

Should sexual consent be compulsorily taught in schools?

What they said...

'[We] are sad and angry that [we] did not receive an adequate education regarding what amounts to sexual assault and what to do when it happens'

Chanel Contos, Australian advocate for better and earlier consent education in schools

'Right now, there's a petition signed by thousands of schoolgirls calling for better and earlier sexual consent education in schools. Is that really what we need, more lessons on consent rather than on Maths?'

Andrew Bolt, social and political commentator

The issue at a glance

On March 21, 2021, the Victorian government announced that consent education is to become compulsory in Victorian state schools and will be taught from Term 2, 2021.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-21/consent-education-to-become-mandatory-in-victorian-state-schools/100019522>

On March 9, 2021, the Queensland government announced that independent and state schools would review sexual consent education. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-09/queensland-government-to-examine-how-sexual-consent-is-taught/13231692>

On September 25, 2020, the British Parliament enacted regulations that require all primary schools in England to teach 'Relationships Education' and all secondary schools to teach 'Relationships and Sex Education'. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06103/>

Despite the increasing pressure in Australia and overseas to mandate consent education in both primary and secondary schools, there remain critics who doubt schools' capacity to deal with this issue appropriately and who believe that school-based sex education intrudes in an area best dealt with in a family context <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/primary-school-kids-not-ready-for-sex-ed-says-ukip-2/>

Background

The information printed below is a condensed version of the content of two Wikipedia entries 'Sexual Consent' and 'Sex education'. The complete texts can be found at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_consent and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_education

Sexual consent

Sexual consent is consent to engage in sexual activity. Sexual activity without consent is considered rape or other sexual assault. In the late 1980s, academic Lois Pineau argued that society must move towards a more communicative model of sexuality so that consent becomes more explicit and clearer, objective and layered, with a more comprehensive model than 'no means no' or 'yes means yes'. Many universities have instituted campaigns about consent. Creative campaigns with attention-grabbing slogans and images that market consent can be effective tools to raise awareness of campus sexual assault and related issues.

In Canada 'consent means...the voluntary agreement of the complainant to engage in sexual activity' without abuse or exploitation of 'trust, power, or authority', coercion or threats.

Consent can also be revoked at any moment.

Since the late 1990s, it has been stressed that consent should be 'free verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity.' Affirmative consent may still be limited since the underlying, individual circumstances surrounding the consent cannot always be acknowledged in the 'yes means yes', or in the 'no means no', model.

Sexual consent and the law

Definitions surrounding consent and how it should be communicated have been contradictory, limited or without consensus. Dr James Roffee, a senior lecturer in criminology in the Monash University School of Social Sciences, argues that legal definition needs to be universal, to avoid confusion in legal decisions. 2021 Australian of the Year and sexual relations reform advocate, Grace Tame, is currently campaigning for an Australia-wide definition of consent. <https://honey.nine.com.au/latest/grace-tame-consent-education-sexual-assault/a57da61e-7d9b-4a8a-884a-37d4f612d9c3> Currently, different Australian states have different legal definitions. In Canada, implied consent has not been a defence for sexual assault since the 1999 Supreme Court of Canada case of R v Ewanchuk, where the court unanimously ruled that consent must be explicit, instead of merely 'implied'. In the United States, the defense may have a chance to convince the court that consent was in some way implied by the victim. 'Implied' consent can be a legal defence in United States jurisdictions. In the United States, many actions can be perceived by the court as implied consent: having a previous relationship with the alleged rapist (e.g., befriending, dating, cohabitating, or marrying), consenting to sexual contact on previous occasions, flirting, or wearing 'provocative' clothing. Internationally, children or minors below a certain age (the legal age of sexual consent in that jurisdiction) are deemed not able to give valid consent by law to sexual acts. The age of consent is the age below which a minor is legally incompetent to consent to sexual acts. Consequently, an adult who engages in sexual activity with a minor younger than the age of consent cannot claim that the sexual activity was consensual, and such sexual activity may be considered statutory rape.

Sex education

Sex education is instruction in issues relating to human sexuality, including emotional relations and responsibilities, human sexual anatomy, sexual activity, sexual reproduction, age of consent, reproductive health, reproductive rights, safe sex, birth control and sexual abstinence. The ways consent to sexual relations may be given can also form part of sex education. Sex education that covers all these aspects is known as comprehensive sex education. Sex education may be provided by parents or caregivers, or as part of at school programs and public health campaigns.

Traditionally, the discussion of all sexual issues was considered taboo, and adolescents in many cultures were not given any information on sexual matters. Such instruction, as was given, was traditionally left to a child's parents, and often this was put off until just before their marriage. However, in the late 19th century, the progressive education movement led to the introduction of sex education as 'social hygiene' in North American school curricula and the introduction of school-based sex education.

Despite early inroads of school-based sex education, most of the information on sexual matters in the mid-20th century was obtained informally from friends and the media, and much of this information was deficient or of dubious value, especially during the period following puberty, when curiosity about sexual matters was the most acute. This deficiency was heightened by the increasing incidence of teenage pregnancies, particularly in Western countries after the 1960s. As part of each country's efforts to reduce such pregnancies, programs of sex education were introduced, initially over strong opposition from parent and religious groups.

The outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s has given a new sense of urgency to sex education. In many African countries, where AIDS is at epidemic levels, sex education is seen by most scientists as a vital public health strategy. Some international organizations such as Planned Parenthood consider that broad sex education programs have global benefits, such as controlling the risk of overpopulation and the advancement of women's rights. The use of mass media campaigns has sometimes resulted in high levels of 'awareness' coupled with essentially superficial knowledge of HIV transmission.

Effectiveness of sex education

Evidence shows that a combination of comprehensive sex education and access to birth control appears to decrease the rates of unintended pregnancies among teenagers. A meta-analysis that compared comprehensive sex education programs with abstinence-only programs found that abstinence-only programs did not reduce the likelihood of pregnancy, but rather may have increased it. Numerous studies show that curricula providing accurate information about condoms and contraception can lead to reductions in the risky behaviors reported by young people as well as reductions in unintended pregnancies and STIs. Programs that teach only abstinence have not been shown to be effective.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 'A 2010 review found that "gender-focused" curricula – meaning curricula that integrate gender equality into the learning material – were substantially more effective in reducing risky behaviors than programs that did not consider gender.' Research has also shown that delay in sexual initiation, use of condoms and practice contraception has been a result of young people adopting egalitarian attitudes about gender roles. These individuals were also found to be less likely engaged in violent relationships and have a lower rate of STIs including HIV and unintended pregnancy.

Improvements in sex education

An article published in the British Medical Journal in 2002 stated that 'Few sexual health interventions are designed with input from adolescents. Adolescents have suggested that sex education should be more positive with less emphasis on anatomy and scare tactics; it should focus on negotiation skills in sexual relationships and communication; and details of sexual health clinics should be advertised in areas that adolescents frequent (for example, school toilets, shopping centres).'

