Australian Human Rights Commission

Celebrating 40 years

‘We’re talking about stopping violence before it begins’:

Supporting Quality Engagement with Children

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Acknowledgements

'We're talking about stopping violence before it begins': Supporting Quality Engagement with Children was written by Sophie Charles, Matt Gibbs, Kerry O'Donohue, Violeta Marticorena Politoff, Isobella Rafty and Jami Blood. Thanks to Susan Nicolson, Susan Newell, Izzy Anderson, Polly Jenner and Ashlee Parcell for their support.

The National Children's Commissioner thanks the children and young people who participated in consultations and the partner organisations who helped create the opportunities for this participation.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders – past and present.

Further information

This publication can be found in electronic format on the Australian Human Rights Commission's website: humanrights.gov.au/our-work/publications

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Our vision is an Australian society where human rights are respected, promoted and protected and where every person is equal in dignity and rights.

The Commission's key functions include:

- **Access to justice:** We help people to resolve complaints of discrimination and human rights breaches through our investigation and conciliation services.
- **Fairer laws, policies and practices**: We review existing and proposed laws, policies and practices and provide expert advice on how they can better protect people's human rights. We help organisations to protect human rights in their work. We publish reports on human rights problems and how to fix them.
- **Education and understanding:** We promote understanding, acceptance and public discussion of human rights. We deliver workplace and community human rights education and training.
- **Compliance:** We are the regulator for positive duty laws requiring employers and others to address sexual harassment, sex discrimination and other unlawful conduct.

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Cover image by Sharelitha Young

ISBN: 978-1-921449-26-0

‘We’re talking about stopping violence before it begins’:

Supporting Quality Engagement with Children

2025 Report

Support contact page

- **Kids Helpline**: Aged 5 to 25 years: Online and telephone counselling service.
  Phone: **1800 55 1800**
  Webchat: **kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/webchat-counselling**
- **Headspace**: Aged 12 to 25 years: Support and counselling for young people.
  Phone: **1800 650 890**
  Online support: **headspace.org.au/eheadspace**
- **Lifeline**: All ages: 24-hour crisis support.
  Phone: **13 11 14**
- **1800 RESPECT Australia**: All ages: 24-hour telephone support for people affected by family, domestic and sexual violence.
  Phone: **1800 737 732** or text **0458 737 732**
- Online support: **1800RESPECT.org.au**
- **Bravehearts**: All ages: Child sexual abuse support and advice.
  Phone: **1800 272 831** or visit: **bravehearts.org.au**
- **Blue Knot:** All ages: information and support for anyone who is affected by complex trauma
  Phone: **1300 657 380**
  Online support: **blueknot.org.au**
- **13YARN**: All ages: 24-hour telephone support for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping.
  Phone: **13YARN (13 92 76)**
- **Beyond Blue**: All ages: Free mental health service offering counselling, coaching and online chat support.
  Phone: **1300 22 4636**
  Online support: **forums.beyondblue.org.au**

More information about the **Department of Social Services Safe and Supported Framework** can be found at **https://www.dss.gov.au/child-protection/safe-and-supported-implementation**

For more information on the **Australian Human Rights Commission**, see our website: **humanrights.gov.au**

Contents

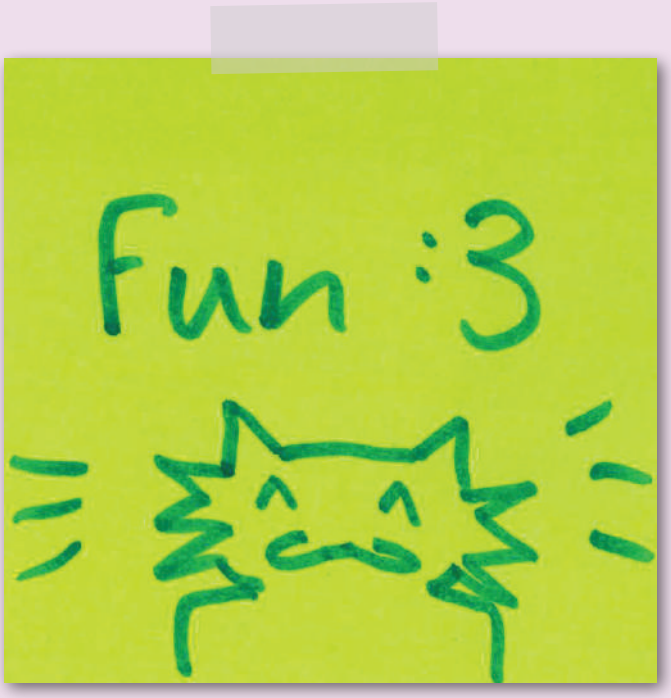
Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ACMS	Australian Child Maltreatment Study
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AGD	Attorney-General's Department
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ATM	Automatic Teller Machine
BPD	Borderline Personality Disorder
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CARM	Culturally and Racially Marginalised
CPS	Child Protection Services
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CRRE	Consent and Respectful Relationships Education
DFSV	Domestic, family and sexual violence
DMs	Direct messages
DSS	Department of Social Services
DV	Domestic violence
ERG	Expert Reference Group
FDSV	Family, domestic and sexual violence
HR	Human resources
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Asexual (plus)
MRC	Migrant Resource Centre
NAPCAN	National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect
NCAS	National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
OOHC	Out-of-Home Care
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RRE	Respectful Relationships Education
SQE	Supporting Quality Engagement
SSI	Settlement Services International
TPPRO	Third Party Parental Responsibility Orders
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
WWCC	Working with Children Check
YRG	Youth Reference Group

A note about language: We use several terms through the report that we have defined in the glossary on page 108, 'aromantic', 'aroace', 'children and young people', 'CARM', 'First Peoples', 'LGBTIQA+' and 'neurodivergent'. Where relevant, we have also described how we have used these terms throughout the report. Please check this list if you need clarification.

In our consultations, children and young people used drawing and writing to unlock and share thoughts, feelings and ideas. Discussions mostly sprang from these visual representations and helped to build a full picture of the situation children and young people face, as well as their vision for the future.

Some of their contributions can be found throughout the report, offering an additional way to highlight the voices of children.



Commissioner's foreword

As I start my term as Australia's National Children's Commissioner, I am honoured to write the foreword for this report, '*We're talking about stopping violence before it begins'.*

This report shares the views of over 300 children who took part in the third and final year of the Supporting Quality Engagement (SQE) project. The priority area for 2025 was the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

Children have the right to live free from violence. However, we know from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study that child maltreatment is widespread in Australia. Emotional abuse is particularly harmful and is much more damaging than we previously understood it to be. We also know that there is a much higher chance of a child experiencing emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect when they are exposed to domestic violence.

Children told the Australian Human Rights Commission about what safe and positive relationships look like, and where and how they get information and support around safety in relationships. Children were also asked what they wanted the future to look like – what helps them do well, what doing well looks like to them. This project focused on children as active participants in finding solutions that could work.

Looking ahead, we must continue to push for children to have genuine and ongoing opportunities to participate and have agency in policy frameworks, plans and strategies that impact on them and their families.

The SQE project was funded over 3 years by the Department of Social Services to elevate children's voices in national strategies that affect them. The project has now ended. However, I hope that the Australian Government will engage with the Australian Human Rights Commission to facilitate further projects of this nature where children can contribute to the evidence base and inform the design and implementation of Australian Government policies.

I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to our government partner, the Department of Social Services, all those service providers supporting the children who participated in this project, and – above all – the children and families who shared and contributed their insights over the past 3 years.

I hope that this report, and the powerful words of the children included in it, act as a catalyst for action and positive change.

Deb Tsorbaris

National Children's Commissioner


Harmony
Mother's
Friendship
Love
Culture
Kinship

Bravery
Family
Fathers
KIND
MOB
Connections

Executive summary

Children have a right to live free from violence – a right enshrined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC).[1] But it is a right many Australian children cannot yet realise. Almost 40% of Australians aged 16 and over reported exposure to domestic violence as children.[2]

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* is committed to ending violence within a generation. Research has demonstrated that children's voices should guide prevention strategies in areas like family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) and abuse.[3] By listening to children and focusing on meaningful prevention and early intervention, there is scope to 'stem future trajectories of harm'.[4]

In 2025, **over 300** children and young people participated in consultations across the country to inform the Supporting Quality Engagement with Children (SQE) project. They told us about what safe and positive relationships look like and how we can best ensure all children experience these in the future. Consultations explored:

- how children define and discover safe and positive relationships
- where and how children get information and support around safety in relationships and what else they need.

> **stopping violence before it begins**

Children have a **clear vision of safe and positive relationships**. They describe these relationships as supportive, comfortable and protective. Such relationships allow you to be honest and open. They contain fun, 'banter' and are 'not always serious'. Trust, communication and respect are key elements of safe and positive relationships. They allow you to work through the 'ups and downs'.

Children's understanding and experience of safe relationships is often based on their **lived experiences**. What is considered safe and positive can differ depending on many factors, including age, gender and culture. If children have seen and experienced safety, they are often better able to recognise it and carry it into their own future relationships.

> **what they're taught is what they think is normal**

Gender norms impact on how relationships are viewed and experienced. Young people had a lot to say about the impact of gender stereotypes. They talked about constraints on expressing emotions, interacting across genders and messaging around things like masculinity. **Systemic and structural issues**, such as housing insecurity, poverty, racism and intergenerational trauma, also influence how children experience relationships. They can create environments where conflict and harm take root.

> **It's not as explicit as don't respect women … it's underlying**

Young people told us about where and how they look for information and support with relationships. They described existing within an **ecosystem** comprising family and friends, community and school, services, online spaces and pop culture. Each of these domains can influence how they learn about and experience relationships. What we heard from young people is that each domain presents an opportunity for prevention.

> **when you are younger, you can think that a lot of stuff is normal and then later realise that it's not**

We need to start with the key people in children's lives. Families and friends have a crucial role in supporting children with their relationships. Children look to these relationships for modelling and messaging about safety. Family and friends need to be equipped to support children with clear understanding about safety. They need skills in listening, empathy and how to respond. They often need support themselves with their own challenges.

Education is already a site of primary prevention with much existing investment in Respectful Relationships Education. Children told us that education needs to start much earlier. It needs to be clear and direct, delivered by people who know their stuff and know them. It should evolve with children's evolving maturity and should not 'sugarcoat' challenging topics like relationships.

Young people want more **community programs** to prevent gender-based violence, including events and activities. We need to listen to community members and Elders and support programs connected to culture and Country. Young people want safe spaces for informal connection and activities like sports and clubs. It should be easier to access **support services** and these should offer choice, agency and confidentiality.

