Inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant
to the use of technology in Queensland state schools

Submission No 013

Submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools.

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Alannah & Madeline Foundation

Keeping children safe from violence

THIS SUBMISSION IS FROM THE ALANNAH & MADELINE FOUNDATION.

Contact:

Lesley Podesta
CEO, Alannah & Madeline Foundation

Address:

PO Box 5192
South Melbourne   3205

██████████████████████

Phone:

█████████████

How prevalent are sexting, non-consensual sharing of sexual images, and other sexualised uses of technology in Queensland state schools?

There are difficulties in trying to establish prevalence figures for the distribution of sexually explicit photos and videos among young people, referred to as 'sexting' in the media (but not by young people themselves). Studies conducted in Australia and overseas have used differing definitions and methodologies in recruiting subjects and prevalence figures vary.

The largest-scale study in Australia, *High-wire act: cyber safety and the young*, published in 2011[1], found 8.8 per cent of the 33, 751 young people interviewed reported that they would have sent such images. In 2015, a survey of 2,243 respondents (aged 13 - 19+) found 49 per cent reported having sent a sexual picture or video of themselves to someone else and 67 per cent had received a sexual image[2]. While high numbers of survey respondents reported sending sexual images, distribution differed across age groups with the youngest group (aged 13 - 15) particularly likely to receive sexual images. Sexting was evident among homosexual and bisexual respondents with most occurring between partners in committed relationships[3].

The *Latrobe Sexual Health Survey*, 2014 found that sending explicit photos via smartphone is now a common part of teenage sexual behaviour and courtship. Fifty four per cent of surveyed students reported receiving a sexually explicit text message and 26 per cent reported sending a sexually explicit photo of themselves[4]. These percentages increase among the sexually active students, with 84 per cent saying they had received a sexually explicit text and 72 per cent saying they had sent one. Half of this group said they had sent a nude or explicit photo or video of themselves and 70 per cent reported receiving one.

Sexting involves a complex set of behaviours and attitudes. It does not refer to a single activity but rather to a range of activities that may be motivated by sexual pleasure but can be coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence. It is not a gender-neutral practice but one that replicates the age-old double standard whereby girls are harassed and those who are sexually active are denigrated as 'sluts', while sexually active boys are admired as heroes or 'studs'. These gendered social norms are played out and amplified in online behaviour and technology provides a platform (but is not an instigator) that enables a range of hostile behaviours – directed principally toward young females.

One of these is the non-consensual sharing of images, which the Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner refers to as 'image-based abuse'. An inquiry is currently being undertaken by the Department of Communications and the Arts to inform the development of a civil penalties regime for this behaviour and will look to empower the Office of the eSafety Commissioner with enforcement measures such as civil penalties, enforceable undertakings and injunctions, as well as infringement notices, formal warnings and take-down notices[5]. However, legal and policy frameworks need to respond to the realities of young people's experiences, practices and ethics, and 'take into account questions of context and consent'[6].

However, laws alone are not a sufficient response to the non-consensual sharing of images. Much of the early messaging around sexting took a 'just don't do it', 'blame the victim approach' and was directed at young girls. In '*Megan's Story*', Megan sends a self-image to a boy in her class, who then shares it with all their classmates and teacher. The message is only addressed to the 'you' of the story, who produced the image and suffers public humiliation and shame. No blame or culpability is placed upon the young man who shared the image[7]. Since those who engage in image-based abuse are

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[1]   Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety (2011)

[2]   Lee, M., Crofts, T., McGovern, A and Milivojevic, S. (2015) Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice no 508, Sexting among young people, Australian Institute of Criminology,

[3]   Lee, M., Crofts, T., McGovern, A and Milivojevic, S. (2015) Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice no 508, Sexting among young people, Australian Institute of Criminology,

[4]   Mitchell A, Patrick K, Heywood W, Blackman P, Pitts M. 2014. 5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 97

[5]   (Department of Communications and the Arts, (2017).

[6]   Albury, K., and Crawford, K., (2012), Sexting, Consent and young people's ethics: beyond Megan's story, *continuum, Journal of media and cultural studies*, downloaded 7/8/17.