The UNFPA recommends comprehensive sexuality education that 'is taught over several years, introducing age-appropriate information consistent with the evolving capacities of young people. It includes scientifically accurate, curriculum-based information about human development, anatomy and pregnancy. It also includes information about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. And it goes beyond information, to encourage confidence and improved communication skills. Curricula should also address the social issues surrounding sexuality and reproduction, including cultural norms, family life and interpersonal relationships.' The explicit inclusion of consent education is now widely recommended as part of this process. <https://theconversation.com/not-as-simple-as-no-means-no-what-young-people-need-to-know-about-consent-155736>

Internet information

On April 2, 2021, The Conversation published an article by Sharon O'Mara, PhD Candidate in Crime, Justice and Legal Studies, La Trobe University and Kirsty Duncanson, Senior Lecturer in Crime, Justice and Legal Studies, La Trobe University, titled 'Sexuality education can counter what kids learn from porn, but some teachers fear backlash when tackling 'risky'

topics. The article outlines why sex education is needed and considers some of the problems teachers face in delivering it.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/sexuality-education-can-counter-what-kids-learn-from-porn-but-some-teachers-fear-backlash-when-tackling-risky-topics-158209>

On March 25, 2021, The Courier Mail published a report titled 'Consent education will not easily solve issues, expert warns' which outlines a number of reservations some authorities hold regarding consent education.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/school-consent-review-gets-underway/news-story/2197b701ef65fc3fc9ca265065088c6d>

On March 23, 2021, Pedestrian published a report titled 'HUGE: Victoria Just Made Sexual Consent Education Mandatory in All State Schools'. The report quotes Victoria's Education Minister and acting premier James Merlino announcing the change and explaining the reasons for it.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.pedestrian.tv/sex-dating/consent-education-victoria-mandatory/>

On March 20, 2021, Mamamia published an article titled 'You are part of the problem': The captain of Brisbane Boys' College has a message for his peers.' The school captain was calling on his peers and all young men to adopt positive attitudes toward women.

The full text of the article can be accessed at <https://www.mamamia.com.au/mason-black-speech/>

On March 15, 2021, Australian Presbyterian (the National Journal of the Presbyterian Church of Australia) published an article titled 'What is the Christian View of Sex Education and Consent?' which outlines a Presbyterian view of what actions should be taken to overcome the problem of sexual assault.

The full text can be accessed at <https://ap.org.au/2021/03/15/what-is-the-christian-view-of-sex-education-and-consent/>

On March 12, 2021, Junkee published an overview of the history and current state of consent education in Australia titled 'How Consent Education Fell Behind in Australia'.

The full text can be accessed at <https://junkee.com/consent-in-sex-education-never-made-mandatory-in-australian-schools/289967>

On March 12, 2021, social and political commentator Andrew Bolt interviewed federal Education Minister Alan Tudge for Sky News. During the interview Bolt indicated his opposition to consent education in schools.

The full transcript of the interview can be accessed at <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/sky-news-andrew-bolt>

On March 11, 2021, Education HQ published an article titled 'Consent education for schools nationally' which referred to Respect Matters, a suite of education materials discouraging violence against women which the federal government plans to distribute to Australian schools.

The full text of the article can be accessed at <https://educationhq.com/news/consent-education-for-schools-nationally-91793/>

On March 11, 2021, the Greens Deputy Leader Larissa Waters issued a media release titled ‘Government’s consent education plan an insult to women and sexual violence survivors’ which criticises the federal government’s response to calls for consent education in schools. The full text can be accessed at <https://greensmps.org.au/articles/government-s-consent-education-plan-insult-women-and-sexual-violence-survivors>

‘In March 2021, Charlton Christian College posted on their website a message from the school’s Principal and Head of Senior School titled ‘Respectful Relationships and Consent’ which outlined the school’s response some of the issues surrounding sexual assault and young people.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.charlton.nsw.edu.au/respectful-relationships-and-consent/>

On February 27, 2021, 9 Honey published an article titled ‘Grace Tame pinpoints flaw in consent education: “Undermines our collective ability to understand”’. The article presents some of Tame’s criticisms of the current approach and suggestions for how it might be improved.

The full text can be accessed at <https://honey.nine.com.au/latest/grace-tame-consent-education-sexual-assault/a57da61e-7d9b-4a8a-884a-37d4f612d9c3>

On February 25, 2021, GQ (Gentlemen’s Quarterly) published an article titled ‘Sexual consent education needs an overhaul—how do we make it happen?’ which outlines some of the deficiencies in the current program and suggests how they might be addressed.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.gq.com.au/lifestyle/gq-inc/sexual-consent-education-needs-an-overhaulhow-do-we-make-it-happen/news-story/d61e8088fe1a0f3d864e975f09e3e039>

On February 23, 2021, The Conversation published an article by Jacqueline Hendriks, Research Fellow and Lecturer at Curtin University titled, ‘Not as simple as ‘no means no’: what young people need to know about consent’ which outlines some of the problems young people face with sexual assault and suggests some key features of effective instruction regarding consent.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/not-as-simple-as-no-means-no-what-young-people-need-to-know-about-consent-155736>

On February 20, 2021, Chanel Contos, a consent education advocate, posted an online petition calling for improved and earlier consent education in schools. The petition includes 3,874 testimonies (as of April 4, 2021) from young women describing sexual assault as secondary school students or soon after leaving school.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.teachusconsent.com/>

(Please note, some of the material contained in these testimonies is distressing. The site includes a trigger warning and contact numbers for Respect, Lifeline, Beyond Blue and the New South Wales child protection helpline.)

On February 11, 2021, The Hill published an article titled ‘Utah rejects sex education classes that would teach consent’ which details arguments for and against a Bill recently rejected in Utah that would have incorporated consent into the state’s sex education program.

The full text can be accessed at <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/education/538472-utah-rejects-sex-education-classes-that-would-teach>

On September 9, 2020, The Conversation published an article by Jacqueline Hendriks, Research Fellow and Lecturer at Curtin University titled ‘Relationships and sex education is now mandatory in English schools – Australia should do the same?’ The article looks at the deficiencies in the Australian sex education program and suggests reform and compulsory status.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/relationships-and-sex-education-is-now-mandatory-in-english-schools-australia-should-do-the-same-144348>

On February 29, 2020, The ABC published a report titled ‘Push to introduce mandatory, unified sexual consent lessons in Australian schools’ which gives an overview of how sex education and consent are currently taught in each Australian state and territory.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-29/australian-schools-on-how-they-teach-kids-consent/11969964>

On January 8, 2019, Education Week’ published an article titled ‘We’re Teaching Consent All Wrong’ outlining some of the deficiencies in the United States’ teaching of consent.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/were-teaching-consent-all-wrong/2019/01>

On August 30, 2018, Salon published an article titled ‘Could "consent education" really work to prevent sexual assault?’ which outlines how consent education might be improved to make it an effective measure reducing the likelihood of sexual assault.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.salon.com/2018/08/30/could-consent-education-really-work-to-prevent-sexual-assault/>

On April 7, 2015, The Irish Times published an opinion piece by Jacky Jones titled ‘Second Opinion: School-based consent education won’t stop sexual violence’. The article argues that the problem lies with the perpetrator of sexual assault and that the solution is not consent education.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/second-opinion-school-based-consent-education-won-t-stop-sexual-violence-1.2158599>

On March 19, 2015 The Christian Institute published an article outlining the views of Paul Nuttall, the Deputy Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), opposing sex education in primary schools. The article is titled ‘Primary school kids not ready for sex ed, says UKIP’.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/primary-school-kids-not-ready-for-sex-ed-says-ukip-2/>

Arguments in favour of compulsory education in sexual consent

1. Sexual assault is a significant problem for Australian adolescents and children Those who argue that consent education is vital for Australian adolescents and children point to the disproportionate representation of these groups among those who suffer sexual assault and abuse. They argue that both adolescents and children need a greater understanding of their right to bodily autonomy to help protect them from assault. They also argue that young potential perpetrators need an understanding of when they are assaulting another person.

