

# RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

## POSITION STATEMENT

### PURPOSE

Family Planning Alliance Australia (FPAA) is the nation's peak body in reproductive and sexual health. The alliance advocates and drives improvement in public health by examining up-to-date evidence and representing leading health and education agencies across Australia. This statement provides a shared position that informs the work of the FPAA with all Australians in the area of comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

### BACKGROUND

Comprehensive RSE is defined as learning that begins at birth and continues throughout life, concerning the physical, emotional, mental and social aspects of sexuality and relationships. Age and developmental stage-appropriate information delivered in RSE contributes to this lifelong learning process. For the purposes of this document, age and developmental stage-appropriate is defined as information that is gradually built upon in line with the age and development of a child<sup>i</sup>.

Comprehensive RSE helps to empower all children and young people to develop a positive body image and manage important transitions such as puberty. It also contributes to their ability to make informed decisions concerning relationships, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing. RSE influences attitudes and values like respect, equality and diversity. RSE requires a positive and respectful approach that recognises the possibility of pleasurable and safe sexual experience, based on a foundation of mutual consent and free of coercion and violence<sup>ii,iii,iv</sup>. Although elements of RSE are included in the Australian curriculum from Foundation through to Year 10, each school may incorporate RSE in a variety of ways depending on the context of the school and/or state or territory curriculum.

### FAMILY PLANNING ALLIANCE AUSTRALIA POSITION

- Governments should fund, implement and evaluate mandatory comprehensive age and developmental stage-appropriate RSE programs for all schools, as well as community programs for young Australians not engaged in schools.
- Principals and other education managers should provide opportunities for regular professional development in order to increase teaching competence and boost teacher confidence to deliver RSE. The compulsory inclusion of adequate RSE training should be offered to all pre-service teachers at the tertiary level across Australia.
- Australian curriculum documents should provide sufficient detail so that teachers know what topics they need to address at the appropriate time in the students' development. Adequate teaching and planning time should be allocated to teach the topics effectively.
- Support for a whole school approach that integrates action across three key domains;
  - (i) Teaching and learning: what is taught and how it is taught.
  - (ii) School environment and ethos: policies and physical and social environments that contribute to the ethos of a school environment.
  - (iii) School-community partnerships: partnerships that recognise the influence of the family and relevant agencies and their role in supporting RSE and reinforcing learnings.
- Support for parent and career programs to develop their capacity to support age and developmental stage-appropriate discussions about relationships and sexuality, including the development of personal safety skills for children and young people.
- Getting input from school nurses, local reproductive and sexual health and relevant community service providers to supplement (not replace) the role of classroom teachers in delivering the program.

### FPAA WILL ADVOCATE FOR COMPREHENSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA BY:

- Promoting approaches that ensure the delivery of consistent and comprehensive RSE programs.
- Supporting school-based evaluation of RSE programs to ensure continuous improvement and effectiveness.
- Advocating for the maintenance and expansion of funding to enable high quality school-based comprehensive RSE programs to be delivered in Australia.
- Engaging in the public and professional discourse on RSE.
- Acting in an advisory capacity to policy makers through providing expertise and research-based information to influence decisions.
- Supporting or conducting research that informs quality teaching of RSE.
- Collaborating with other groups and networks to provide equitable access to RSE programs.