[7]   E.g. Megan's Story, AFP, (2010) YouTube

most often boys and young men, they must also be engaged in solutions-based approaches. Adults – parents, teachers, others who work with children and young people – need support in the form of education and provision of a range of resources to engage with young people around this issue. To overcome the culture of silence, adult embarrassment, and a paralysing uncertainty over changing sexual norms, adults who variously provide for youth should develop an explicit set of statements and advocate for educative, policy and legislative changes that recognise, critiques and redresses the gendered sexual pressures on youth[8].

There is a significant difference between media portrayal of 'young people's sexting behaviours' and young people's lived experience and it is a mistake to conflate sexting behaviours with other online risks. Many parents, teachers and other adults who are responsible for supporting young people's online safety have little understanding of the realities of how young people view and engage in this behaviour. With misunderstanding comes fear and understandably adults are concerned about the consequences young people face when engaging in the act of sharing intimate images. Despite the majority of parents reporting that they felt comfortable having conversations with their children about the acceptability and impacts of sexting and that being informed about the topic was extremely important; less than half had spoken to their children about sexting in the last three months[9]. Most sexting relationships have no negative effect and social media has a major role to play in the negotiation and development of sexual relationships. There has been a recent shift in Australia from regarding image distribution as 'pornography' toward a greater focus on issues of privacy and the need to gain consent before sharing images.

'Technology [may indeed be] fast-tracking the sexualisation of young people'[10]; through technology they are exposed to 'globalised consumer oriented cultures of consumption which present challenges and pressures to have the 'right' types of embodiment, commodities and status symbols'[11]. Technology is almost universal among young people, therefore policing and controlling every avenue of social interaction is impossible[12]. What good sexuality and relationship education must therefore provide is a pathway for young people to develop a personal ethic and to treat others with respect – the best defence – and responses should be informed by young people's own perspectives and behaviour standards.

Education directed at adults needs to highlight the fact that while the harms can be extreme (e.g. the recent use of a website that contained sexual images of school girls from across Australia, images that were shared non-consensually or were obtained illegally and accompanied by 'predatory, misogynistic and violent content'[13]), most young people experience no or minimal harm from engaging in sexting. Adult fears about presumed dangers could be addressed by demonstrating that young people may be more responsible and self-protective in their use of technology than previous studies suggest. It is also important that adults understand that when non-consensual sharing occurs, the perpetrator is generally the same age as the victim and has received the image consensually. Online grooming of children and sexual predation by paedophiles is relatively rare, internet predators are mostly the same age as their targets[14].

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[8] Ringrose, Gill, Harvey, & Livingstone, (2012), A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting', A report prepared for the NSPCC
[9] Our Watch, (2015), The Line research summary, retrieved from https://www.ourwatch.org.au/What-We-Do/The-Line
[10] Courier Mail, November 3, 2016.
[11] Ringrose, Gill, Harvey, & Livingstone, (2012), A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting', A report prepared for the NSPCC, p 8.
[12] Professor Anne Mitchell, personal communication, March, 2017.
[13] ABC online news (2016) Police investigate pornography ring targeting Australian schoolgirls
[14] McGrath, H. (2012). Students, Cyber safety, Relationships and Life Education; a literature review.

Compared to Queensland state schools, are there advantages or disadvantages in the ways that other states and territories deliver sex education, respectful relationships education and education about at-risk behaviour and the use of digital technologies?

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation has developed *eSmart Schools*, a whole-school framework aimed at producing cultural change by addressing a school's structures and features, policies and procedures, wellbeing/relationships, pedagogy, curriculum and engagement of parents and community. Teachers as well as students are required to develop explicit written behaviour protocols in the context of the school values, while students are given opportunities to develop relationships through peer and cross-age interaction in formal and informal ways. While the framework was developed to enhance understandings about digital devices and their safe and effective use, as well as addressing issues of wellbeing and the effective prevention and management of bullying, its implementers have increasingly been asked to advise on matters to do with sexualised content and the unsafe use of technology by students.