It has been noted that young people in their late teens and early twenties are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault. This has been demonstrated through surveys of university students. The results of a National Survey released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2016 revealed that university students are disproportionately likely to be sexually harassed or assaulted. The survey revealed that 51 percent of university students were sexually harassed at least once in 2016. 6.9 percent of university students were sexually assaulted at least once in 2015 or 2016. Most perpetrators of these recent incidents of sexual assault or sexual harassment in a university setting were male, and in approximately half of these incidents, were known to the victim. Of students who were sexually assaulted in a university setting, 87 percent did not make a formal report or complaint to anyone at the university and 79 percent did not seek support or assistance from their university following the most recent incident. The report by the Australian Human Rights Commission noted that the results of the National Survey reflected existing research about the prevalence of sexual harassment in Australia more broadly, which indicates that women aged 18 to 24 experience higher rates of sexual harassment in the workplace than any other age group.

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/executive-summary-8#:~:text=Prevalence%20of%20sexual%20assault,-Overall%2C%20the%20prevalence&text=Overall%2C%206.9%25%20of%20students%20were,assaulted%20in%202015%20or%202016>. A similar pattern of sexual assault experienced by young people has been found in the United States. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused or assaulted by age 18. Regarding perpetrators, nearly a quarter of those arrested for sex crimes—including forcible rapes, sodomies, assaults with objects, and forced fondling—were under 18, and the most common age was 14 years old. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/were-teaching-consent-all-wrong/2019/01>

It has further been noted that students in secondary schools faced similar instances of assault. A 2016 report by the Women and Equalities Committee of the United Kingdom's House of Commons revealed 'the shocking scale of sexual harassment and sexual violence' experienced by girls in schools in England. Evidence presented to the Committee included that almost one-third (29 percent) of 16 to 18-year-old girls experienced unwanted sexual touching at school and 59 percent of girls and young women aged 13-21 said in 2014 that they had faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college in the past year. Giving evidence to the Committee, Laura Bates of the Everyday Sexism Project described sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools as 'a widespread, regular and common problem [and] something that the majority of girls are experiencing'. These findings related to girls and young women in English co-educational schools. <https://www.agsa.org.au/news/22609/> Recent work done among young women who had or were still attending single sex schools in Australia has revealed a similar problem. Chanel Contos, a former Australian private school student who is now a sexual reform advocate doing a master's degree in sex education, has had over 5,000 young women contact her with personal testimonies about sexual assaults they claim they suffered from young men who were then private school students. Ms Contos believes there is urgent need for improved sex education in schools, including more explicit and effective education about consent and the behaviours which indicate it has been given. She believes that neither male nor female students are sufficiently informed about this issue. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/15/do-they-even-know-they-did-this-to-us-why-i-launched-the-school-sexual-assault-petition> It has been noted that young males, especially those on their mid to late teens are the most likely to commit sexual assault.

According to the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey, 1 in 6 women have experienced at least one sexual assault since the age of 15 compared to 1 in 25 men. ABS data also shows that most recorded sexual assaults were perpetrated by males, with

the highest offender rates occurring in males aged 15-19.

<https://www.agsa.org.au/news/22609/> Without proper consent education, Chanel Contos argues there may be some young men who do not realise that their actions are sexual assaults and many young women who do not know how to take action to protect themselves.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/15/do-they-even-know-they-did-this-to-us-why-i-launched-the-school-sexual-assault-petition>

Finally, advocates for early consent education to be delivered within schools argue that children of all ages, including the very young, suffer sexual assault. Of the 25,500 women who participated in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health in 2018, 13-16 percent reported experiencing sexual abuse as a child. According to the 2017 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey, 11 percent of women and 5 percent of men in Australia report having been sexually abused before the age of 15 years. In total, the ABS estimates that approximately 1,410,100 people living in Australia experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15. Greater than half of these respondents (58 percent) report being sexually abused for the first time before the age of 10 years. https://bravehearts.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WIP_Facts-and-stats_updated-Oct-2019.pdf Statistics such as these have been used to justify consent education beginning as early as pre-school. Federal Liberal MP Dr Fiona Martin, who was a psychologist before entering Parliament, has argued such education would set up children for a life of healthy relationships and the ability to recognise coercive control and sexual abuse. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/embed-consent-education-in-school-curriculum-liberal-mp-urges-20210316-p57b4w.html>

2. Sex education, including consent, is often difficult for families and is avoided

Those who argue that consent education should be compulsory in schools claim that parents cannot be relied upon to inform their children in this area. Many parents, it is alleged, do not give their children adequate information about sex, and do not discuss sexual consent with them. It is further argued that many parents avoid this material because it is difficult for them to address.

Advocates for compulsory consent education within schools argue that sex education is an area in which many parents and guardians do not adequately educate their children and therefore the deficiencies must be addressed within schools. A comparative 2020 United States data survey found that a significant proportion of adolescents around the world reported rarely or never discussing sex with their parents. It further noted that parents often fail to have timely discussions about sex, such that as many as 40 percent of adolescents were engaging in sexual behaviour before their parents had discussed sexuality and sexual health and relationships with them. Barriers such as embarrassment, inaccurate knowledge, low self-efficacy, religious and cultural beliefs opposed to comprehensive sex education, and parental underestimation of their child's sexual behaviour, appear to prevent many parents from communicating about these issues. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12978-020-00975-y> Relatedly, Melissa Carnagey, a sexuality educator, and social worker, based in Austin, Texas, has presented a variety of motivations explaining why parents avoid giving their children adequate education about sex. Included among these is the belief that giving information about sexuality can be delayed until later in a child's life and that it is not a priority until a young person reaches or approaches puberty. Another reason why Carnagey believes that parents avoid giving their children sex education is awkwardness. She argues that many parents are inhibited by a lack of confidence in their own knowledge, by sexually related traumas from their own earlier lives and by the influence of religious beliefs. She also argues that parents are inhibited by the mistaken belief that if they discuss sexually related matters with their children, they will be encouraging them toward early sexual experimentation. <https://sexpositivefamilies.com/8-reasons-parents-avoid-the-talks/>

Supporters of sex education and consent education in schools argue that this reluctance on the part of parents necessitates schools taking on the role of sex educators.