## WHY IS RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

### EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT COMPREHENSIVE RSE PROGRAMS:

- **Are a trusted source of information for children and young people.** Two large-scale Australian studies of over 4000 students found that between 43 and 77% of young people cited school programs as a trusted source of information on relationships and sexuality<sup>viii,ix</sup>.
- **Influence behaviours that lead to decreases in unplanned pregnancy<sup>vi,xxi</sup>, abortion<sup>vii</sup>, and sexually transmissible infections including HIV<sup>vii</sup>.** International evidence shows that RSE programs impact positive behaviours such as: up to a 40% increased use of condoms and other contraception, up to a 53% reduction in sexual risk-taking, and up to a 37% delay of initiating sex as a result of sexuality education<sup>i</sup>.
- **Influence behaviours that lead to a decrease in sexual abuse<sup>x</sup>.** There is evidence to suggest that school-based interventions which promote education about informed consent to sexual activity can effectively prevent or decrease intimate partner violence, victimisation among adolescents, and the emotional harm that such violence can cause<sup>xii</sup>. However, these interventions must be delivered by trained teachers and reinforced in community settings<sup>xii</sup>.
- **Influence behaviours that lead to decreases in homophobia<sup>xii</sup> and transphobia.** In Australia, 75% of LGBTI students experience abuse or discrimination, and 80% of student's experience abuse or bullying in the school environment<sup>xiii</sup>. International and Australian evidence<sup>xiv,xv</sup> indicates the prevalence of homophobia<sup>xii</sup> and transphobia can be significantly reduced with anti-discriminatory school policies and education programs.
- **Build learning about the social construction of gender and foster gender equality<sup>xvii,xviii</sup> and encourage critical analysis of popular media, pornography, social networking and other online environments.** RSE programs promote awareness of sexual and gender stereotypes and development of negotiation skills in responding to peer pressure, building new relationships and navigating online dating<sup>xvi</sup>. Initiate discussions about intimacy, desire and pleasure in sexual relationships prior to the onset of puberty. Young people want to learn about these topics to feel positive about themselves, their sexuality and their bodies<sup>xix,xx</sup>. Evidence indicates approximately a quarter of students have had sexual intercourse by year 10<sup>x</sup>, 34% by Year 11 and 50% by Year 12<sup>x</sup>, emphasising the need for comprehensive RSE in the school setting.

## PRINCIPLES OF COMPREHENSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION:

- All students, from Foundation to Year 12, should have access to age and developmental stage-appropriate RSE that aims to empower all students with knowledge and skills to encourage healthy and safe choices concerning their relationships and their sexual health and wellbeing.
- Teachers play a key role in delivering RSE. This should be clearly articulated by all Australian educational authorities, who should provide relevant support to teachers and enable them to confidently and competently deliver RSE.
- RSE should be acknowledged as an integrated education and health promotion initiative.
- Schools should offer a positive and open view of relationships and sexuality and be respectful of diversity. Resources utilised should be inclusive and representative of different cultures, religions, sexual orientation, gender identity and family values.
- A diversity of gender identities should be visible and valued within the learning environment.

### The World Health Organisation's definition of sexuality is:

*"...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors."*

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# FAMILY PLANNING ALLIANCE AUSTRALIA

Reproductive and Sexual Health Policy and Advocacy

## **FAMILY PLANNING ALLIANCE AUSTRALIA IS THE NATION'S PEAK BODY IN REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH.**

It promotes advances in public health through policy insight and advocacy and represents leading health and education agencies across Australia.

The current primary members are the state based Family Planning Organisations and we look forward to others joining the alliance.

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[www.familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au](http://www.familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au)

### **AUSTRALIAN FAMILY PLANNING ORGANISATIONS**

Sexual Health and Family  
Planning ACT  
Level One, 28 University Ave  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Phone: 02 6247 3077  
[www.shfpact.org.au](http://www.shfpact.org.au)

Family Planning NSW  
328-336 Liverpool Road  
Ashfield NSW 2131  
Phone: 02 8752 4300  
[www.fpnsw.org.au](http://www.fpnsw.org.au)

Family Planning Welfare  
Association of Northern  
Territory Inc  
Unit 2, The Clock Tower  
Coconut Grove NT 0810  
Phone: 08 8948 0144  
[www.fpwnt.com.au](http://www.fpwnt.com.au)

True Relationships and  
Reproductive Health  
Building 1  
230 Lutwyche Road  
Windsor QLD 4030  
Phone: 07 3250 0240  
[www.true.org.au](http://www.true.org.au)

SHine South Australia  
64c Woodville Road  
Woodville SA 5011  
Phone: 1300 794 584  
[www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

Family Planning Tasmania  
421 Main Road  
Glenorchy TAS 7010  
Phone: 03 6273 9117  
[www.fpt.asn.au](http://www.fpt.asn.au)

Family Planning Victoria  
901 Whitehorse Road  
Box Hill VIC 3128  
Phone: 03 9257 0100  
[www.fpv.org.au](http://www.fpv.org.au)

Sexual Health Quarters  
70 Roe Street  
Northbridge WA 6003  
Phone: 08 9227 6177  
[www.srhwa.com.au](http://www.srhwa.com.au)