Online spaces and pop culture are key sites of learning about relationships for young people. As a result, they are powerful tools for shaping attitudes. They provide guidance when real life examples are missing. We heard that young people want positive, relatable content in formats they use. These can include music, books, television, movies and online spaces. They want media to promote safe and positive relationships through better representation, education and regulation. It needs to be harder to access harmful content.

Consultations focused on safety and prevention opportunities, yet young people also told us how **laws and justice systems** need to improve. They offered guidance on how to respond to violence and better support children and their families to heal when violence has occurred.

> **listen to what the kids are telling you**

Centring children and young people's voices in prevention efforts is critical. Their ideas can help shape policies and programs that work. In acting on the voices of children, we can better support all children and young people to realise their right to live safe from violence. They said they want 'understanding and comfort' as well as action from adults to 'please end the cycle'.

Recommendations

Australia's commitment to the CRC should guide all policy design and implementation relating to children. Taking a child rights-based approach means being child-centred and, where appropriate, child-led in all policy decisions affecting children and young people. This approach must also embrace intersectionality and go deeper to address the social determinants and drivers of gender-based violence.

In consultations, children and young people told us that opportunities to prevent gender-based violence exist across the various domains of their lives. As noted in the Context section below, several policy areas are already investing significantly in prevention initiatives. However, children told us more is needed. Growth and innovation will help ensure their rights are fully realised.

Based on this, we recommend systemic actions that address issues of violence with a whole-of-government approach. There are multiple national frameworks and action plans that have a role to play in ensuring child safety and they should work in a more coordinated and streamlined way. This is the most effective way to deliver and sustain prevention efforts.

All governments have made a commitment under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.* The second action plan is an opportunity to continue to build on, and invest in, strategies that shift attitudes, structures and behaviours that drive gender-based violence. These actions should align with other key strategies to deliver a holistic approach.

As stewards for the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032,* the Australian Human Rights Commission expects that the Department of Social Services (DSS) will lead this work, including through ongoing engagement with relevant departments, to deliver on these recommendations.

Recommendation 1

DSS, the National Office for Child Safety and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing coordinate and integrate existing national strategies, frameworks and action plans to advance child safety and wellbeing across all activities of the Australian Government. This will include:

- **a mapping exercise to identify integrated funding opportunities, unify data and impact measurement, coordinate consultation and engagement mechanisms with children, and consistent targeting of priority cohorts**
- **careful coordination with other strategies that impact on children, such as Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy**
- **systematic use of a Child Rights Impact Assessment tool to ensure children's rights are at the centre of this approach.**

(see section 3)

Recommendation 2

DSS develop local place-based pilots that implement an integrated approach to building whole-of-community capacity to promote child and family safety, including ending gender-based violence. This must include:

- **coordinating and integrating initiatives across different national frameworks**
- **localised grants for smaller scale community activities to address the above issues**
- **evaluating the effectiveness of pilots for children across all priority cohorts**
- **identifying innovative and emerging practices to inform further investment in ending gender-based violence.**

(see section 4)

Recommendation 3

DSS ensure that all national frameworks that affect children and young people contain mechanisms for child and youth participation, including elements of youth leadership, genuine co-design and monitoring and evaluation. This must include:

- engagement with the most marginalised and affected cohorts of young people
- appropriate measures – including ethical considerations, engaging experienced professionals and undertaking due diligence in consultation preparation and support – to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people during participation
- support through existing independent mechanisms with relevant expertise – particularly the National Children's Commissioner, as well as the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, and the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner
- resourcing to support this.

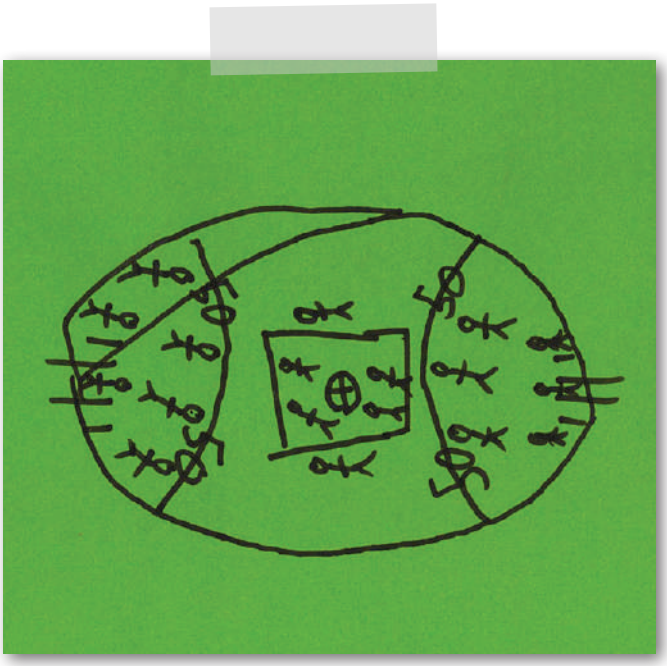
(see section 4)

Recommendation 4

All relevant Australian Government departments further expand programs to improve education and awareness of safe and positive relationships, including:

- an early years program for parents, carers and children delivered through early childhood centres and health services
- content for families in media environments they use, such as podcasts, streaming services and social media platforms. This should be informed by the voices of children in this report as a starting point, and use the full potential of storytelling to raise awareness
- working with popular content creators to develop positive content about relationships on platforms that young people use. Content must be strengths-based, include representation of diverse cohorts and be co-designed with young people
- working with employers to ensure workplaces are a source of information and support about rights and safety for young people.

(see section 4.1)



Recommendation 5

Education Ministers to continually improve and review the curriculum to ensure nationally consistent learning, which includes emotional regulation, conflict resolution, consent and respectful relationships education. This should:

- start from the first year of school, and evolve with developmental capacity
- reflect a whole-of-school approach, which includes a parallel program for parents/caregivers
- include opportunities for peer education, providing young people with support and practical skills to respond to peers, such as active listening, proactive help seeking and bystander action
- articulate clear standards for teacher training and of delivery tailored to the audience
- provide for regular review and evaluation with the participation of young people.

(see section 4.4)

Recommendation 6

All relevant Australian Government departments work closely with eSafety to develop accessible resources to promote children's right to safe media and online spaces. This includes:

- the development of youth-led skills training to assist children and young people – and their families – to navigate and curate their online experience
- an education campaign to build family skills in identifying harmful content in books, podcasts and other media, and how to have constructive discussions about this.

(see section 4.5)

Recommendation 7

All relevant Australian Government departments continue and expand investment in First Peoples community-led development programs and culturally safe services to build community connection and empowerment as a mechanism for prevention and early intervention.

(see section 4.9)

Recommendation 8

All relevant Australian Government departments continue and expand investment in safe spaces and community-led programs, such as sport and art, to build community connection and empowerment as a mechanism for prevention and early intervention. This should include mixed gender opportunities where culturally appropriate, be accessible to children of all ages and inclusive of all priority cohorts.

(see section 4.9)

1. Listening to the voices of children

This section introduces the Supporting Quality Engagement (SQE) project, funded to elevate children's voices in national strategies that affect them.

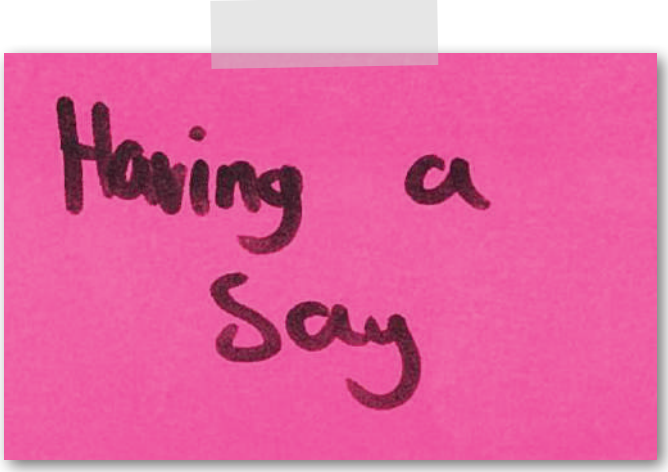
It describes the policy focus for this report, the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032,* and provides an overview of the consultations held with 303 diverse children aged 10–17. This section also uses an infographic to give an overview of the prevalence of family, domestic and sexual violence amongst children and young people.

The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) and is a key tenet of the child rights-based approach.[5] In Australia, there are opportunities for some children to be heard, including initiatives at national and state levels, in schools and within organisations in the non-government sector. However, this right is not systematically realised across the country.

While there is a growing awareness of the value of children's voices, how to engage children in a meaningful way that brings about change is still an evolving practice.

In 2023, the Australian Human Rights Commission and UNICEF Australia released Australia's first national *Child Rights Impact Assessment* (CRIA) tool to help governments and service providers assess how children's rights and wellbeing will be affected by new laws and policies. A child-centred approach includes the imperative to count children and young people as sources of information when developing and accessing policy and services. This can be complemented by a Child Rights Impact Evaluation (CRIE) process, to measure the actual impact on children and young people following implementation.[6]

There are few opportunities for younger children to engage in ways which draw on their unique lived experiences.[7] Children living in vulnerable or marginalised circumstances also have limited opportunity to participate in such processes. Sensitively including these perspectives in policy-making is critical to ensure that policy is meaningful and addresses the needs of those it is designed for.



1.1 Supporting Quality Engagement with children

Recognising a child's right to express their views freely in matters that affect them, the Australian Government has provided funding over three years (2023–2025) for the Australian Human Rights Commission to increase capacity to consult with children and young people on the effectiveness of Government programs. This work has been led by the National Children's Commissioner.

The Supporting Quality Engagement with Children (SQE) consultation project undertook consultation activities across 5 national strategies and associated action plans that directly address key issues facing children across Australia (see the Context section).

The consistent priority across these was to elevate the voices of children and to recommend ways to embed them in decision-making for policy and programs. Accordingly, the objective of the SQE consultation project was to draw on the lived experiences and views of children to contribute to the evidence base informing the design and implementation of Australian Government policies affecting them.