It has been noted that some Australian parents from culturally diverse backgrounds feel particularly ill-equipped to educate their children about sex. In an article published by the ABC on March 18, 2021, a 55-year-old Melbourne mother from a traditional Chinese family revealed her sense of inadequacy when attempting to educate her daughter about sexual matters. She explains that her own parents rarely talked about sex, and she was not taught about consent. She states that she tried to educate herself by attending community workshops, consulting with mental health services, and reading parenting columns in both English and Chinese, so she could talk to her 17-year-old daughter about it. But she said none of those channels had what she was looking for. The article concludes, 'While many parents find sex an awkward topic, families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities say they are facing extra challenges.' Some of the parents interviewed urge that not only should schools inform students about consent, but there should also be programs to help parents from diverse backgrounds inform their children about this and other sex-related issues. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-18/migrant-parents-call-support-sex-education-consent-petition/100013554>

It has further been noted that even those parents who give their children basic sex education avoid some of the more challenging areas. In January 2014, Planned Parenthood and the Center for Latino and Adolescent Family Health released a survey that revealed that while 82 percent of parents have talked to their children about topics related to sexuality, 'more complicated topics' within this area were being avoided. The poll, 'Let's Talk: Are Parents Tackling Crucial Conversations about Sex?' showed that parents talk to their offspring about a wide range of sexuality-related topics, including relationships (92 percent) and their own values about when sex should or should not take place (87 percent). However, fewer parents were talking with their children about more difficult topics. Only 74 percent were advising their children re how to say no to sex. Leslie Kantor, national director of education, Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), has stated, 'The survey shows that some parents are still uncomfortable talking about harder topics, such as birth control and how to say no, and can use help having these conversation.' The survey further showed that 57 percent of parents indicated they feel only somewhat comfortable or uncomfortable talking to their children about sex and sexual health. It also showed that parents overwhelmingly support sex education programs in high school and middle school and believe that they should cover a wide range of topics. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/press-releases/new-poll-parents-talking-their-kids-about-sex-often-not-tackling-harder-issues>

3. Teachers will be trained to teach consent in age-appropriate and culturally sensitive ways Those who support the compulsory teaching of sex education at all levels of education argue that teachers will be trained to present age-appropriate and culturally sensitive material to their students.

Advocates of compulsory in-school sex education claim that the programs being run are and will continue to be conducted in an appropriate manner. When Victoria announced that it would make consent education compulsory from pre-school through to Year 10, Employment Minister Jaala Pulford indicated that the new, extended courses would be developed in conjunction with child sex education specialists and young people so that teachers could be supplied with further training in order to ensure that the new programs were need-based and age-appropriate. Ms Pulford stated, 'We'll work with education experts and also young people to understand where the opportunities are for the best possible education for boys and girls, and people who are almost young men and young women... in a way that's age appropriate but also provides a very deep understanding for everyone about what consent

means and why it matters.’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-21/consent-education-to-become-mandatory-in-victorian-state-schools/100019522> The Victorian Education Department says of the sex education programs it runs, ‘In Victoria, sex education is compulsory for students from Prep (Foundation) to Year 10. All our school-based programs are age-appropriate, and cover not just anatomy, puberty and reproduction but also body safety (protective behaviours), respect, friendships and the risks of technology. Our courses are...run with sensitivity, patience and humour.’

<https://sexeducationaustralia.com.au/schools/primary/#:~:text=In%20Victoria%2C%20sex%20education%20is.and%20the%20risks%20of%20technology.>

It has been claimed by many educationalists that issues such as consent can be taught in a completely age-appropriate manner, beginning with pre-school and early primary school age children in ways that often do not make explicit reference to sex. In an ABC Q & A program televised on March 18, 2021, one of the panellists, Dr Briony Scott, the principal of Wenona, an independent, non-denominational school for girls, argued that instruction could be carefully calibrated so that the material presented was completely in accord with the developmental needs of the children being taught. Dr Scott explained, ‘Consent training... starts right from the beginning – so, from [ages] one, two, three, [this involves] learning that your body is yours, that you don’t impose or take over a child, their actions.... Now, it’s not, obviously, all around sex – there’s a lot of different ways that consent plays out with a person, and it has to be age appropriate, but most people are very capable of educating around that...from a very young age...’ <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/2021-18-03/13250600>

Referring to Victoria’s Respectful Relationships program, childhood educator Margie Buttriss, has similarly noted that ‘child-friendly’ examples are used. She explained, ‘We’re talking about situations such as Grandma wants to swoop in for the big sloppy kiss and if the child doesn’t want that to happen what can they do? And they can respectfully say “No thanks Grandma, let’s have a hug instead. Or if it’s someone they don’t know, “Let’s high five, let’s fist bump.”’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-28/consent-training-for-kids-empowers-them-against-sexual-abuse/11335842>

There are numerous international examples of programs that have been developed to enable teachers to teach consent in an age-appropriate manner. For example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education has developed a program that allows teachers to instruct in consent from preschool to high school. Gideon Kahn, who has taught in preschools in California and New York using the Harvard program has explained that one of the early strategies is to develop a shared vocabulary using words such as ‘body’, ‘space’ and ‘touch’. Kahn states, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever used the word ‘consent’ with a three-year-old... The goal is that if a kid doesn’t want to be hugged by another kid, he can say, “This is my body,” and be understood.’ Another early stage is to establish a social-emotional groundwork. Kahn explains that children need to be helped to develop the social-emotional skills to thrive, and that these naturally dovetail with the concepts of consent and respect. Kahn states, ‘Emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, empathy — these all allow you to basically understand your own feelings and the feelings of others and are foundational to respect.’ By the senior end of the program, when students are in high school, concepts can be imbedded in contexts which match circumstances that older students are likely to encounter. For example, the impact of alcohol on an individual’s capacity to give consent can be discussed. For example, in sex educator Sharon Lamb’s ‘Sex Ed for Caring Schools’ she recommends asking students to discuss several scenarios in which alcohol might affect consent, as when you cannot tell whether the person you are with is too intoxicated to give consent. The Harvard program suggests that deep thinking about the ethics of sexual encounters and alcohol from the safe space of a classroom will help guide these older students’ decision-making in real life.

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/12/consent-every-age>

4. Consent is currently either not being taught in Australian schools or is not properly taught. Those who support improved, mandatory consent instruction argue that currently consent is either not taught or is not well taught.

An overview of sex education in Australia through the 1960s, 70s and 80s, published by Junkee Medea on March 12, 2021, explained that ‘one thing that just wasn’t talked about that much, was consent. While young people were beginning to learn about biology and anatomy, there was limited discussion about consent violations like rape, or any form of abuse. For decades the focus remained on how sex worked, with little attention given to someone’s right to choose whether they wanted it or not.’ The Junkee overview further states, ‘When sexual health was brought up in schools, it was done without there being any sort of support or training for teachers, who would pull resources from anywhere they could... It wasn’t until the early 1990s when Australia started drafting its first national school curriculum that there was a mandate for every school to teach some kind of sex education.’

<https://junkee.com/consent-in-sex-education-never-made-mandatory-in-australian-schools/289967>

Critics note that despite the mandated introduction of some form of sex education, its content varied and there was no requirement that consent be taught. Dr Jacqui Hendriks of the Curtin University School of Population Health has stated, ‘There are some fabulous schools around the country who do address this issue [of consent] quite comprehensively. There are classroom teachers who prioritise it and they know that it’s an important lesson and a conversation to have. But unfortunately, the way our curriculum is written for our teachers in our schools, it’s quite open-ended and vague.’ Dr Hendriks has stressed the need for explicit consent instruction from children’s early years, in a variety of contexts, not only the sexual one. She has stated, ‘It’s a conversation that needs to happen early in childhood. It’s about understanding as a young person that you are in charge of your own body. And you get to say if you’re happy with something and you always have the right to say no. Just because you’ve agreed to do something doesn’t mean you have to continue; you can stop at any point in time.’

<https://junkee.com/consent-in-sex-education-never-made-mandatory-in-australian-schools/289967>

Georgia Carr, a University of Sydney doctoral candidate studying how sex education is delivered in Australian schools, is also concerned that though consent is now part of the Australian Curriculum, it is not being taught in all schools. Carr has stated, ‘Even though up to 90 percent of students receive sex education in years 7-10, it’s much more likely that that covers the risks of sex such as STIs and unwanted pregnancy. It’s much less likely to cover consent, pleasure and LGBTQIA relationships, which is why students have been asking for them for years. Like Dr Hendriks, Carr is concerned that consent be explicitly taught in a wide variety of contexts. She states, ‘Consent education is generally assumed to mean (1) consent to sexual intercourse and (2) the legal definition of consent. While both of these should be part of consent education, they also only scratch the surface.’