We endorse the approach suggested by the Australian Curriculum: focus on educative purposes, strengths-based approach, the value of movement, development of health literacy and the inclusion of a critical enquiry approach. All the same, the strands, sub-strands and focus areas of the Health and Physical Education Curriculum produce a full program without a specific requirement that teachers produce outcomes in the areas of gender equality, sexuality education or respectful relationships (on and offline).

The UNESCO review cited in the Respectful Relationships Information Paper examined 22 curriculum-based (not one-off) sexuality education programs and found that about 80 per cent of these were effective in their aims. The review's broader agenda is to meet 'one of humanity's great challenges' that is, to 'prepar[e] children and young people for the transition to adulthood'[15]. When young people are compelled to seek out knowledge and skills relevant to informed decisions about their own and others' sexuality, they are 'vulnerable to coercion, abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV'[16]. The only other option is to produce 'clear, well informed, and scientifically-grounded sexuality education based in the universal values of respect and human rights'.

The goals of sexuality education, according to this paper, are as follows:

- to increase knowledge and understanding;
- to explain and clarify feelings, values and attitudes;
- to develop or strengthen skills; and
- to promote and sustain risk-reducing behaviour.

There are strong advantages in the development of respectful relationships education. The Department of Education, Victoria has developed, in conjunction with *Our Watch*, Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships education. These learning materials have been designed for teachers in primary and secondary schools to develop students' social, emotional and positive relationship skills. Efforts to promote social and emotional skills and positive gender norms in children and young people have been shown to improve health related outcomes and subjective wellbeing and shown to reduce antisocial behaviours, including bullying and engagement in gender-related violence[17].

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[15] UNESCO (2009), International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators, Vol 1, The rationale for sexuality education, iii.

[16] UNESCO (2009), International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators, Vol 1, The rationale for sexuality education, iii.

[17] Espelage, D., and Swearer, S., (Eds) (2004) Bullying in American Schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey and London.

The Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) of the Victorian learning materials cover eight topics of Social and Emotional Learning across all levels of primary and secondary education: Emotional Literacy; Personal Strengths; Positive Coping; Problem Solving; Stress Management; Help Seeking; Gender and Identity; and Positive Gender Relationships. It has been envisaged as a school-wide implementation, delivered over time in a sustainable way and supported by lesson plans and resources. The agenda of the Our Watch/Department of Education, Victoria Respectful Relationships educational resources is to change the discourse around gender relationships with a view to reducing violence against women but a respectful relationship framework must also, in our view, encompass the aim of producing in children and young people a healthy self-respect as well as respect for others, including those of different culture or colour, ability, sexuality or age.

When one thinks about a whole-school implementation, however, difficulties lie in ensuring that all staff support it, endorse it, and importantly, model the desired attitudes and behaviours. This does not always happen. Not only do teachers sometimes engage in bullying one another, something students observe, but they do not intervene in bullying (read also cyber abuse, harassment, sexual and racist and other forms of relational aggression) incidents: found that teachers intervened in only 4 per cent of incidents in the playground and only 18 per cent of incidents in the classroom[18].

We know that while individual talks, lessons, drama presentations and the like can raise awareness about a subject, they have no capacity to effect real or sustainable change in attitudes and behaviour despite schools' continuing to employ them. Schools should be encouraged to adopt whole-school programs and approaches based in reliable evidence [about bullying], which can be applied across a range of contexts and supported to do so – by a framework such as STEPS[19].

Clearly, the purpose of the educational resource must be clear and unambiguous. It has been noted among researchers that some programs work where others fail. Program fidelity is seen to be an especially important aspect of intervention effectiveness and program outcomes[20]: 'If you don't attend to implementation fidelity, you won't get the [intended] reductions' in negative behaviours[21].

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[18] Veenstra,R., Lindenberg, S., Huitsing, G. and Salmivalli, C., (2014) The Role of Teachers in Bullying: The Relation Between Antibullying Attitudes, Efficacy, and Efforts to Reduce Bullying Craig and Pepler, *Journal of Educational* Psychology, Vol. 106, No. 4, 1135–1143.

