



## R4Respect:

Lessons from a peer-to-peer respectful  
relationships education program

*Key findings and future directions*

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

RESEARCH TO POLICY & PRACTICE  
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ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from ANROWS research *Young people as agents of change in preventing violence against women*. Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Struthers, K., Parmenter, N., & Tilbury, C. (2019). *Young people as agents of change in preventing violence against women* (Research report, 02/2019). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

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ANROWS research contributes to the six national outcomes of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses national plan outcome 2 - Relationships are respectful.

### **Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence**

We acknowledge the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family, sexual violence and neglect, who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing.

Recommended support services include: 1800 RESPECT - 1800 737 732, Lifeline - 13 11 14

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledge.

## In brief

- Research into peer-to-peer models for respectful relationships education shows promising results.
- The R4Respect program had a positive impact on young people's understanding of the nature and extent of interpersonal violence.
- R4Respect showed potential to positively influence young people's behaviour, including how they managed conflict.
- Young men's attitudes towards gender equality remain difficult to shift.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider peer-to-peer initiatives as a part of the respectful relationships mix — and help to build the evidence base.
- Embed respectful relationships programs as a part of a whole-school approach.
- Engage young people in program planning and development.
- Apply a gendered lens and use a range of existing tools and frameworks.
- Ensure that programs are inclusive of diversity.
- Manage the wellbeing of participants.

# Primary prevention of violence against women and respectful relationships education

Over the last decade, primary prevention of violence against women (PVAW) initiatives — that is, efforts to stop violence from occurring in the first place — have proliferated. These initiatives are, typically, grounded in the evidence that shows that gender inequality, entrenched in all aspects of socio-cultural, economic and political life, is a primary driver of violence against women.

There is a growing body of international evidence on the techniques that are effective in preventing violence against women and their children (Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety & VicHealth, 2015). Techniques that have demonstrated effectiveness or promise include: direct participation programs; community mobilisation and strengthening; organisational development; communications and social marketing; and civil society advocacy (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth, 2015).

Respectful relationships education (RRE) for young people is one kind of direct participation program. RRE can occur in school, at post-school institutions, in youth groups and in other contexts. It can occur through face-to-face delivery and online. RRE initiatives may incorporate other programs, such as health, sexuality and bystander action education.

# Peer-to-peer education models

Peer-to-peer education is a “participatory style of teaching and learning in which people of similar social status or group membership educate each other about specific topics” (McKeganey, 2000 in Southgate & Aggleton, 2016). Peer-led interventions are viewed as a means of engaging young people, especially those from marginalised groups, on a range of sensitive topics, including sexual health, drug use, mental health, bullying and more (Kim & Free, 2008; Rich et al., 2012; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012). The use of peer models is promoted as valuing young people’s capacity to participate and lead change (United Nations Development Program, 2018).

The long-term benefits of peer-led RRE interventions, however, are not as evident as their popularity. There is still no definitive answer on whether peer-led RRE is more effective over other models of RRE.

# The ANROWS research project: Young people as agents of change in preventing violence against women

The *Young people as agents of change in preventing violence against women* project, led by Dr Karen Struthers from Griffith University, evaluates the impact of the R4Respect peer-led respectful relationships program run by YFS Ltd, Logan (YFS) in south-east Queensland. YFS is a not-for-profit community services agency that delivers employment, housing, financial counselling and other services. The R4Respect program is centred on youth-led peer-to-peer RRE sessions and also incorporates a social media strategy and community events.

Using an action research methodology, the R4Respect team developed and delivered 4 hours of RRE to young people aged 14-25 in Logan (Queensland) and Darwin. Researchers administered pre- (n=86) and post-workshop (n=80) surveys to participants and undertook a range of interviews with stakeholders.

Young people were actively engaged in the research process through the Youth Research Group (YRG). The YRG was made up of the program coordinator, peer educators, a research officer and youth “ambassadors” to the program, five of whom attended meetings regularly. This group facilitated student input toward the design of the survey tools and questions, reflection and revisions following each RRE session and data entry and analysis. Darwin-based sexual assault counselling and education organisation and project partner, Ruby Gaea, reviewed the program, providing feedback relevant to a different geographical, cultural and socio-economic context.

The full report and guide are available at <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/young-people-as-agents-of-change-in-preventing-violence-against-women/>

## Key findings

### Peer-to-peer education is a promising model for respectful relationships education

Almost all participants strongly agreed or agreed that it is helpful to have young people leading the learning on respectful relationships — and that young people leading the learning helped participants better understand what is okay and what crosses the line into harm. Teachers and community workers were also very positive about the relatability and enthusiasm of the peer educators in the R4Respect program.