Consent is something that exists beyond sexual intercourse. It applies in all sexual encounters, from kissing to touching to sexting, and students can learn about how to seek and express consent even if they are not interested in sex yet. But consent also applies outside of sexual contact altogether. It applies when you ask a friend’s permission to borrow their car, or when you offer to make them a cup of tea. The concept of consent can be taught even to young children: “Do you want to give grandma a hug or wave goodbye?”

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/what-curriculum-says-about-consent-isn-t-necessarily-what-s-taught-in-classrooms-20210225-p575wz.html>

Those arguing for compulsory education in consent, beginning in pre-school, presented as a basic element of everybody’s human autonomy, claim that only this type of instruction will bring about the sort of attitudinal and behavioural change that is needed to help prevent

unwanted sexual contact. Chanel Contos, an Australian academic who is completing a masters in gender and education at University College London, recently set up a petition calling for consent to be included earlier in Australian sex education and that sex education should be more 'holistic'. As of February 2021, the petition had received 22,000 signatures. Contos argues that consent is a complex concept which needs to be comprehensively taught from an early age. She claims that 'lessons need to be reflective of [students'] lives' and that currently this is not the case. <https://www.vogue.com.au/culture/features/chanel-contos-consent-education-petition-lays-bare-the-depth-of-rape-culture-in-australia/news-story/c357e9b0b95760cbd52ce3472813c689>

5. Schools need to teach consent to reduce the impact of pornography on young people Those who support consent education in schools argue that this education is needed to minimise the effect of pornography on young people. They note that many young people view online pornography and that these images promote negative views of women and encourage non-consensual sex.

It has been noted that many young people seek information about sex through pornography. A 2016-2017 study among sex education teachers conducted by Latrobe University noted, 'Teachers said sex isn't being discussed at home with parents. Instead, students are deliberately seeking out information about sex from pornography.'

<https://theconversation.com/sexuality-education-can-counter-what-kids-learn-from-porn-but-some-teachers-fear-backlash-when-tackling-risky-topics-158209> Similar data has been supplied by Our Watch, a public awareness agency which works to prevent violence against women and their children in Australia. Our Watch's 2018 survey of nearly 2,000 young people (aged 15-20) found that the median age of first seeing pornography is 13 for young men and 16 for young women. Among those surveyed who had previously seen pornography (78 percent of the sample), young men were more likely to have actively sought out pornography the first time they viewed it (50 percent) compared to young women (40 percent). The survey results show that young men use pornography far more regularly than young women. Over half (56 percent) of young men surveyed indicated that they viewed pornography at least once per week over the past 12 months, with over 1 in 6 young men (17 percent) indicating daily usage. a high rate of young people reported that they had used pornography as a source of information to learn about sex and sexual relationships in the past 12 months (60 percent of young men and 41 percent of young women). Young people were also more likely to access pornography as a source of information on sex, than to get this information from their parents, healthcare workers or other family members. <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf>

Advocates of better consent education in schools argue that this is necessary to reduce the negative impact of pornography. They claim that pornography is likely to develop unrealistic and aggressive attitudes toward women and sexual relationships in adolescent males. Our Watch has analysed the type of pornographic material accessed by young people to clarify the sexual attitudes and behaviours regular pornography viewing is likely to promote. In 2020 they produced a paper titled, 'Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women background paper'. This paper draws together existing findings and research specifically conducted by Our Watch to gauge the impact of pornography on young people and their ideas and attitudes regarding gender roles, sex, and relationships. It found that pornography tends to promote rigid gender roles, controlling behaviour among men and limited independence among women. It also found that pornography appears to condone violence against women and to present male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women. The analysis noted that one expression of men's dominance in

pornography is that male characters direct the sexual encounter, with men typically depicted as being in control of the pace/direction of sexual activity. Another expression of this driver is male characters forcing female characters to perform a certain sexual act, with women eventually appearing to acquiesce and enjoy the act despite not initially consenting to it. This can also be seen in women's responses to violence in pornography; for example, one content analysis found that women who were gagged in a scene usually responded neutrally, positively, or with 'mixed signals' (that is, first appearing to dislike it and then changing their response to one of pleasure). Our Watch concluded, 'Such a script complies with perceptions of masculinity which require men to be "in charge" and persistent, both during sexual encounters and more broadly in their relationships with women. Further, it reproduces the ideas that femininity is characterised by passivity or subservience, that women should not be in charge of their own sexual desires, and that consent is not necessary or valued.' Our Watch has surveyed young people to gauge their awareness of the negative attitudes that pornography promotes. It found that views about the potential for pornography to be harmful to women are clearly gendered, with women far more likely to report this type of concern. Most young women (53 percent) felt that pornography is at least somewhat violent towards women, a view shared by only 36 percent of young men. Similarly, substantially more young women (67 percent) felt that pornography is at least somewhat degrading to women, compared to young men (46 percent). <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf> Those supporting more, and better consent education argue that schools need to act to reduce the impact of the negative attitudes encouraged by pornography.

Arguments against compulsory education in sexual consent

1. Sexual consent is best taught within families

It is generally acknowledged that there are key areas of a child's life, especially in areas such as values education, where the parent has the determining role in deciding what the child will be taught. This applies obviously in areas such as religious education. However, it is also argued by some that sex education, particularly as it involves values and the development of human connections, is best taught within the intimate circle of relationships established in a child's family.

Australian public schools acknowledge that parents have a primary and central role in the sexual education of their children. They are seen as the first influence on their children's sexual development. The South Australian Government's guidelines to parents on 'Children and learning about sexuality' state, 'Learning about sexuality means learning about bodies, babies, puberty, gender, relationships, feelings, making decisions and family values. Children build their understanding of these things bit by bit as they grow up...

Children learn from parents – their first teachers. What you think and feel about sexuality has a big influence on how you deal with your child's sexual development. What your own parents said and did, your religion, cultural background and feelings all affect how you approach it. You can help your children to feel healthy and good about themselves and their body by what you say and do. Children also learn from how they see their parents treating each other...'

https://parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/peg54_children_and_learning_about_sexuality_finalweb.pdf