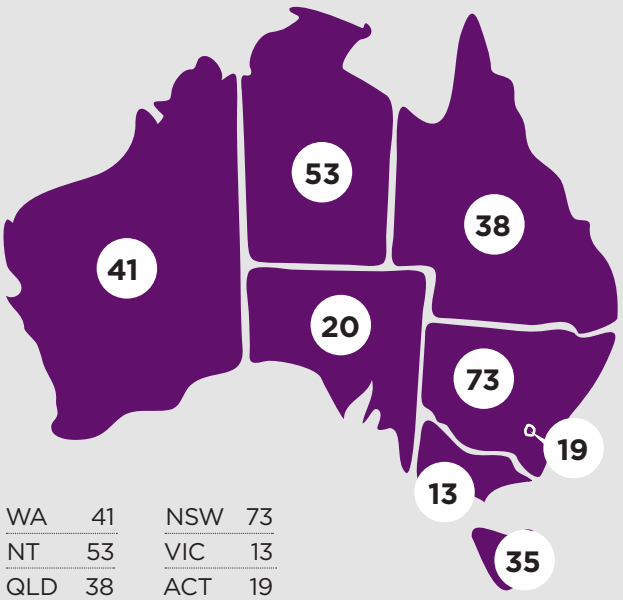
1.2 Year 3 focus: ending gender-based violence

The priority area for 2025 was the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. This plan is Australia's primary policy framework aimed at eliminating violence against women and children within one generation. It emphasises the need for a whole-of-society approach to address gender-based violence.

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* policy team asked the SQE project team to talk to children and young people to discover:

- how children and young people describe safe and positive relationships, including the language they use
- where children and young people go for information and support with relationships, as well as how these spaces can better support young people
- what they think the Government could do to stop gender-based violence before it starts.

Figure 1: The children we consulted with



WA	41	NSW	73
NT	53	VIC	13
QLD	38	ACT	19
SA	20	TAS	35

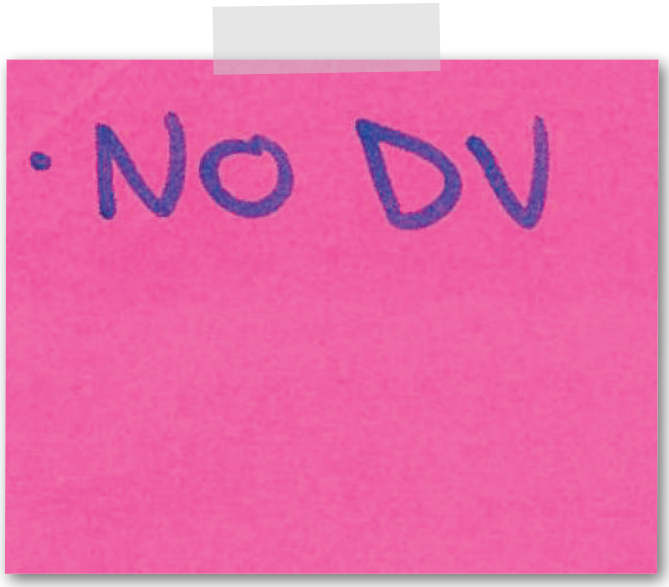
Total of 303 children aged 10–17 participated in 53 consultations across Australia

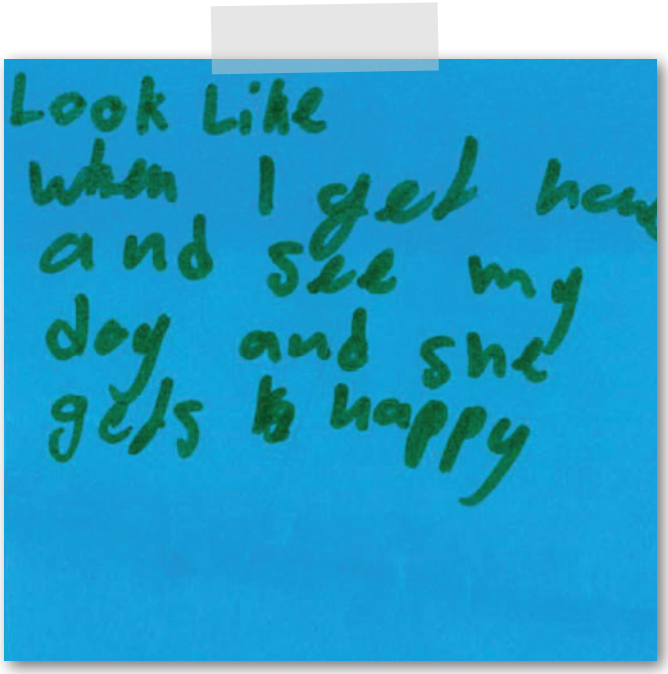
- **131** Girls
- **132** Boys
- **24** Transgender and gender diverse children
- **61** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual and/or children that use another term for diverse sexual orientation
- **100** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children
- **84** Children with disability and/or identify as neurodiverse
- **111** Children from culturally and linguistically diverse and/or racially marginalised communities

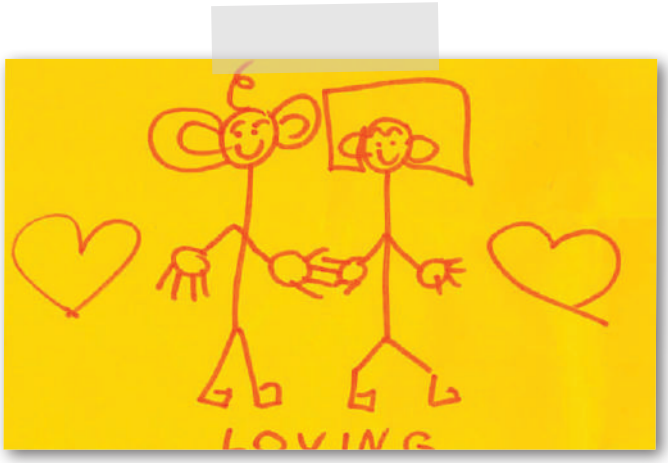
1.3 Situation of children and FDSV

Family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) is a widespread issue in Australia, with significant impacts on children and young people.

- 62.2% of people have experienced at least one type of child maltreatment, exposure to domestic violence was the most common (39.6%).[8]
- 1 in 4 women and 1 in 8 men have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member since the age of 15.[9]
  - 69% of women and 48% of men who experienced violence from a previous partner said their children had seen or heard the abuse.[10]
  - In one study, children who had both witnessed and experienced violence were 9.2 times more likely to use violence themselves.[11]
- For children and young people, FDSV increases lifetime risk of serious physical illnesses, mental health impacts, substance misuse, self-harm and elevated suicide risk.[12] Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children.[13]
- Young people, especially young women, are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. 2023 police-recorded ABS crime data revealed that women under the age of 18 accounted for the highest proportion (57%) of victims in FDSV-related sexual assault incidents.[14]







2. Defining and discovering safe and positive relationships

This section highlights how children and young people define safe and positive relationships.

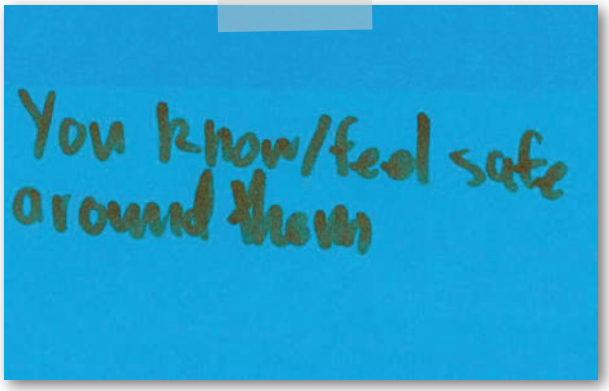
Key elements include kindness, respect, fairness, open communication and setting boundaries. Positive relationships span family, friends, partners, teachers and spiritual ties. They describe negative relationships as involving control, judgement or disrespect. Defining healthy relationships is often shaped by lived experience and exposure to good examples.

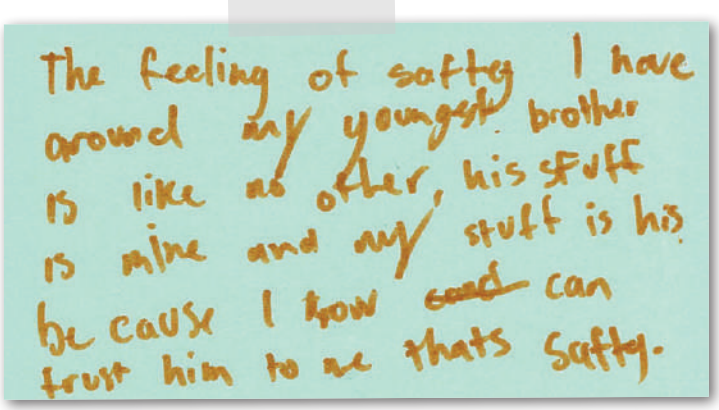
How do you know if a relationship is safe?

> You can feel it.
> You can see it.

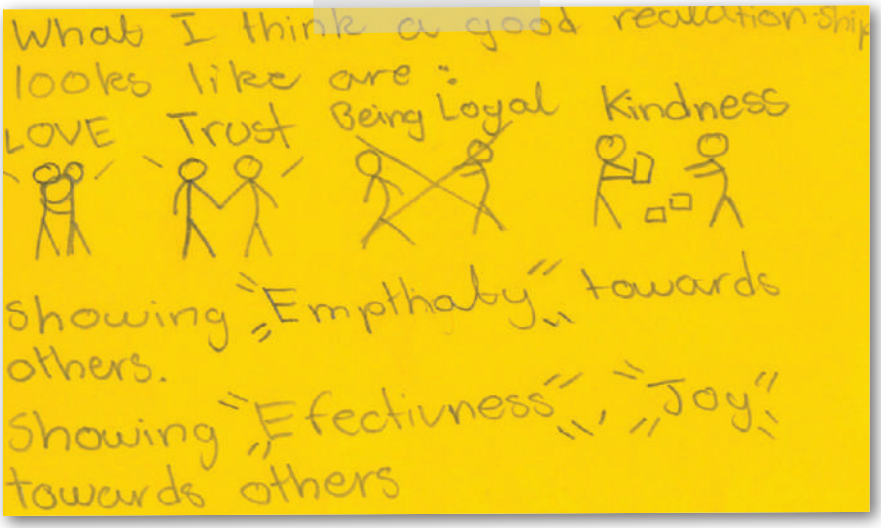
One of the central activities in our consultations this year was the creation of a safe and positive relationships vision board. We encouraged young people to write and draw what safe and positive relationships look and feel like.

This image is a visual representation of what we heard.





Young people talked about the fact that 'you can just kind of tell' whether a relationship is positive and safe, based on how you feel and things like 'body language'. Several young people spoke about having a 'gut feeling' about whether a relationship was safe, based on 'how you feel and how they make you feel'. Some talked about it being hard to 'put it in words' as 'there's no words really that can describe' the feeling or connection. As one young person articulated 'you don't make a list and go "okay they're doing this and that and this and that so I'm comfortable", you just feel it'.



Frequently young people talked about how they drew on their past experiences to judge a relationship, with one young person explaining 'lifting out my experience of positive relationships made it easy to describe what they looked like'. Most consultation participants described defining safe and positive relationships as easy.