[19] STEPS decision-making framework (2016) Bullying. No Way!

[20] Polanin, J., and Espelage, D., (2014) Using a Meta-analytic Technique to Assess the Relationship between Treatment Intensity and Program Effects in a Cluster-Randomized Trial, J Behav Educ DOI 10.1007/s10864-014-9205-9

[21] Bureau of Educational Research, University of Illinois

Does the Queensland Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum:

- **meet students' needs?**
- help students to make safe and healthy choices?
- help students understand respectful relationships?

As educators know, the curriculum is only as good as local implementation: results between classrooms vary more than between schools[22]. There is also a significant difference not only in the kinds of skills and content taught from classroom to classroom, the time spent on these (from 15 per cent to 80 per cent of time on a topic), but in their levels of complexity. The difficulty is in finding a balance between a 'common entitlement to core knowledge and skills' and the flexibility to allow students 'opportunities to develop and pursue areas of individual interest and expertise'[23] without diverging too much into 'areas of ephemeral interest rather than enduring value and . . . fundamental requirements for all further learning . . .given insufficient attention'[24].

Only analysis at the individual school level would reveal with any accuracy whether these aims were met: as already stated, the difference between teachers' understanding, ability to deliver content, ability to overcome reluctance to discuss 'tricky' topics is enormous. The Deakin University unit on teaching sexuality and relationship education within the context of the Health and Physical Education Degree acknowledges that:

Sexuality education can be confronting and challenging for teachers and currently there is very little professional development in the area of health and sexuality education, particularly for primary teachers. Current programs in primary schools are often taken by outside agencies in one-off blocks. This approach does not provide any continuity in teaching and goes against research that suggests classroom teachers are the best people to teach sexuality education. Research also indicates that secondary school teachers find this a difficult area to teach. Graduating teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to integrate sexuality education content, issues and activities in health education programs in line with the Victorian Curriculum and student wellbeing policies and practice. Teachers need skills to provide effective teaching and learning activities, assess resources, deal with potentially sensitive issues with students and allay possible parental concerns. In Victoria there is a *degree of outsourcing of teaching, parent outreach and professional development* [25] (Our italics).

There is, as far as we could discover, no evaluation of whether beginning (or, for that matter, experienced) teachers are, in fact, 'equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to integrate sexuality education content, issues and activities in health education programs', especially considering the relatively small age-gap between them and their students. Many schools utilise external providers to present sexuality education.

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[22] Harvard Education Press, (2009) Education Newsletter, Behind the classroom door, Vol 25, 6
[23] Victorian Curriculum F-10 (2015) Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines – VCAA, 16.
[24] Victorian Curriculum F-10 (2015) Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines – VCAA, 17.
[25] Deakin University Online Handbook, Bachelor of Health and Physical Education. Accessed 3/8/17

- curriculum, including ethical decision making
- involvement of students, parents and the school community in the content of sexuality education
- policies at the school or state-wide level
- teacher training and professional development
- other changes?

In examining the Queensland – and other – Health and Physical Education frameworks for the delivery of respectful relationships education and health education what is immediately apparent is the huge amount of work that must be undertaken in individual schools to unravel the sheer amount of material presented and break them down into tasks such as course content, curriculum development, relevant pedagogies, evaluation strategies, reporting methods. We wonder whether a slightly more prescriptive approach could cut down the sheer amount of work replicated across state/territory/country.

At present, sex education in Queensland state schools is not compulsory. Leaving it to school-based decisions sets it against competition from other subject areas and places no obligation on principals to undertake it, train staff or find a place for it on the timetable. Respectful relationships programs are likewise discretionary.