A primary reason why many believe that sex education (including consent education) is best conducted within families is that parents are most well placed to gauge when their children are ready to receive such education. On August 13, 2018 Family Org New Zealand published an article titled 'Sex education: four reasons why parents are better'. The article argues that

parents are the best sex educators because ‘School-based sexuality education can only ever provide a blanket-based approach, yet it is far more advantageous when sexuality formation is individually tailored and focused’. The article also maintains that ‘Parents know their child far better than any school ever will’ and that ‘Sexuality education is an area of fundamental human formation, and... [is] the primary responsibility of parents.’ The article expands on these arguments stating ‘The simple fact is that sexuality education can never be tailored to the needs of the individual child in a classroom setting. Not every child is ready for sexuality education at the same age and time, which means classroom-based sex education fails miserably in this regard because it can only ever provide a one-size-fits-all option.’ The article further notes ‘Any parent with more than a couple of years of parenting experience under their belt can tell you that one of the biggest components of good parenting is nuance - knowing the when, how and what that is right for each individual child. This ability to parent with nuance only really comes about as the result of a strong awareness of who a child is, and that awareness exists solely because a parent will spend more time with their child than any other person will.’ <http://www.family.org.nz/our-blog/sex-education-four-reasons-why-parents-are-better> The same view has been put by Paul Nuttall, the Deputy Leader of the United Kingdom Independence party, who has stated, ‘Some parents might want to teach their kids about sex, if the individual child is ready to learn that, but not all children are. The state shouldn’t be teaching such things at an age where many kids just aren’t ready for it.’ <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/primary-school-kids-not-ready-for-sex-ed-says-ukip-2/> The Western Australian guide to parents on children’s sexual education quotes one parent of an 11-, a 13- and a 16-year-old boy explaining how he supplies information to his sons when they are ready and as opportunities present themselves. He states, ‘I’ve probably never sat down and discussed the birds and the bees. It’s not been like that. They’re boys, and you go, we’ll have a bit of a chat about that now. It’s not even if they ask, it’s as if something goes “ping” in my head, and I can connect bits of information. It’s been little bits of information as they are ready to absorb it really.’ <https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/-/media/HWA/Documents/Healthy-living/Sexual-health/talk-soon-talk-often.pdf> In an ABC Q & A program televised on March 18, 2021, one of the panellists, Joe Williams, a former NRL player and a mental health advocate also argued that parents know their children best and so are best placed to educate them about consent. Williams stated, ‘I know with my kids that I’m going to have more intimate conversations with my kids than a teacher can ever have, because I know my kids. I know their persona; I know everything about my kids. So, we need to get to the point, I believe, that parents are starting to educate their kids...about respect for other people.’ <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/2021-18-03/13250600> A substantial Australian study of parental attitudes to relationship and sex education in schools found that those parents who objected to schools taking on this responsibility were concerned that their children would be introduced to this material before they were experientially ready to do so. These parents believe that they know their children well enough to judge when they are prepared to receive this information. The study referred to parental ‘fear about the differing maturity rates amongst children and the type of knowledge that they might be subjected to in school-based sexuality education programs. There was a strong fear that if children accessed certain information about sex and sexuality before they reached “maturity”, this would result in their having too much information, too early, to be able to handle this knowledge appropriately.’

2. Compulsorily teaching consent in schools may discourage parents from broaching the issue <https://au.news.yahoo.com/vic-mandates-consent-classes-schools-030821733.html> Critics of schools assuming responsibility for instructing students in sexual consent argue that this emphasis will encourage parents to feel that they are not capable of supporting their

children in developing appropriate sexual attitudes and behaviours. It has also been suggested that some parents may use these school programs as a way of avoiding their responsibility to help their children develop appropriate sexual values and behaviours.

The Victorian Opposition leader, Michael O'Brien, stresses that parents, not schools, have the primary role to play in this area and that any action taken from schools must not serve to diminish the importance of parents in assisting their children to become responsible sexual beings. Michael O'Brien has stated, 'There's more that can be done in the classroom but let's not sideline the role of parents. Ultimately, parents have got the primary job to talk about values with their kids. They can be supported by what happens in schools, but let's not cut parents out of the process.' <https://au.news.yahoo.com/vic-mandates-consent-classes-schools-030821733.html>

The situation in Ireland seems to reinforce Mr O'Brien's concern. Referring to sex education for students in Ireland, the Irish Times has stated, 'Many parents who are in favour of mandatory RSE (Relationship and Sex Education) are delighted to pass on the responsibility of sex education to teachers... The difficulty for many parents... is that they feel teachers are better equipped to deal with the dramatic changes in sexual knowledge that have occurred among children of all ages.' <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/experts-disagree-about-sex-ed-1.57994>

Similar comments have been made about the situation in Rwanda. The New Times has quoted Aflodis Kagaba, the coordinator of Rwanda's Health Development Initiative, who has claimed most parents are uncomfortable when it comes to talking to their children about sex due to the fear of exposing them to early sexual activities. He has claimed parents shy away, hoping that whatever needs to be learned will be done at school. With this, they do not make time to sit down with their children and properly discuss this subject.

<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/194933>

Some psychologists and social commentators have criticised Australian parents for their readiness to offload their responsibilities to help their children mature sexually. Adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg has claimed that too many parents outsource their children's moral and cultural development to schools. He has stated, 'There are teenage boys who have never had boundaries set. Their parents are clueless narcissists who lavish attention on their kids without ever holding them to account.'

<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/victoria/she-said-she-was-raped-now-she-is-being-punished-why-20210325-p57dwp.html>

Carr-Gregg has further stated, 'Perhaps it is time we named the catastrophic spinelessness of some parents to set intelligent limits, boundaries and consequences when it comes to the behaviour of their boys...'

While schools do need to re-examine what they are doing in terms of sex education and when they are doing it, it is time for parents, grandparents and adult carers to exert a steadying influence, to become the voice of reason to counter this culture of misogyny, entitlement and indulgence.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/parents-can-t-escape-responsibility-for-boys-misogynistic-behaviour-20210317-p57bnd.html>

Carr-Gregg argues that parents must not either blame or hand over their responsibilities to schools. He has stated, 'It is an oversimplification to point the finger at the education system. Yes, it has a role, but what... [is happening] should be both a warning and a clarion call to the parents of Australia.'

It's time to overthrow the republic of weak-willed parenting and reinstate the forgotten pillars of parenting: respect for all, wise, firm, fair and prudent governance.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/parents-can-t-escape-responsibility-for-boys-misogynistic-behaviour-20210317-p57bnd.html>

It has been argued that children and adolescents look to their parents as role models in sexual relations and as primary sources of guidance. A 2017 Harvard study found that young people want support and information from their parents regarding relationships and issues such as consent. It noted that what they sought from their parents was more guidance on ‘how to have a more mature relationship’ and ‘how to avoid getting hurt’. The lead author of the study, Richard Weissbourd, an American child and family psychologist on the faculty of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, noted that parents tend to assume that their children ‘are going to learn to love naturally, or that they will magically or organically figure this out.’ He warns, ‘There’s a lot of evidence that’s not the case’ and urges parents not to surrender their responsibility to schools or popular culture. <https://qz.com/989014/parents-are-getting-the-sex-talk-all-wrong-and-not-because-of-the-sex-part/>

3. Many teachers may not be sufficiently skilled or confident to teach the material
Opponents of compulsory consent argue that many teachers will not be able to deliver the program effectively.