Different types of relationships

Although consultations started with a broad discussion around relationships and close connections with others, it was apparent that young people interpreted relationships to be different things. Participants drew on a diverse range of examples of relationships they admired. For younger participants, family members were often referenced, while older participants often centred discussion on romantic relationships. In addition, participants talked about relationships within sporting teams, or with trusted adults like teachers. Some young people raised spiritual connections, others gave famous examples from movies, television and popular culture.

2.1 Identifying key elements of safe and positive relationships

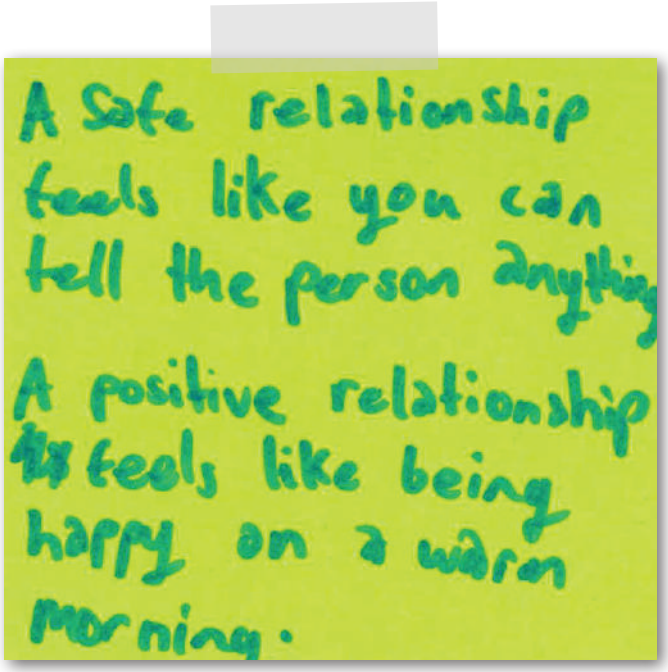
'Looking out for' and 'being there for' each other: Young people described safe and positive relationships as those which provide 'support' and 'protection'. They explained that such relationships offer 'help' and a place to 'belong', with one child stating that 'healthy relationships feel like home'. Another child went on to explain that safe and positive relationships feel 'happy … there are some places when you go in you feel like your spirit tells you don't belong there, but there are some places, like to your mum or your friends, you feel joy'. One young person with disability described how they 'turn to' their mum as a positive and trusted support in 'how to deal with … and how to go about' some new or challenging situations.

'Comfort', being comforted and feeling 'comfortable' were repeatedly mentioned by young people as an essential part of a safe and positive relationship. One child described a safe and positive relationship as being 'like a shield', offering a sense of 'security'. Acts of care were raised as important as they demonstrate to young people that they are valued and that they are 'loved and appreciated'.

> **A warm hug. A positive relationship looks and feels like a warm hug.**

Love, caregiving and 'empathy' were often mentioned by young people. They spoke about the importance of kindness and gentleness, that a safe and positive relationship is one which is calm, 'cosy' and patient. Such a relationship allows you to be 'honest'. You 'can be yourself' and talk 'about anything' as there is unconditional positive regard. One young person described this as 'not having to hide or be ashamed about anything'. Friends were often given as an example of these relationships, in that you can 'tell them everything' and 'they support' you.

In such relationships there is a 'willingness to be open'. Young people described feeling seen, accepted and understood in that 'you get each other's quirks'.



One neurodivergent young person spoke about positive relationships having 'space' and understanding for what they need, 'the things that they do, especially like neurodivergent people … their routines and how they live [they] understand it'.

'You feel joy': Safe and positive relationships contain 'fun'. They are 'not always serious' and there is space for enjoyment and laughter. One young person said of their friend, we 'still have a lot of fun, laugh a lot'. These relationships can be 'whimsical', they contain 'banter' and promote a 'positive mindset'. One young person commented that positive relationships 'make me feel like a good person', while another spoke of a romantic relationship that 'pushes me to be my better self' and 'hypes me up'.

> **my sister and her boyfriend … I like the way they bounce off each other … the vibe, the way they are with each other.**

'Trust is a really big one': Trust was described as foundational to safe and positive relationships. Often young people spoke about trust being gained over time, 'spending time together' in 'long-lasting' relationships which are 'loyal' and 'reliable'. One young person spoke of the relationship they enjoyed with a grandparent, saying of her grandmother, 'she's been there ever since we were little, she's never left'. Young people described trusting relationships as steadfast, involving 'quality time' and 'an unbreakable bond'. Another young person also spoke of a grandparent, stating 'she's always there for me, even when she doesn't agree with what I do'. They explained that trust is often built on:

> **open communication because I don't think any relationship is going to be right if you don't talk to each other. Say if you have problems, the other person's not going to be able to fix it if you don't tell them what's wrong, what's upset them. So, you can't prevent those things from happening again if you don't let them know.**

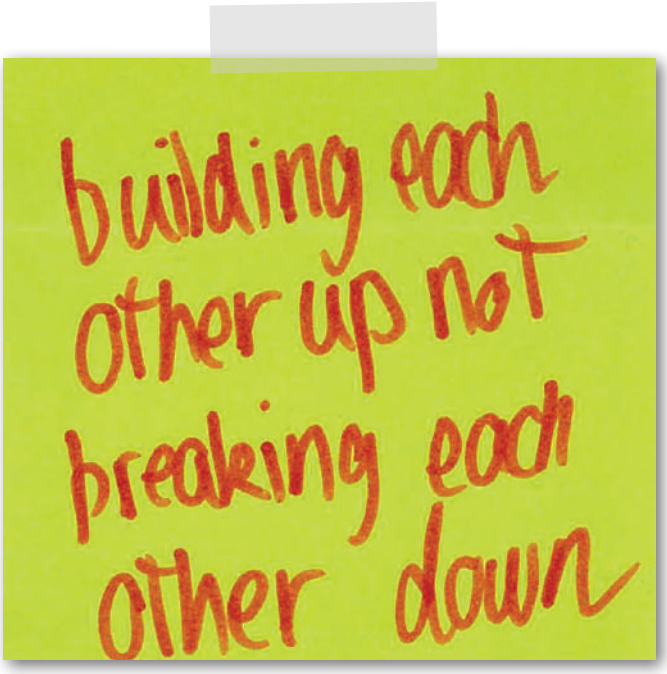
‘Being able to express yourself freely’: Communication was repeatedly raised by young people as key to safe and positive relationships. They spoke about this as ‘verbalisation’, in ‘being able to tell the other person anything without judgement’, ‘not keeping secrets’ and being able to ‘open up and feel comfortable doing so’. It also involves being able to listen, demonstrating ‘actions that show they listen’ and finding ways to express ideas and feelings in respectful ways ‘without crash outs’. Being able to safely express things was described as critical in ‘letting you speak your side’ and ‘letting you hear their side’.

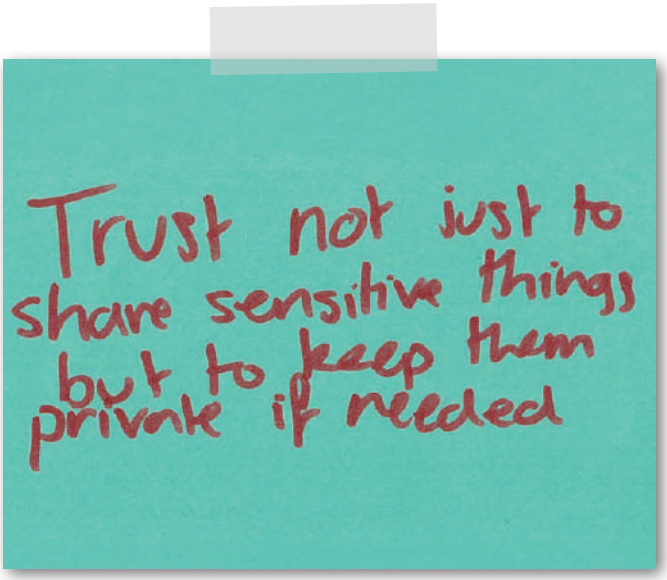
‘Respect is a huge thing in a relationship’: Young people told us ‘you need to have respect’ and ‘fairness’ in relationships. Respect was framed as multilayered and mutual. As one young person explained ‘if you respect, they respect you back’. It is about ‘respecting others’, ‘respecting boundaries’ and ‘not just one sided’. Being ‘big on respect’ means:

> **you can’t expect to be respected if you’re not giving it. It’s not something that you just expect. It’s a big thing. It’s a huge thing – not even in like romantic relationships, in any relationship, with a stranger, someone you work with, you need to have respect for them.**

While respect is something children frequently raised, for many First Peoples children we spoke to, the notion of ‘respect’ was a particularly familiar gateway concept to speaking about safe and positive relationships more generally. One First Peoples young person spoke about respect as multidimensional. They explained it as an act of duty ‘to respect your Elders’, a bodily sensation, a facilitator for feeling ‘proud’ of themselves and something you learn from others.

Several young people articulated that healthy relationships are those with ‘equity’, a balance of independence and dependence and ‘sharing responsibility’. Boundaries and consent were highlighted as important, with one young person identifying the need to ‘always set boundaries for yourself in a relationship’ as they assist to set expectations and ‘what you’re willing to do’.





They commented that a relationship ‘with no boundaries’ will ‘not necessarily thrive’. This linked back to communication and the importance of checking in with the other person ‘what you can and can’t do’. One young person defined consent as the need to ‘ask to do anything’, as different people will have different expectations, values and feelings.

