexual assault. The education would be tailored to correspond with the formative stages of young people’s lives, recognising that sexual assault occurs as a possible endpoint on a continuum of unwanted power-based sexualised behaviours. The approach would also see the introduction of national performance indicators to allow evaluation of the programs.

Mulroney (2003) has reviewed schools-based programs as well as a range of community, web/resource and recreation-based programs to promote positive relationships, and provided a list of recommendations regarding the development of prevention programs dealing with violence and healthy relationships. Although not focused on sexual assault, she notes that these recommendations could also be applied to sexual assault programs, particularly as it is recommended that sexual assault programs be incorporated into wider relationship programs.

Mulroney’s (2003) recommendations centre on locating the anti-violence message within a broader initiative addressing violence and encouraging healthy relationships. She suggests targeting young people aged 12-15 years and that initiatives should involve primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies (for a breakdown of these see Urbis Keys Young 2004). Strategic and comprehensive planning needs to occur that takes into account local needs and issues. Specific consideration must be given to the population where the program will be implemented, especially strategies to engage with Indigenous, immigrant or refugee youth, and disadvantaged young people who are at most risk. Further, Mulroney argues that programs are more effective if specific risk factors are targeted and appropriate methods are implemented to address those risk factors operating at all levels, including individual, family, peer, school, and community.

Mulroney suggests that parents need to be informed about the prevention initiatives and should be included in the process. For all those involved, a clear rationale should be articulated about the educational principles and strategies used to encourage change. Program content or curriculum development needs to incorporate elements designed to inform young people about violence and options available to them, challenge attitudes about the use of violence and gender construction, develop skills and provide opportunities to practise and implement skills. Furthermore, support mechanisms need to be clearly articulated and schools need to be informed about the existence of these.

In order to achieve long-lasting behavioural and attitudinal change, follow-up sessions or a commitment to a prevention program that occurs over a lengthy period of time is necessary. Finally, consideration must be given to evaluation measures used to determine the effectiveness of intervention methods and an evaluation strategy should be integrated into the program from the beginning.

Schools as sites of prevention

Schewe (2002), an academic prominent in the area of violence prevention who has written extensively on the design of effective prevention programs, suggests that our knowledge of how to prevent violence among adolescents and young adults is in its infancy and, like Mulroney, encourages the evaluation and continual refining of program initiatives.

Following is an outline of two schools-based programs – one in Melbourne run by CASA House, and one in South Australia run by SHine SA. Both programs reflect the knowledge that best-practice programs involve ongoing and open discussion with young people about healthy relationships and that they focus on positive behaviour, rather than reprimand and blame people for their actions.

CASA House

The development of comprehensive schools-based programs specifically aimed at preventing sexual assault is, as noted by Schewe (2002), relatively recent, although the specialist sexual assault service CASA House (the Centre Against Sexual Assault) has been working with secondary schools in the north-western region of Melbourne for a number of years, as have other sexual assault services. In line with Carmody's proposed changes to the way in which sexual assault prevention is conceptualised, the program run by CASA House locates anti-violence messages within broader "human relations" units.

A sexual relations curriculum is increasingly based around the notion of respect, and explores what constitutes healthy relationships or how ethical sexual relations between individuals can be achieved. A benefit of "focusing on positives" within relationships is that this type of approach is more appropriate with primary school aged children. The authors of the *Sex in Australia* study suggest that, as the age of young Australians' first experience of sexual intercourse is decreasing, and that young people often experiment with other forms of sexual activity

media representations of violence, sex, sexuality and how young people may apply what they see and hear into their social and sexual relationships. CASA House's program, through its design, appears to offer students the opportunity for candid discussion with an adult, which they may not be afforded elsewhere.

The schools-based program at CASA House involves advocates from CASA House attending schools and conducting workshops with students from Years 9, 10 and 11. CASA House workers generally deliver between three and five sessions that cover the following topics: introduction to sexual assault and harmful behaviours; the meaning of consent and social pressures that influence communication; the impact of sexual assault on male and female victims; and social action strategies to prevent sexual assault in society, including an activity where students design campaign materials such as slogans and posters.

Only in the final session are boys and girls present in the same room and encouraged to debate their opinions with each other. In the earlier sessions, the facilitators run separate sessions for the boys and for the girls. While the content is identical for both boys and girls so that there is no mystery about what the others are hearing, separating them allows for the students to better communicate with the facilitators and same-sex peers. Local police officers are also now involved in the program as they bring a different perspective and knowledge to the sessions and are able to reinforce the message that sexual assault is both harmful and criminal.

The focus of prevention initiatives is now increasingly centred around promoting healthy behaviours from a young age. It is encouraging to see the issue of sexual assault, which women fought for so long to bring into the public arena, is now part of young people's education.

beforehand, there is a "need to urgently review the teaching of sexuality education in primary school" (Smith et al. 2003: 4).

According to CASA House, one major difference between its program and previous school-based sexual assault programs is that the emphasis of the discussion is on sex, rather than rape or violence. In response to stories and scenarios, students are encouraged to have open debate about how to differentiate between sex and sexual assault, with an emphasis on the importance of free agreement from both partners and how to communicate openly about it. Students report that this enables them to apply the program's messages in the context of their relationships and sexual encounters, which makes the information more practical and relevant to their lives.