It has been claimed that many teachers are uncomfortable dealing with the more complex and values-based aspects of sex education, such as consent. Jenny Ackland of Sex Education Australia, an independent facilitator that delivers age-appropriate sex-education programs to primary and secondary schools, as well as universities, has claimed that teacher discomfort has led schools to simplify their sex education classes to avoid more controversial material. Ackland has stated, ‘Many secondary schools feel safest sticking to what we call the “nuts and bolts” topics, like how not to get pregnant and maybe reproduction—those are a lot easier to talk about because they’re black and white, they’re fact-based. When you get into other areas like sexual consent, talking to young people can be really difficult and quite uncomfortable.’ Ackland suggests that this discomfort dealing with some materials leaves schools conducting a more minimalist program so that they can claim to have met their curriculum obligations, without broaching more complex materials. She explains, ‘I think there’s fear. Some schools will be ticking boxes.’ <https://www.gq.com.au/lifestyle/gq-inc/sexual-consent-education-needs-an-overhaulhow-do-we-make-it-happen/news-story/d61e8088fe1a0f3d864e975f09e3e039> A 2020 study conducted by the Durex Network which involved surveying 1,400 parents, teachers and school governors found that teachers’ lack of confidence in their own understanding of sex was a major obstacle to effective school-based sex education. <https://www.madeformums.com/news/teachers-do-not-feel-confident-teaching-sex-education/>

A range of reasons have been given to explain teacher discomfort in delivering sex education, including consent education. One of these is that teachers are often apprehensive as to how the material being taught will be regarded by the wider school community. A 2015 University of Newcastle study into teaching sex education in Australian schools found that many teachers were reticent to address more ‘sensitive’ issues, sometimes because they feared parental disapproval and other backlash within their local communities.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681811.2015.1055721?scroll=top&needAccess=true> Another reason for teacher unease is that the material is so values-based that they are not sure of the place of their personal attitudes and beliefs in the teaching of this content. An extensive British study conducted by Keele University in 2003 found that many teachers ‘were anxious about being criticised if their own values showed.’ Part of the reason for this apprehension appeared to be concern that their values may be in conflict with those of some of their students’ families and that parents would reject the school’s and teachers’ intrusion in what they saw as a parental responsibility. It was further noted that individual teacher’s previous life experience and personal predispositions significantly affected their ability to teach the subject. The Keele University study concluded, ‘Some key factors in teachers’

degree of comfort with Sexuality and Relationship Education included their own degree of openness as parents, their personalities, and the nature of their subject disciplines.’ <file:///C:/Users/Pc/Downloads/533-Article%20Text-2230-1-10-20090624.pdf> A similar conclusion was by a 2018 Grand Valley State University literature review on sex education which concluded, ‘In many schools, sexuality education is offered through health classes and research shows that many teachers, regardless of specialization, lack confidence to address issues of sexuality both inside and outside of the classroom.’ The same literature review further concluded, ‘In a study of elementary teachers’ techniques in responding to sexuality related questions, many teachers felt that they could not adequately address issues, and 46 percent of the teachers sampled reported that they felt pressured from the community, parents, or schools to be particularly cautious about providing answers to sexuality related questions. Teachers also report feeling discomfort about the subject of sexuality, and some studies show that teachers resist formal policies and agendas.’

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X18307509#!>

It has been claimed by some that the unease of many British teachers conducting sex education has made the programs difficult to administer. One British Sex Education coordinator was quoted as saying, ‘No, I wouldn’t do it again. It’s a lot of hard work, very little appreciation from anybody else, and because there’s a lot of staff who don’t feel comfortable teaching it, you’re the one who gets it in the neck at the end of the day because they’re angry about it. Where staff or pupils aren’t happy about it, or are threatened by it, it can come out in aggression.’ <file:///C:/Users/Pc/Downloads/533-Article%20Text-2230-1-10-20090624.pdf>

Teacher discomfort appears to impair their capacity to deliver lessons effectively, with another United Kingdom study finding that ‘many young people reported disliking having their teachers deliver Sex and Relationships Education and...found that key messages could become lost when interpreted by teachers.’ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/5/e014791> Dissatisfaction with the way sex education is delivered by teachers was shown by a 19-year-old Bulgarian student interviewed as part of a 2010 study conducted by the Durex Network. The young man stated, ‘Our sex education sessions at school were provided by Y-Peer, the Youth Peer Education Network that works with young people in lots of countries. It was good, much better than I’d expect teachers would have handled it.’

<http://www.durexnetwork.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/The%20Face%20of%20Global%20Sex%202010.pdf>

Critics of the compulsory teaching of consent education in schools argue that it will be difficult to find sufficient teachers able to effectively teach the subject.

4. There is no evidence that consent education reduces instances of sexual assault
Critics of increased consent education in schools argue that such action is misguided because there is no clear evidence that this measure will have any impact on sexual assault. Opponents of consent education in schools argue that there is no evidence of its effectiveness. On March 9, 2021, Mark Latham, a New South Wales MP and the state leader of One Nation indicated that he had serious reservations about the likely success of consent education in schools. During an interview on Sky News with Paul Murray, Latham stated, ‘Is there an evidence base to say you can teach behavioural change effectively in schools? Is there an evidence base that says that you can teach what they call “general capabilities”, you know, collaboration, being a better person, and so forth in our schools? And there’s a whole series of research reports saying that these are low impact programs for whatever reason.’ https://www.skynews.com.au/details/_6238191374001 Latham went on to cite a report dealing with behaviour management in New South Wales schools which concluded not that behaviour management programs were ineffective, but that there was insufficient evidence to

gauge their effectiveness. <https://www.education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/student-wellbeing/attendance-behaviour-and-engagement/media/documents/telethon-kids-institute-final-report.pdf> Referring to consent education specifically, Professor Kerryanne Walsh of the Queensland University's Faculty of Education has suggested that consent education may be a simplistic and ineffective solution and that before schools across Australia focus on consent there needs to be evidence that such education has a positive effect. The professor stated, 'Consent education is not the single silver bullet we need. It risks narrowing multi-component sexual violence prevention education down to one single component. We need to know that consent education will reduce the problem.' <https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/school-consent-review-gets-underway/news-story/2197b701ef65fc3fc9ca265065088c6d>

Some opponents of consent education claim that there is evidence to suggest that it does not work to reduce sexual assault. The first nation-wide survey in the United States on sexual assault among university students, including its connection with consent education, found that consent education did not appear to reduce the incidence of sexual assault. The 2017 Maclean's Student Survey polled 23,000 undergraduate students at 81 campuses. 60 percent of the students surveyed said they had received some instruction about the definition of consensual sex from an official university source; however, these students were no less likely to be assaulted than those who had not received instruction. The only difference appeared to be that those who had received consent education were more likely to report their assault. <https://www.macleans.ca/education/consent-education-isnt-linked-to-fewer-sexual-assaults-at-universities/> Another 2017 study appears to also indicate that consent education and an 'affirmative consent policy' does not reduce the incidence of young men engaging in sexual activity with young women who had not clearly consented. The study was conducted by a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan who interviewed sexually active heterosexual undergraduate men at a large mid-Atlantic university. The researcher found 'Overall, the way the respondents sought consent in their sexual encounters did not match up with the strategies they claimed to invoke. Respondents were much less likely to ascertain explicit verbal consent and relied on their partners to initiate a conversation about sexual expectations. Most commonly, respondents relied on physical and nonsexual cues like eye contact or an accelerated heart rate to indicate consent, despite the many nonsexual scenarios in which these actions commonly occur.' The researcher further noted that her male subjects 'often assumed consent to one sexual activity communicated consent to all sexual activities. In general, the men in this study did not reliably apply what they had learned about affirmative consent, even though they insisted that they did when expressly asked.' The study concluded, 'College men are receptive to the idea of affirmative consent, but struggle to apply it in their sexual encounters.' <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/14/study-suggests-big-difference-between-how-college-men-describe-affirmative-consent>

Critics of consent education argue that there is no evidence that it is effective and that some studies indicate it does not result in a reduced incidence of sexual assault. Studies conducted at universities in the United States where consent education has been given and where consent policies are in place have found that they are not protective for women, who may subsequently report having been sexually assaulted but were not able to prevent the assault occurring; while university men seemed unable to properly implement the behaviours they had been taught or to recognise when their behaviour was coercive.

5. The school curriculum is already overcrowded

Many of those who oppose consent education in schools argue that schools are being diverted from their main business of instructing in skills such as literacy and numeracy by being required to address a wide range of social issues which would be better dealt with elsewhere.