> **Respect’s a big one for me. I grew up in a family where you give respect, and you earn it. [It is] listening when talking, paying attention, not being rude.**

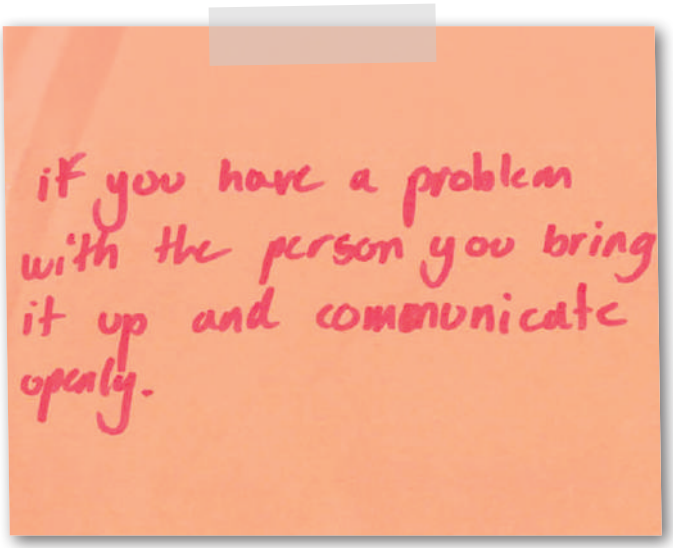
Working through conflict: Young people recognised that relationships have 'ups and downs'. While safe and positive relationships 'make you happy' and 'lift you up', they spoke about space in positive relationships to 'work through conflict'. Young people commented that safe relationships are not about 'just avoiding conflict or lashing out' but 'ownership' or accountability, being able to 'admit when you've done something', 'working on stuff', finding ways of 'staying through the hard times' and 'working through conflict'. They talked about a place for arguments and that you should be able to 'disagree about certain topics' without 'lashing out'. Ideally, you should be able to:

> **just go up to them and say, "can we have a discussion on something that's making me uncomfortable". Like you can trust them enough to be able to go to them and say like, "hey, yesterday you did something that upset me. Can we talk about it". And then if they talk to you about it, or just do it calmly, like it doesn't end up in a fight.**

Young people talked about role models in resolving relationship conflict. One young person said that their mother and step-parent 'never leave things unspoken, they discuss things if they're wrong'. Another spoke of an aunt and uncle who 'are lovey-dovey but also communicate and talk things out' and another described the relationship with her mother, 'she trusts me, and I trust her, we talk about things when we don't agree with each other'.

Forgiveness, 'mercy' and 'working together, coming together despite differences' was raised by young people. One young person articulated that 'a safe relationship for me, [is] a relationship when you can get over stuff quickly, get back to being friends'. This requires 'empathy' and the safety of 'feeling heard'. It's important to 'understand what it's like in their shoes' and how you can 'help them'.

> **I always admired how my grandparents have been together a long time, and they've probably had to forgive each other so many times and faced so many adversities together.**



2.2 Describing what safe relationships are not

In discussing safe and positive relationships some young people spoke about the absence of certain behaviours or feelings. They argued that there should be 'no violence' or 'controlling' behaviour, no 'having to walk on eggshells', 'no fear' or judgement, so that you are free to be who you are 'without judgement' or 'tension'.

Young people explained that safe and positive relationships 'don't make you feel bad'. They are not 'negative' and do not involve 'double standards' where one person 'can do whatever they want but doesn't let the other do that'. They do not involve 'being manipulated and gaslit', 'unrealistic expectations' and 'mixed signals'. They do not include a partner who does:

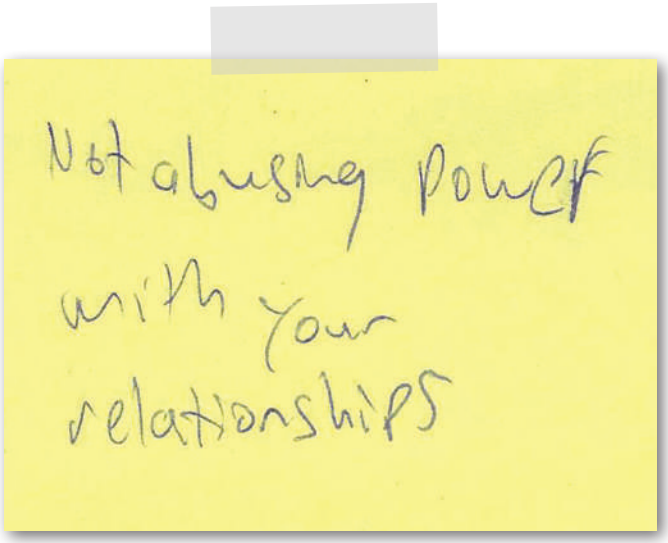
> **something to you and then they make you the crazy one when you react to what they did. But then if you did that to them, they would act the same away you did, but, like, when they speak about something they make it all in the right and you're still in the wrong. That makes you feel crazy.**

When discussing entering romantic relationships, young people spoke about the importance of being in a good place yourself. They explained that it is 'hard to love someone else' without the foundation of 'self-love' as 'how will you love other people when you don't even know how to treat yourself right'. One young person cautioned 'don't go into relationships if you don't have half decent mental health. Don't go into one while depressed, it's gonna crash and it's gonna burn'.

2.3 Understanding when it's tricky to know

Some participants said that it can be hard to know if a relationship is safe and positive. It can be especially hard for younger children or those who have not experienced safety. They also raised other complexities, explaining that what is considered safe and positive can differ, depending on your gender, age or culture.

Young people reflected that while it is 'simple in theory' to name qualities of safe relationships, 'sometimes it can be confusing', especially if people's words and actions do not align. Sometimes young people are exposed to 'coercive control' or 'intimidation' and feel 'guilt tripped'. They may not recognise that certain actions are harmful, especially if they 'don't have any safe and positive relationships in their life' to compare to. It can be 'hard to look for and find' what they need.



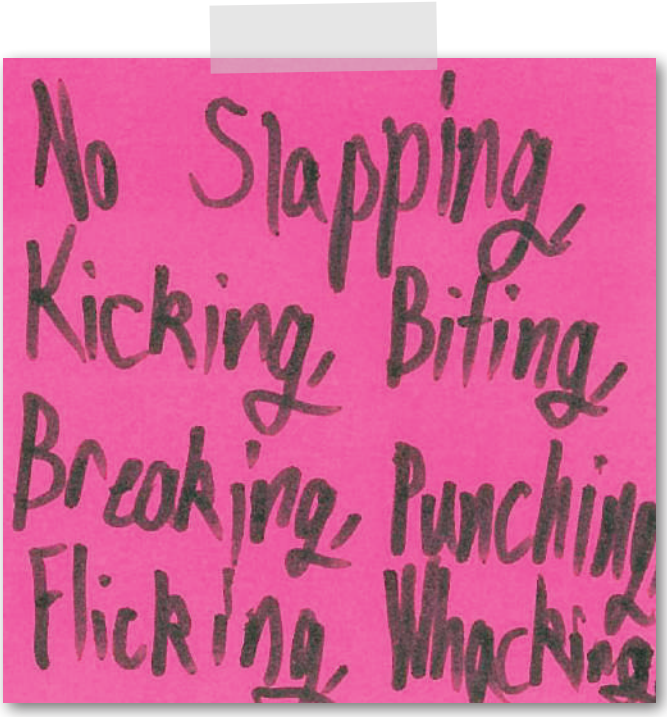
> **In theory a lot of people know what a good or healthy relationship is, doesn't mean they always do it.**

'It's easier if you've experienced it': We heard that lived experience is critical in shaping ideas and expectations around relationships. Unsurprisingly, 'what you grow up around and what you're exposed to' influences your behaviour and views. The behaviour that is modelled around you can 'make you have the same thoughts' and potentially 'make you do the same stuff'. Many young people described this in terms of 'nature versus nurture'.

Some participants talked about 'false beliefs' that can impact on the perceptions you have about 'how people act or think'. As one young person explained 'if someone's been through lots of negative things then they're going to think that that's normal in a relationship, whereas if someone's gone through positive things then that's what they're going to think'. How young people are treated can 'change their beliefs', including their willingness to enter relationships and how early they do so.

Role modelling is important: Many young people spoke about how hard it would be for children who do not have 'an example' of positive relationships, who have instead had a 'back story' where they have 'grown up and not seen good relationships'. Such young people may have been 'treated in a bad way', or experienced a 'non-positive relationship, an abusive one, whether that's verbally or physically, or just a toxic one'. In these situations, you 'don't really know what a good relationship is' and don't have 'anyone to look up to'. As one young person articulated 'if you were not raised in a safe household, you're statistically more likely to end up in an unsafe relationship'. Others may have experienced unhealthy or negative behaviours in 'their first relationship' which they may take forward and could influence future relationships.

> **some people don't know what a safe relationship is because of their home life. What they're taught is what they think is normal.**



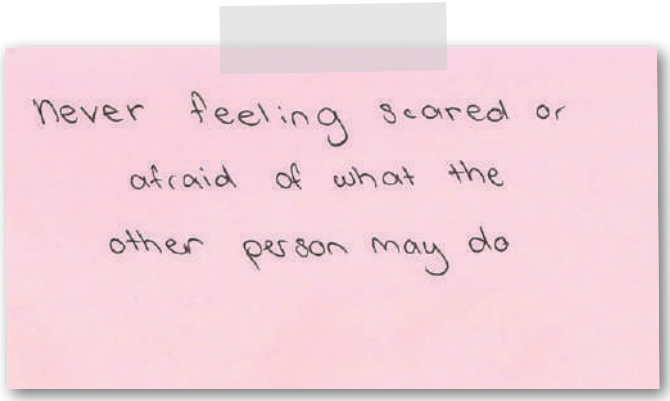
Exposure to relationships: Being able to 'see the signs', 'know the standard' and recognise qualities of safe and positive relationships was frequently raised as important. This can include recognising 'when people are trying to control you, stop you from doing stuff' or 'if someone makes you feel like you can't do the things you love'. Having exposure to other information is important here: if you have 'heard things from other people', which challenge these ideas, you can 'learn from experience'. This may include information from peers, trusted adults and influence from media and pop culture. Such exposure can broaden your frame of reference and give you 'social intelligence' to draw on.

The need for positive relationship examples was raised by many young people, often along with the importance of these examples reflecting the diversity of young people's identities and experiences. One young person talked about there being 'no good autistic relationship representation in the media … when there is, they stop being as autistic in the relationship'. Many young people from the LGBTIQA+ community talked about a desire for better representation of 'what a healthy relationship looks like' and 'how healthy relationships should be'.

> **I feel like that's the reason why not a lot of queer people, like, know what a healthy relationship looks like because there's barely any representation of healthy relationships, and, like, there are 'ships' online, but I feel like a lot of them end up being based around some sort of angst.**

Even with insight and knowledge of safe and positive relationships, 'communicating what you actually want in a relationship can be hard'. It can be difficult to find the words and courage to express yourself.