In a 2002 evaluation of their program, students indicated to staff at CASA House that they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss issues of sexual health, sexual coercion and violence, as they had little opportunity to do so elsewhere, or to engage in discussion with an adult. One of the most notable findings from the project is that the students said that they were very keen to talk directly about sex, and did not want to talk around the issue.

In an age where young people are frequently exposed to media images of sexual violence (particularly on the internet) there is a need for open discussion about the impact of

Another highlight of the CASA House program is that it not only involves the students, but also includes a ninety-minute session with staff prior to the sessions with the students. This includes an introduction to sexual assault and information on how to respond appropriately to disclosures. This teacher training was found to effect better policy and procedures at the schools. CASA House workers also found that many schools wanted to engage in this type of process but did not know how to do it. A unique part of the CASA House program is that the program is tailored to each school that they work with, and, where possible, the sexual assault education is incorporated into other programs such as human relations education. To date, more than 700 students and 200 teaching professionals have participated in the program.

SHine SA

Also welcomed by students is the *share* program, designed and implemented by SHine South Australia (formerly Family Planning South Australia) in collaboration with the South Australian Department of Education, and funded by the South Australian Department of Health.

Share stands for "sexual health and relationships education" and is considered by many to be the benchmark for programs in Australia. It is a new project that aims to improve the sexual health, wellbeing and safety of young people by supporting school communities to deliver education in a

safe, supportive environment. Rather than merely focusing on the biology and physiology of sexual health and relations, *share* aims to improve the knowledge, skills and confidence of students in Years 8–10, so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual health and the relationships they will form throughout their lives. The program aims to engage students in their own learning and encourages communication and participation with parents or carers (SHine SA 2005). SHine South Australia is currently working in 15 state schools involved in the project and is therefore offering the most substantial and comprehensive prevention program in Australia at this time.

Various features of the *share* program are considered best-practice. First, the project works on a whole of community model and, as part of the project, the teachers undergo extensive training. Second, *share* project workers provide ongoing support to the school communities. Third, all schools hold parent information evenings before implementing the program. This provides an opportunity for the materials to be perused, for parents to meet with teachers, and for questions to be answered. Parents must provide written consent before students can participate in the *share* program (SHine SA 2005).

Additionally, the curriculum includes a comprehensive relationships and sexual health program. It is based on the scope described in the Middle Years Band of the Health and Physical Education learning area of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA). This curriculum was developed for the *share* project, and describes 45 lessons to be taught, 15 per year level, for Years 8–10. The curriculum is taught in *share* schools by teachers who have participated in 15 hours professional development. The curriculum focuses on a core set of topics and builds in complexity from Year 8 onwards. For example: within the theme of “relationships”, the Year 8 students explore what it means to be in a relationship, what is a friend, what is a sexual relationship etc. Year 9 students go on to discuss their rights and responsibilities within relationships; and in Year 10 there is discussion about what is a healthy and unhealthy relationship, and about relationship breakdown and relationship violence.

The curriculum was originally written in 2002 by SHine SA. It was used in 2003 by almost 200 teachers in the *share* schools. Each teacher and many students provided feedback. The 2004 curriculum has incorporated that feedback. In 2004, 79 per cent of students rated the program good or excellent and relevant to their lives.

A further feature of how the program has been conceptualised is that research and evaluation are considered an important part of the project. La Trobe University was contracted to undertake a literature review of the critical factors for success in conducting effective sexual health education in schools. The draft review (Dyson, Mitchell Dalton and Hillier 2003) has identified the following factors: be positive about sexuality; move beyond information provision; address the social and cultural world in which young people make decisions; address the issue of gender; refrain from teaching abstinence alone; promote an understanding that sexuality and sexual behaviours are diverse; address the issue of risk; focus on the development of particular skills; incorporate peer education and peer support; create a supportive learning environment; and involve the wider community, particularly parents.

Researchers at La Trobe University are also undertaking the impact evaluation of the project which will involve

surveying a sample of students from the *share* schools over the next three years and comparing them with students in other schools to assess the development of their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours around relationships and sexual health. The literature review is available on SHine SA's website.

Conclusion

Sexual assault prevention initiatives have altered dramatically over the last 30 years. Whereas once women and girls were made responsible for their own safety, now, increasingly, the shift has changed to focus on all parties in a relationship being responsible for the health of the relationship. The focus of prevention initiatives is now increasingly centred around promoting healthy behaviours from a young age. It is encouraging to see the issue of sexual assault, which women fought for so long to bring into the public arena, is now part of young people's education.

In this context, schools are recognised as prime sites of prevention, with an increased emphasis on negotiating ethical and consensual relationships. It is important that this occurs at a time when young people are forming their views on sex, sexuality and relationships, and beginning to be sexually active. It is equally important that young people are educated to behave in ways that are non-violent and to have the opportunity to talk about and develop respectful ways of conducting their relationships together.

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