Some social commentators have argued that schools are being used as stopgaps to address social problems and that their focus is being taken away from their primary purpose of imparting skills education and knowledge. On March 9, 2021, Mark Latham, a New South Wales MP and the state leader of One Nation stated, during an interview on Sky News with Paul Murray, 'It's an interesting aspect of every single social issue...that there's got to be a school-based program to deal with it...Maybe, Paul, at the end of the day you are better off teaching literacy, numeracy, history, science and geography...'

<https://www.skynews.com.au/details/6238191374001> This concern has been expressed for more than a decade. In 2010, Max Angus, Professor of Education at Edith Cowan University, indicated his belief that interest groups were pushing their causes on to schools to solve a variety of social problems. The Professor stated, 'The people who want these things, they're well-intentioned of course, are trying to have the school make up for what previously we expected parents and local communities to teach out of school time.' The then Western Australian Director of Education, Sharyn O'Neill, similarly stated, 'All of these issues must be approached also by parents, by social groups themselves, by other aspects or areas of government.'

Education plays a large role, and we are very conscious of our responsibility in that, but schools cannot shoulder the burden of all the challenges of society, so we are very keen to work with other groups, other individuals to ensure that young people have all of the education and learning and development that's available to them, but we certainly can't do it all.

Teachers do a fantastic job, but they're not the only ones who have responsibility here.'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-06-22/the-crowded-curriculum/876076>

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority published a report in 2018 which stated, 'There is evidence that school curricula tend to be 'crowded' with content that teachers are expected to cover. This is a major focus of the OECD Education 2030 Project, as researchers and educators attempt to address the concerns coming from the field regarding the density of content and the temptation among teachers to 'tick off' items they have taught rather than aspire to providing students with deep learning in fewer areas.'

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/3924/ac-sc-international-comparative-study-final.pdf>

Some critics have claimed that crowding the curriculum with additional, non-essential content has resulted in students' basic skill level declining. This point was made by the then federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, who in 2018 stated, 'Teachers tell me that there is too much being taught and we should be concentrating on developing a deeper understanding of essential content...That is not to say there is not a role for developing skills like problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and teamwork, but those skills cannot be applied if someone doesn't have the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/too-much-being-taught-tehan-says-national-curriculum-is-overcrowded-20181209-p5015s.html>

The same point was made by the current federal Minister for Education, Alan Tudge, who, in a March 12, 2021 interview, stated, 'I think that the curriculum has become way too cluttered and maybe taken our eye off the ball on the reading, and the mathematics, and the science, and those core subject areas.' The federal government is currently conducting a review of the national curriculum intended to remove extraneous material. Apparently addressing this problem, a New South Wales curriculum review, to be implemented in 2022, has resulted in what its developers claim will be a stronger focus on key skills. The review found most syllabuses are 'overcrowded' with content and need to be stripped down to focus on what is essential in each subject, while students need more time to master a syllabus before moving to the next one. The New South Wales premier, Gladys Berejiklian stated, 'For our youngsters, the curriculum needs to focus

on core subjects of English, Maths and science.’

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/times-tables-spelling-basic-maths-back-in-2022-school-curriculum/news-story/2bcd387bd82781dface41988093cb9>

The proposal that consent education be taught in schools has been seen by some critics as an example of less essential material being introduced into school curriculums at the expense of more significant content. On March 12, 2021, Sky News commentator Andrew Bolt cited consent education as an example of what he termed ‘peripheral stuff’. Bolt stated, ‘Right now there's a petition signed by thousands of schoolgirls calling for better and earlier sexual consent education in schools. Is that really what we need, more lessons on consent rather than on Maths?’

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/sky-news-andrew-bolt>

Further implications

The current ground swell of awareness of the dangers faced by Australian girls and women in many aspects of their lives, including in relationships, appears likely to ensure that most states and territories will adopt some form of consent education in their jurisdictions. Victoria has already announced that it will mandate consent education at all levels of state education from Term 2, 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-21/consent-education-to-become-mandatory-in-victorian-state-schools/100019522> The Queensland government has announced that it will review sexual education in schools across the state to determine whether consent and reporting is being adequately addressed. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-09/queensland-government-to-examine-how-sexual-consent-is-taught/13231692> In New South Wales, Government, Catholic and Independent schools have agreed to help drive community and cultural change around sexual assault and violence by signing a Statement of Intent to strengthen the understanding of consent and harm prevention in school communities. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/education-leaders-to-strengthen-consent-support> In Tasmania, State government funding for a sexual consent education program provided in Tasmanian public schools is set to run out in three months, and there is mounting pressure for it to be renewed and expanded,

<https://www.examiner.com.au/story/7180411/funding-for-key-consent-education-program-set-to-expire/>

Arguments against compulsory sex education frequently draw on claimed shortcomings in sex education in general and consent education in particular. It is important to note that those who support compulsory sex education do not only want that education to be mandatory. They also want it to begin earlier and to be conducted more effectively.

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education-victoria/chanel-contos-calls-for-toxic-masculinity-to-be-taught-at-victorian-schools/news-story/d0b1a9481357784255c95b72f9641b09>

As the different states and territories introduce consent education, its supporters stress that it will be important to develop wide-ranging, age-appropriate programs and ensure that the teachers who deliver this material have been carefully trained to be able to do so. The Greens have criticised the federal government for recycling a package of educational materials that are not tailored to the consent issue they are intended to address.

<https://greensmps.org.au/articles/government-s-consent-education-plan-insult-women-and-sexual-violence-survivors>

Whatever the truth of this allegation, those who are calling for consent education are looking for best practice consent education at all levels of students’ school lives. There have also been calls for a national consent education program.

<https://educationhq.com/news/our-very-vague-national-approach-to-consent-education-must-change-expert-92645/> A national program is part of The Greens education policy platform.

<https://greens.org.au/policies/education> Supporters of a national consent program claim that it would help to ensure that best practice was adopted nationwide.

Critics of compulsory consent education also note that it is not a ‘magic bullet’ which will automatically remove the problems of coercive relationships and sexual assault.

<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/consent-education-does-not-stand-a-chance-against-pornography/13231364> Defenders of consent education argue that though this form of education may not be a complete solution to the problem, it is part of the solution. However, other social commentators have argued that we must be careful not to stop at consent education. They argue that there must be a concerted effort to counter the multiple media inputs that serve to dehumanize women and mark them as targets for mistreatment.

Significant among these is pornography. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/consent-education-does-not-stand-a-chance-against-pornography/13231364> A large body of research has indicated its widespread consumption among Australian adolescents and children. The same research has pointed to the highly negative consequences pornography viewing has in shaping young people’s expectations of sex and young men’s view of women. <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf> In 2016, the Australian Human Rights Commission made a series of recommendations re reducing the impact of pornography on Australian children and adolescents. Each of these recommendations focused on the importance of education in countering pornography’s message and teaching students how to avoid it.

https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/legal/submission/inquiry-harm-being-done-australian-children-through-access-pornography#_Toc445720183 Critics have noted that stronger action is needed. It has been claimed that current restrictions are not serving to limit young people’s access to these materials. Instead it has been suggested that Australia needs employ measures such as those being developed in the United Kingdom where the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) will have the ability to block non-compliant websites and request that service providers withdraw their services from non-compliant websites.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/Onlineageverification/Report/section?id=committees%2Freportrep%2F024436%2F72615