> **It's, like, a lot harder to identify safety if everyone thinks differently. Not that that's a bad thing, everyone should be their own person. But, like, then again, if everyone has a different view on it, what is it?**

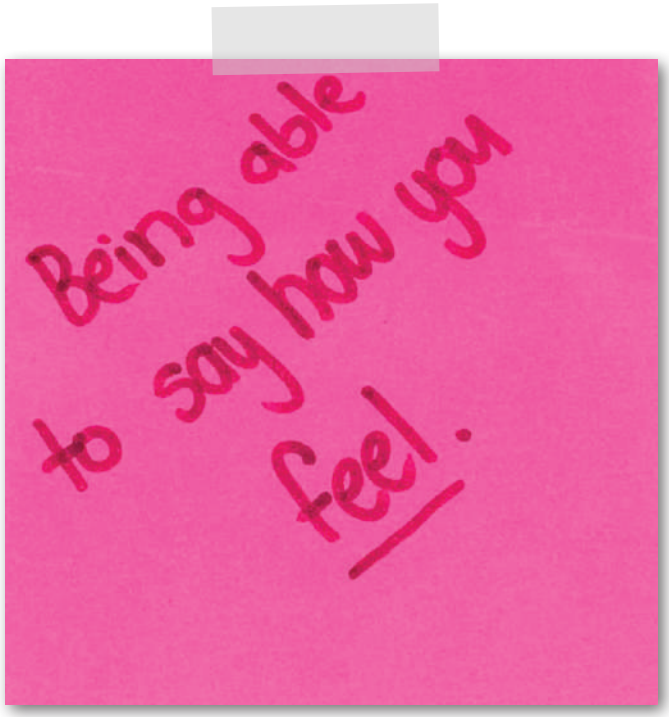


A word on relationships language

Young people were encouraged to share the language they use when talking about relationships. Sometimes there were words for negative or unsafe behaviours like 'toxic', 'sketchy', 'red flag' and 'ick'. Positive relationships were usually described as simply 'good' or 'healthy'. A few young people made references to 'love languages' or 'flipping the lid', concepts adopted from psychology and referenced by influencers on social media.

However, most often young people struggled to name terms they used to describe relationships. While words like 'toxic' resonated strongly with some, others cautioned against government efforts to use youth-friendly language in publications. They advised that such language could become dated quickly and may not land well with young people. They advised that while some words may be popular for a time, trends rapidly change and certain terms may be specific to particular ages, cultures or groups and may alienate others.

Some young people referenced the proliferation of 'brain rot' words like 'rizz' on platforms like TikTok. A 17-year-old participant described feeling 'outta the woodworks with the language' used by a 'new generation' of 12- and 13-year-olds. Another young person cautioned about how 'subjective' terms such as 'toxic' are in labelling behaviour. One young person explained 'if I find it a red flag, doesn't mean she finds it a red flag'. They suggested that a more helpful, and less shaming, approach can be to simply describe behaviours and options, rather than trying to land a particular phrase.



3. Big picture barriers to safe and positive relationships

This section explores the structural issues and barriers to forming safe and positive relationships identified by children and young people through our consultations.

These included gender norms and stereotypes, racism, intergenerational trauma, financial stress and housing instability. These barriers are often beyond young people's control and deeply affect their ability to feel safe, supported, and connected in their relationships.

Recommendation 1:

DSS, the National Office for Child Safety and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing coordinate and integrate existing national strategies, frameworks and action plans to advance child safety and wellbeing across all activities of the Australian Government. This will include:

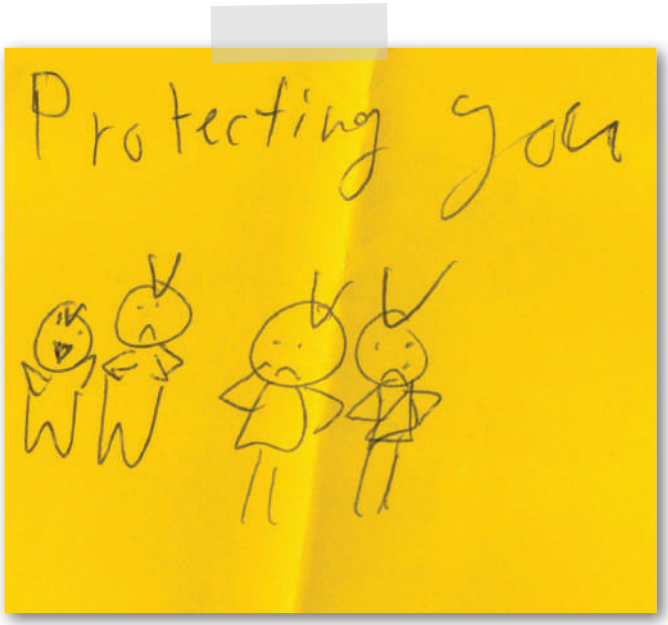
- **a mapping exercise to identify integrated funding opportunities, unify data and impact measurement, coordinate consultation and engagement mechanisms with children, and consistent targeting of priority cohorts**
- **careful coordination with other strategies that impact on children, such as Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy**
- **systematic use of a Child Rights Impact Assessment tool to ensure children's rights are at the centre of this approach.**

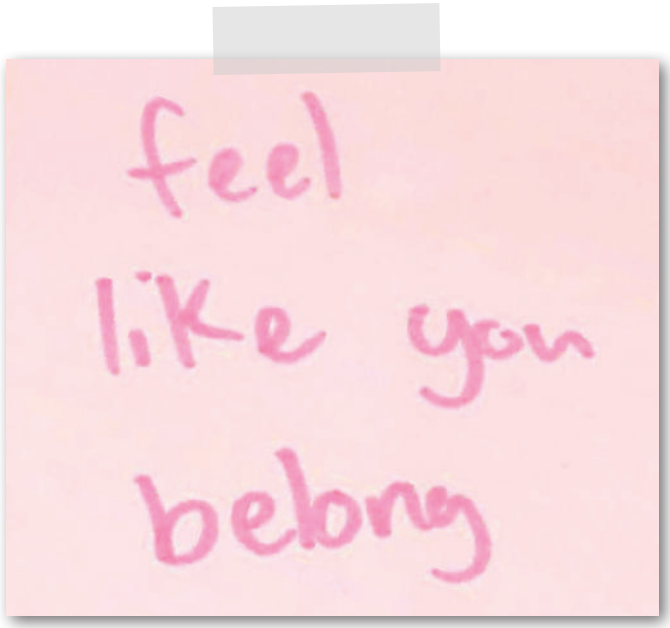
Children and young people told us that their ability to build safe and positive relationships is shaped by forces beyond their control. Violence – all violence – came up in our consultations. Children and young people said that it shaped how they learnt about and interacted in society. Some young people felt violence was intrinsic to the human experience, saying 'there's always been wars. World wars, Ukraine, Israel'. Even in Australia, you just had to look to the highest levels of government to see that 'they verbally assault each other in parliament all the time'.

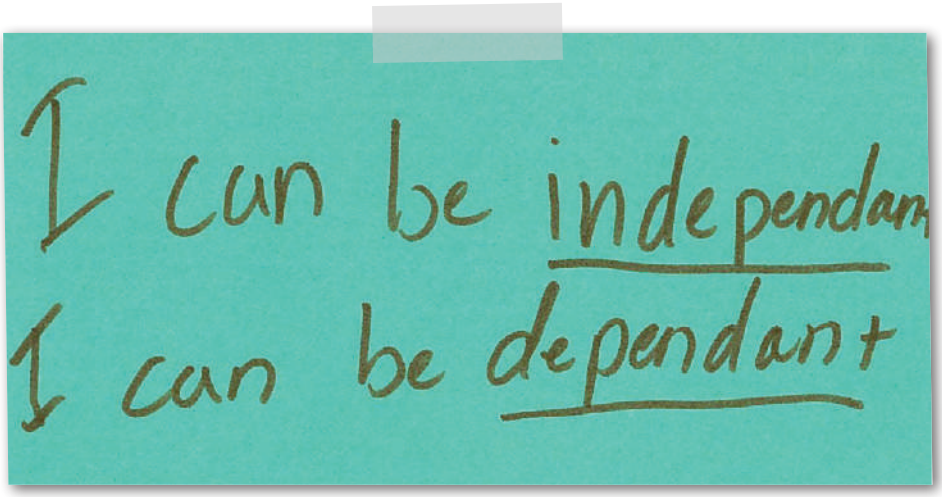
Young people told us that violence feels like a huge, complicated problem that touches everything. They talked about feeling unsafe and witnessing violence linked to drugs and alcohol. They described how intolerance and fear contribute to widespread, normalised aggression in their communities. They spoke about how 'children are products of their environment', growing up in homes where disrespect, racism, sexism or homophobia are normal, and how this can influence their own behaviour. Violence becomes entrenched and action against it is complicated, because 'how are you supposed to stop a problem against gender-based violence – or just violence in general – if it's a problem that spans across everything?'.

To understand this – how violence 'spans across everything' – children and young people pointed to the intersecting drivers of violence – and FDSV specifically. They spoke about gender. How stereotypes and expectations can constrain and limit opportunity, or create power imbalances and harm. They raised major structural and systemic issues – housing insecurity, poverty, racism and intergenerational trauma – as creating environments where conflict and harm can take root. These barriers do not just affect families in crisis, they influence everyday experiences, from where children live and go to school, to how they access support and feel included in their communities. When housing systems fail, when financial stress dominates family life or when discrimination erodes trust, the result is a cycle of disadvantage that undermines wellbeing and perpetuates violence.

The above issues raised by young people, and the need for a multifaceted and systematic approach to prevent cycles of violence, have also been acknowledged by others in the sector.[15] The recent *Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches* highlighted the importance of addressing intersecting forms of marginalisation and using structural levers to address violence and disadvantage.[16] The Review explicitly calls for the experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be prioritised and for a strong intersectional approach which acknowledges violence is underpinned by systemic issues. Similarly, holistic responses which include addressing the needs of families living with disability, such as accessing appropriate housing and other supports for their specific long-term needs, are seen as key in early intervention.[17]







3.1 Gender makes a difference

During consultations there was often a mix of views from young people about gender. Some felt that 'gender doesn't matter' and 'shouldn't make a difference' to how relationships are viewed and experienced. Some argued that 'everyone's different' and a safe and positive relationship 'should look the same' regardless of your gender identity. Some highlighted the commonalities between themselves and peers of different genders, with one young person stating that the 'type of person you are … not your gender – like, how you view yourself and your values' are more significant to how you view and experience relationships.

Other young people said that while 'things are changing' in relation to gender stereotypes, gender does make a real difference to how relationships are viewed and experienced. One young person highlighted the 'gender violence ratios' to illustrate their point. They commented that 'the stat is something like 70% of victims of sexual violence is 15–19-year-old girls and the main perpetrator is 15–19-year-old males'. While the percentage given is incorrect, this suggestion is consistent with high rates of violence against girls aged 15–19 and high rates of violence perpetrated by boys aged 15–19 years.[18]

> **We need to find a way to change that … culture and make it not acceptable at all to perpetrate violence on young women.**

Several groups spoke about 'the main issue' around gender-based violence being the 'underlying misogyny that society has'. They spoke about growing up 'within the patriarchy' where 'it's taught to men that it's okay to have a power imbalance and that they can have control … or it's pushed aside that when [women are] being disrespected in a relationship that it's like "oh women are just like that, you're being dramatic"'.