### R4Respect had a positive impact on young peoples' understanding of violence

The results of the study indicate that the R4Respect peer education sessions impacted positively on young people's understanding of what constitutes respect and harm in relationships. After undertaking the program, there was a 12 percent increase in young people indicating strong agreement with the statement “I know that there is a clear line between what is okay behaviour and what is harmful behavior”.

## **R4Respect showed potential to positively influence young peoples' behaviour**

There was a 12 percent increase, post-workshop, in young people indicating strong agreement with the statement “I solve disagreements peacefully”. Responses to the statement “I can remove myself from a person or partner who could cause physical or emotional harm to me” were also encouraging. Eighty-five percent of young people indicated that they agreed/strongly agreed with this statement post-workshop, compared to 68 percent, pre-workshop.

## **Young men's attitudes towards gender equality remain difficult to shift**

The R4Respect program evaluation showed clear indications that attitudes to gender equality can be difficult to shift — especially among young men. Before the program, 44 percent of young men indicated that they were unsure about, agreed that, or strongly agreed that “men should take control in relationships”, compared with 41 percent, post-program. Results for female participants were more positive — the number of young women who disagreed with the statement “men should take control in relationships” had risen from 20 percent, pre-program, to 35 percent, post-program.

## **Implications for policy and practice**

### **Consider peer-to-peer initiatives as a part of the respectful relationships mix – and help to build the evidence base**

Peer education is a strategy to help promote the “youth voice” in RRE. Programs like R4Respect are worthy of wider application and further development to help meet the prevention objectives of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* (the National Plan) (Council of Australian Governments, 2011) and continue to build the evidence base.

### **Embed programs as a part of a whole-school approach**

Programs like R4Respect have a role to play in the whole-of-school, systematised approaches to RRE that are emerging as good practice in Australia. Teachers, as well as non-government organisation stakeholders, described how external programs, such as R4Respect, reinforce existing education — and that they are most useful when complementing existing programs, rather than “standing alone”.

## Engage young people in planning and development

Young people should be encouraged to take equal responsibility for the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of RRE programs. This can be achieved by establishing participatory and decision-making structures and processes. Efforts to attract and train suitable young men to be involved in peer-to-peer RRE need to be ongoing — the R4Respect research showed this to be a challenge.

## Use a range of existing tools and frameworks

In Australia, there are well-developed, evidence-based guidance and educational resources (including curriculum) for RRE. R4Respect, for example, used the *Respectful Relationships Education Toolkit* (2018), developed by Our Watch.

There are limited resources available to guide the development of specifically peer-to-peer RRE models. As an outcome of this research, the R4Respect educational materials and processes have been developed into an R4Respect education guide to help address this gap. The guide is available at <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/young-people-as-agents-of-change-in-preventing-violence-against-women/>

## Apply a gendered lens

Feminist frameworks that expose the links between gender, power and violence are recommended as most effective in challenging violence supportive attitudes, actions and cultural norms (Flood, Fergus & Heenan, 2009; Ollis, & Dyson, 2017; Our Watch, 2015; Taket, & Crisp, 2018). Adopting these frameworks will ensure RRE programs maintain alignment with the gender-based framework of the *National Plan*.

## Ensure that programs are inclusive of diversity

It is also important for peer-led RRE programs to improve their responsiveness to and inclusion of young people from a wide range of identities and backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, LGBTIQ young people, refugees and migrants and others who can be marginalised, such as young people with disabilities. These programs also need to challenge the compounding impact of inequalities, such as those based on race, class and sexual identity.

## Manage the wellbeing of participants

RRE programs can prompt disclosures and distress among young people as participants and as peer educators. It is important to have strong relationships among participating community organisations and agreed protocols between educators, schools and external organisations, in order to manage the wellbeing of young people involved in RRE.

# Further resources

[R4Respect Peer Education Guide](#) (2019) - YFS, Ruby Gaea, Griffith University & ANROWS

[Respectful Relationships: A Resource Kit for Victorian Schools](#) (2018) – Victorian Department of Education and Training

[Respectful Relationships Education \(RRE\) Toolkit](#) – Our Watch

[Tracking Change: midterm snapshot evaluation findings for The Line Campaign](#) (2017) – Our Watch

[Respectful Relationships Education in Schools: The Beginnings of Change. Final Evaluation Report](#) (2016) – Our Watch

[Partners in Prevention website](#) – Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria

[LOVEBiTES: An evaluation of the LOVEBiTES and respectful relationships programs in a Sydney school](#) (2012) - Flood, M. & Kendrick, V.

[Boundaries, better friends and bystanders: Peer education and the prevention of sexual assault. A report on the CASA House Peer Educator Pilot Project](#) (2011) – Imbesi, R. & Lees, N.

[Respectful Relationships Education. Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools](#) (2009) – Flood, M., Fergus, L & Heenan, M. for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

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