This leads, in the words of some commentators, to sex education being left to delivery through young people's viewing of explicit online pornography. The Australian Medical Association believes that 'children viewing highly sexualised pornographic material are at risk of negatively affecting their psychological development and mental health by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a critical time of development in their life'[26]. A number of media reports cite children 'displaying worrying sexual behaviour'[27]. Whether the children have watched music videos or internet advertising and are imitating what they see, or have been sexually abused is unclear. What is clear is that teachers are unprepared to manage incidents which is concerning, since 40 per cent of them have witnessed behaviour such as 'simulated intercourse, attempts to coerce other students into sexual conduct' or, from a four year-old, threats 'to rape other students[28]'. There does then, seem to be a definite need to give children strategies to protect themselves and critical thinking tools to help them discern that much of what they may observe online is fantasy, not reality.

The Department of Education, Victoria in association with Our Watch has not only produced a series of statements to guide teachers, but a series of lesson plans with resources for teachers to use. They are comprehensive and robust, but one wonders how much time could realistically be devoted to them in an already crowded curriculum, particularly in the secondary context – an overcrowding, which has led some schools to do away with Homegroup/Tutor/Pastoral Care time in favour of subject delivery time.

There seems little emphasis on ethical decision making, which is only paid passing reference. Queensland Education has an ethical decision-making model (Ethical Standards Unit) using the REFLECT acronym http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/codeofconduct/pdfs/guideedm.pdf that underpins the public service. Ethical decision making is allied with philosophy and should consider principles of autonomy, avoidance of actions that cause harm, how to work for the good of the individual and society, principles of justice and fidelity, or, behaving in an honourable or trustworthy

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[26]   Parliamentary Report (2016) Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet
[27] Smith, A., Teachers need more training to deal with problematic sexual behaviour, Sydney Morning Herald, 6 August, 2017.
[28]   Smith, A., Teachers need more training to deal with problematic sexual behaviour, Sydney Morning Herald, 6 August, 2017.

fashion. This strand should perhaps be abstracted and be considered as relevant across the curriculum, but perhaps most apposite in the Humanities.

Involvement of parents in the work of the school community is effective for a number of reasons. It is difficult but not impossible to engage parents in such an educative endeavour and there have been calls from different community organisations for sex education to be made mandatory in all Queensland schools. According to a poll run by the Courier Mail, most parents want sex education classes to be compulsory in Queensland state schools[29].

Current and continually updated resources are required for students, parents and teachers to ensure a holistic and genuine approach that meets the complex needs of these audiences. The Foundation's workshop and consultancy service Connect is one such example where schools can access evidence-based, best practice workshops to support the implementation of respectful relationships curriculum.

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[29] Courier-Mail, October 17, 2016 Lauren Martyn-Jones 'State schools urged to teach kids about sex'

Recommendations

In the view of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation:

- The sending of sexual images is not a technology issue, it is a social one, subject to misunderstandings and moral panic induced by fear and whipped up by the media. We propose a collaborative effort – Government, Education, Not-for-Profit – that works toward changing the public discourse concerning the sharing of intimate images, and the current culture of victim-blaming, to reduce the prevalence of image-based abuse and help eliminate barriers to reporting for the person whose image has been distributed without consent.

- Age-appropriate sexuality and relationship education should commence before young children begin to get interested in sexuality and continue through adolescence, taking account of children's **and young people's** developmental stages and needs but encourage moral and ethical growth as well as resilience.

- Respectful relationships education and sex education in Queensland state schools should be made mandatory as soon as children begin school.

  The difficulty with leaving it to individual schools, as research has shown, is that they can choose to ignore the area completely or play lip-service to it, with the result that many students do not receive the information they need. Parents can present a serious block to the implementation of such programs and if a program is not compulsory, schools have the responsibility of bringing them on board which can drain resources and slow momentum.

- If a whole-school model of respectful relations and sex education is to be implemented, it must be supported with training and resources:
    - Prior sessions to inform/educate staff of the need for the program
    - Gain staff support of the intentions and substance of the program
    - Provide comprehensive professional learning for all staff
    - Provide targeted professional learning for staff who will be involved in delivering the program
    - Examine the possibility of de-briefing for teachers who deliver lessons
    - Support with refresher professional learning about mandatory reporting

- Young people also need explicit education in critical thinking that is transferable and relevant to authentic experiences outside the school.

THANK YOU.

Alannah & Madeline
Foundation