Gender stereotypes are pervasive

Many young people spoke about the impact of 'gender stereotypes'. They talked about 'gender norms' and 'getting fed these ideas' young, about what it means to be a young woman or young man. They spoke about this being implicit and embedded in society, it 'doesn't even necessarily have to be teaching, you're kind of automatically taught when you see things in that world'. They said that these ideas can include things like 'the man has to protect. The lady has to care'.

> **It's not as explicit as don't respect women … [it] is underlying.**

Young people spoke about gender roles being reinforced 'especially if you're raised with parents that do things in a certain way or follow gender rules'. They commented that ideas such as 'being the man of the relationship, or the one with the most power or more decision-making' are conveyed 'through media like movies and tv shows … even in children's programs'. These ideas around gender differences are reinforced again in other parts of our lives and communities.

> **Just generally because gender is a social construct in society. It's everywhere. Even like the government, because of the laws that there are and how there are differences depending on gender.**

Gender stereotypes constrain how people function in society

Gender stereotypes can be constraining, with some young people talking about how this limits opportunities for girls, boys and non-binary children. This can result in 'people having less confidence in themselves' because 'you're supposed to look a certain way, supposed to be a certain way' because 'that's the way that it is'. This can range from things which seem innocuous 'like boys having short hair, it seems normal but even that's [a] stereotype' to the idea that 'girls can't do what boys can'. Some young people gave everyday examples, like praising risk-taking among boys, viewing a dangerous skateboarding trick as 'sick' and 'cool', 'while girls might talk about how idiotic it is to attempt something as dangerous'. This echoes the literature, which recognises that while some behaviours like risk-taking are not inherently harmful in isolation and can benefit all genders, framing these as proof of masculinity sets most up for perceived failure or punishment when they do not meet said expectations.[19]

For non-binary or trans young people there are additional constraints with expressing their identity. We heard that older generations may hold binary gender beliefs, which significantly impacts gender diverse young people. This may cause young people to 'feel bad about themselves' and 'second guess themselves about why they transitioned' because there is 'a stereotype that it's not okay to be gay or lesbian or trans'. In this context young people face additional discrimination. While 'they should be proud of who they are' they may face opposition, 'people get upset or angry or violent', which can impact their safety and can 'also affect a person's psyche'. Young people can face compounding barriers to expressing their identity. As one young person described:

> **For me personally because I'm disabled, the perspectives of someone who is able-bodied and queer is very different from mine, because on top of being queer and facing the societal repercussions that that is, I face a lot for being disabled too. And even then, there should be more done for even white people, but also those who live in different cultures. For example, I'm [cultural background] … ooh fuck you cannot be gay in [cultural background] because it is so frowned upon in communities.**

Participants spoke about messages like, 'I am a boy, I can't cry'. They reflected that, for some boys, there is pressure to be 'manly' that they are 'not used to talking about relationships or used to expressing their emotions'. This can create difficulties and frustrations as boys 'don't know how to express what they feel' compared to their female peers who 'are more likely to seek help'.

Others talked about a perception of girls as inherently 'vulnerable'. They said that girls can be viewed as 'weak' or 'emotional'. There is a view that 'girls can't smack boys' and that 'boys are stronger than girls'. There are also societal expectations around femininity and female caregiving. One young person spoke about pressures to present in certain ways, referencing 'weight' and 'makeup'.

> **… activities, also how they act, their personalities, based on their body and their mind. One example of a boy or girl acting differently is putting on makeup, the way they play sport is different. How they play, making strategies to score, like when boys are playing … some boys can be extreme in how they play … because they see it differently than girls.**

Participants conveyed the complexity of these issues, in that gender impacts differently depending on your background, experience and intersecting aspects of your identity like culture and religion. This can influence your 'perception on how to treat women, how a relationship should be', giving you a sense of what 'is normal'. Some young people from CARM backgrounds described how expectations can vary across cultures, with one young woman describing how 'it's very different. In my country, girls … you could say … it's not like they don't have their voice, they do, but it's not that much'. While

another commented that in their culture there is greater respect for others, and violence would be less tolerated than in Australia. Another commented 'in my culture making fun of somebody is okay but maybe in other cultures [that's] not okay'.

One young person explained that it comes down to 'how you're socialised' – not only 'how you are raised' in your family, school and community, but also the influences from television and media. Some common ideas emerged during discussion around gender and relationships as outlined below.

Commonly when gender was raised in consultations, discussion focused on the experience of boys and contrasting that to other genders. This happened organically with young people themselves focusing on the challenges of young men in modern society. Participants frequently raised concerns around 'toxic masculinity' and separation of young people based on their gender. They conveyed that there are few opportunities for young people to learn together and understand their experiences. It was also notable that several groups spoke about gender primarily in binary terms.

Expectations around masculinity are damaging

Young people spoke about the often-contradictory associations of what it means to 'be a man'. Some highlighted that there is pressure on boys to be strong and to lead. This is consistent with the recent *Adolescent Man Box* report which highlights that between 60% and 63% of boys and girls surveyed consider that 'most people in Australia expect teenage boys to be manly, confident and strong at all times'.[20] A few young people spoke about the lack of 'role models' for young men and the presence of misogynistic influencers and those promoting negative content.

Some young people reflected that while messaging about masculinity stereotypes is more subtle than in the past, it is still present in movies and popular culture and is 'being passed on from generations'. 'It could be as simple as teaching boys they can only play rough sports … it's not necessarily "you have to be like this" but it pushes them in that direction'.

Some young men talked about the perception of ideal masculinity as successful, wealthy and powerful, permeating social media, reels and American movies. They gave an example of a high school 'jock' who has 'got all the ladies and stuff'. They talked about how this narrow sense of 'playing to a stereotypical, performative masculinity can intrude on how you seek relationships and what you try to get out of relationships'. This can be confusing to young men in balancing the different messages they receive. Research has suggested that young men can experience multiple pressures to enact different forms of dominant masculinities, with masculinity a dynamic and shifting construct.[21]

> **Particularly as you go into adolescence, you start getting told more and more as to what your role should be in a relationship. I know that, at the moment, if I go on Instagram, I would get a lot of different, conflicting opinions of what the role of a boy should be in a relationship. You get some that are very equal, very respectful, and then unfortunately you also get a lot of Andrew Tate agendas, which is like "You own", which is wrong. But it gets pushed from different sides at different levels of intensity. So, I can understand why young people, particularly young men, are very confused about what their role should be in a relationship.**

Some participants raised the topic of 'toxic masculinity' in consultations. They commented that such ideas involve perceptions of men that 'think they're more tough, more in control'. One young person reflected that this can be insincere and come from a base of fear. In presenting in such a way, that 'they're all buff and all', 'they want people to know they can do that; they want people to know that they can't be messed around with because they're, in a way, scared of the world that they live in'. One young person reflected that 'masculinity has been twisted over time. Like you'll see 13-year-olds trying their hardest to either get a backyard tattoo job or like something to show that they're tough'. Others explained that boys 'wanna act tough. Don't seem weak'.

Figures like Andrew Tate were referenced in discussions around harmful forms of masculinity, with some describing that:

> **you are what you consume and what you see on a day-to-day basis. So, let's say someone's watching Andrew Tate podcasts and they definitely would have a very different view of women.**

However, other participants highlighted how problematic gender stereotypes are 'embedded in society as a whole' in that 'we live in a patriarchal society' and toxic masculinity 'doesn't just belong within male friendships'. The literature also recognises that masculine norms can be reinforced by all genders and extend to broader societal systems, with some arguing young men should be engaged in prevention efforts as part of a whole-of-population approach.[22]

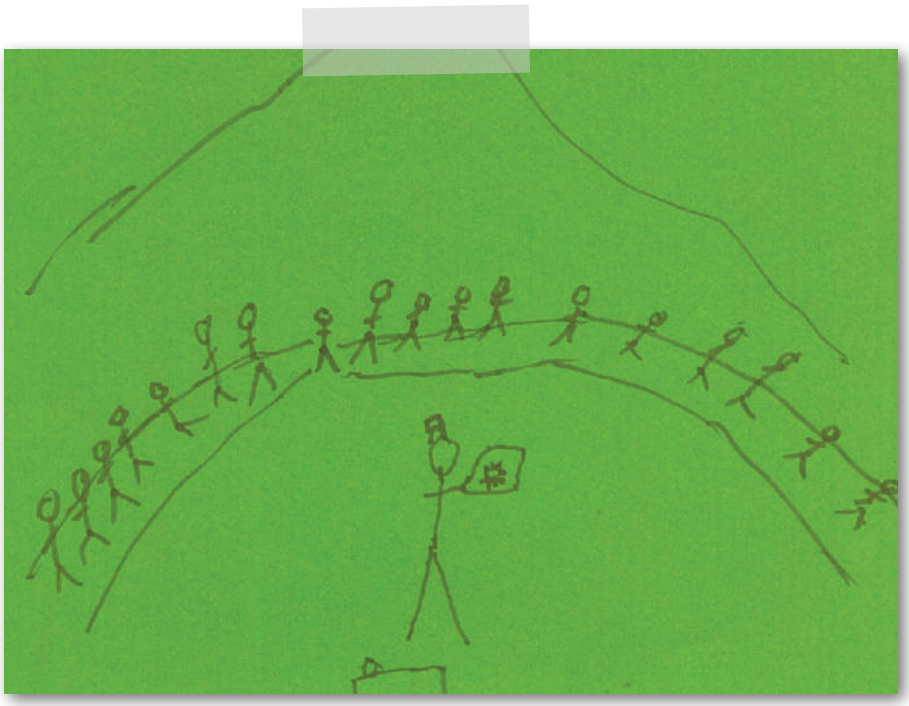
One young person explained the 'whole idea of what it is to be a man and masculinity as a concept or theory, varies from person to person, influencer to influencer'. One person suggested complexity in these influences, saying 'social media and Andrew Tate have influenced them but exacerbated underlying factors they have already had'.

People of different genders learn to express emotions differently

Several young people commented that boys and girls think and react differently in relationships. They said that there is a different 'mindset' in that 'a lot of boys like to be left alone', 'keep it to themselves' and like to be 'independent'. This was contrasted with depictions of girls who 'can open up' to family and friends more easily and were described as more 'emotional' or 'emotionally mature'.

> **I don't know where it came from, the idea that boys don't have emotions, they shouldn't show emotions … that's always been a massive thing, it needs to stop.**

Some young people talked about boys struggling to show vulnerability, that 'men shouldn't really show emotions' so that 'makes them struggle with forming a good relationship'. They may consider that it is 'weak to express their emotions' and have 'different views compared to a girl'. Several young people explained that 'boys have a harder time and get judgment' if they do show emotion, that 'they're looked down on if they, like, cry or something like that'. Some young men described 'shame' talking about emotions, because 'they could get judged'.



One young person spoke about the impact of this on their father:

> **in my culture, at least in Asia, it's always taught to us that men are supposed to lead the relationships, so I think in a sense men often feel this responsibility.**

Other young people spoke about the impact of this pressure to 'man up in the sensitive moments', describing how this creates 'loneliness' for men and contributes to struggles with mental health.

> **[Boys] definitely feel unsafe, I just feel like they just don't express it as much. Because they're a 'man'. 'Cos in this world it's like people made it that men can't express themselves, and that all women do is cry. When in some relationships it can be the complete opposite and it's the man crying and the woman being like the strong one. And it could just be them crying together, being strong.**

A young man in one consultation reflected that his peers simply do not talk about relationships with one another as it is 'uncomfortable' to do so:

> **if you're a boy and raised a boy, your mentality of what it is to be in a relationship and how to view people in a relationship can be different to if you weren't a boy. If you're in a relationship and you're a man, you're not allowed to show those emotions, you might cry or you have to be the protector in the relationship.**

Early relationship modelling is important to development

The importance of early relationship modelling was often raised by young people. They talked about how critical it is for all children to be 'taught how to express their emotions'. The ability to express emotions in ways that do not support aggression or dominance is a well-recognised factor in shaping masculine norms and a critical area to be challenged.[23] This can be compounded

by other factors, with one neurodivergent young person describing how it 'can be harder to get across your feelings when you have a different way of thinking. Sometimes it can be harder to express your feelings'. Some young people identified differences in the way children can be parented, depending on their gender. This can influence 'the way they show love' as boys are more often given 'tough love'. Some spoke about the overall importance of raising children in a 'more supporting' way which validates expression. Another young person said simply, 'teach them how to comfort'.

> **Not all boys, but most boys because they're men, they don't get taught emotional intelligence and things like that. Like they miss parts that they should have. Like, just because you're a man doesn't mean you shouldn't know about, like, things that girls know about.**

Young people feel the gender divide

Young people spoke of a lack of understanding of the experience of one another, 'a divide between them'. Some young people spoke about having little idea how boys think, while many boys talked about a lack of knowledge or confidence interacting with girls. For non-binary young people there was a sense of isolation and being singled out. They gave examples of having to constantly navigate environments that are unwelcoming and forced into a binary, such as having to use 'the gendered bathrooms' at school and other practices that are 'transphobic'.

> **Gendered sport pissed me off so much cause I have been genderqueer since around year 7, so being in those stupid "girls do this, boys do this" it was so frustrating, so like, even now, I am a binary trans man, so when my teachers split it boys and girls I don't know where to go. It annoys me so much. Because number one, the binary of gender is really dumb to enforce on kids, and also what about queer … like I can't go with the boys because they will annoy me and harass me, and I can't go with the girls because I won't be with any of my friends and I don't feel comfortable there 'cos I'm not a girl.**

Culture sometimes requires gender separation

Some young people spoke about a strong divide between genders based on culture. They explained that they would only feel comfortable sharing certain topics and experiences with people of the same gender. Some First Peoples groups spoke about separation based on gender as a part of their development and maturity. This separation was described more as a division of specific cultural knowledges or domains, than in terms of Western gender stereotypes. Having strong role models and connecting with others of the same gender, in cultural and other activities, has been linked to strengthened cultural identity and expression.[24]

While not specifically raised by young people in consultations, being LGBTIQA+, including non-binary, Brotherboy and Sistergirl identities, can mean cultural practices divided by gender are experienced differently – with

family, Elders and community playing a crucial role in supporting them to navigate these experiences.[25] Other CARM groups spoke about gender separation, saying 'we keep girls separate to keep them safe, because most of the negatives are for the girls, not the boys'.

Young people are careful about interacting with other genders

Some young people told us that boys would be less likely to discuss relationships with their female peers. In some contexts, there is a strong separation of genders, or 'division between the boys and the girls'. Participants spoke about being 'taught you can't be friends with boys'. This can result in different perceptions and values, 'usually boys hanging out with other boys and those boys would have a different influence on them to the girls who hang out with other girls'.

A group of young men spoke about how they would avoid talking to female peers, stating they were 'scared to talk to girls', that 'everyone's pretty scared you'll reject them'. We heard that there can also be embarrassment in being friends with the opposite gender as there are fears other people will view any connection as romantic, 'it's hard … to be friends … without being accused of dating', which can lead to avoidance of interacting. Some female participants spoke about being judged 'if you are friends with a guy everyone thinks you are dating or having sexual relationships with them'.

> **My little brother is absolutely shit scared of girls. We get very little up to no advice on how to have a proper friendly relationship with girls … its always about "what are you going to do if you are about to have sex" but there's nothing about how to have casual and friendly relationships, and I worry that when he goes to uni and is out in community and is suddenly getting involved in relationships for the first time, I fear that he will do something wrong because he doesn't know how to deal with it … do something without knowing what's going on … get into a crap tonne of trouble. I don't just mean those endgame boyfriend and girlfriend relationships, but also … just how to hold a conversation for more than five seconds.**

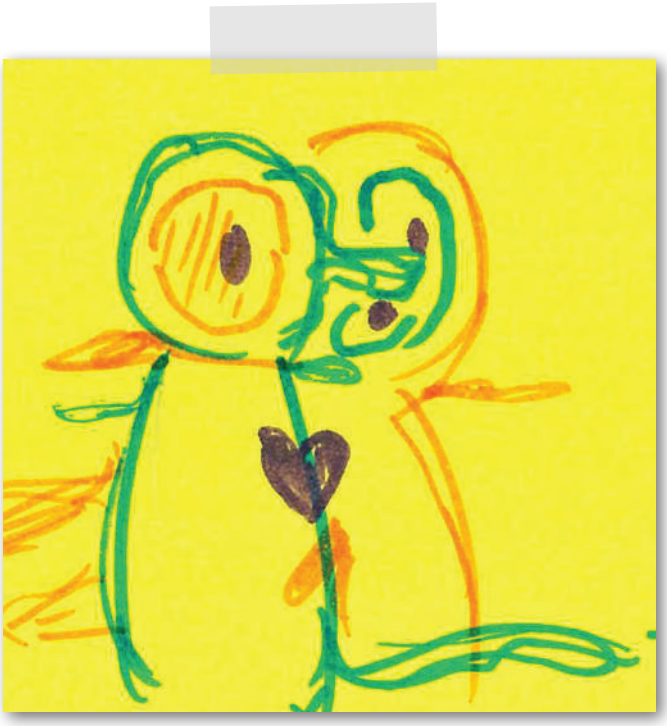
Boys turn to other boys, but are still careful about sharing too much

Perhaps as a result of this division, we often heard in consultations that young people turn to similar gender peers. In particular, we heard that boys turn to other boys to discuss relationships. We also heard that the way they interact with one another is often different to their female peers. Young people told us that boys are more likely to be active and physical with one another, playing sport and 'mucking around'. They claimed that boys 'don't check on each other like women' and are less likely to 'take it seriously' and instead deflect when a peer raises a concern. Teasing and making fun of peers can be seen as a typical way of boys interacting with one another. In the *Adolescent Man Box* report 62% of young men agreed it is a normal way for male friends to behave with one another.[26]

> **Girls' and boys' relationships can be very different. Like I think for girls, friendships can just be talking, and boys' friendships can be like playing sports with each other.**

While some young people commented that 'boys can understand each other' and 'usually go to their friends', others talked about this providing a narrow frame of reference. 'If you're a … boy, you're more likely to ask other … boys about relationship advice, especially if you're straight you'd be asking about girls and vice versa'. Sometimes this can be problematic as it can be hard to show vulnerability and male peers may 'like to impress … show off, peacocking'.

There was also negative 'influence' of peers. One gave the example that if a boy behaves badly in a relationship, their male peers may be 'backing them up', instead of challenging their actions. They highlighted that double standards may be reinforced in how a male may be judged compared to how a girl may be 'shamed' for the same actions, 'she's going to get called a whore or a slut'. There can also be problematic views reinforced, with one young person saying, 'a lot of girls, they usually lie for a guy to go to jail or have the money'. How young men talk about



relationships also perpetuates negative relationships and perceptions. For example:

> **Guys will hear other guys talk really bad about their girlfriend or a girl they like, and girls will hear that and go "ok I need to be belittled" and guys will hear that and go "I need to belittle". So, guys will learn the cycle of harming their partners and learning really toxic mindset about it.**

Recent research has highlighted the need to support young men to be 'active bystanders'.[27] Many young men are uncomfortable witnessing sexist behaviour, but they are also often uncomfortable intervening.[28] One young woman in consultations spoke about the need to 'get rid of the bystander thing … guys just looking' on when peers behave poorly. She highlighted, 'they're the ones with the real physical power; they would make more of a difference'.

Some dating relationships start pre-teen

Several groups of young people reflected that 'people are just too young' when they are entering into dating relationships. They described early dating starting at 'ten, thirteen, twelve, my first relationship was seven'. Some participants reflected further that 'if you have had a bad childhood you seem to be getting into relationships quicker'. In discussion about

'dating starting way too early' we heard that this raises risks as young people are ill-prepared to manage dynamics and have received little education around things like consent.

As there is a perception that 'you're too young to be in a relationship', young people receive minimal formal education around relationships, consent and sex. As one young person said 'if you ask them about sex ed they're like "what? You mean the thing with the post-its at school where you write about the five people?"'. The challenge is that they are 'not as educated and ... self-aware'. One participant cautioned 'when you are younger, you can think that a lot of stuff is normal and then later realise that it's not'.

Several groups of young people raised concern with the age of consent. They noted that 'most people I know in relationships, like bad relationships, are below the age of consent'.

Girls and boys look for relationship information from different sources

We also heard that in the absence of formal education young people turn to other sources to find out what's 'normal' in romantic relationships. Young people spoke about girls being more likely to be influenced by 'romantic movies' while 'boys are interested in different things' and sometimes look at different sources. There can be pressure on young people to be sexually active, that 'losing your virginity is the ultimate goal so they're not really looking for a relationship, they're just looking for sexual relations'. Young people described boys as more likely to joke around or be 'lustful' in discussions about relationships. They said that 'society expects them' to be more focused on 'attraction' rather than 'emotion based'. This is intensified if there is exposure to pornography and women are portrayed in 'vulnerable ways' as 'sluts' or 'prostitutes'.

> **A relationship is just the saddest nowadays for kids. Well, for younger kids ... my nephew, he's a little player... he's only like recently got into dating and he's like "I don't actually like these girls. They kind of just like me. So, I just date them".**

Gender changes where young people seek support

We heard how gender can impact on the supports young people receive. Some young people spoke about the need for investment in supports for women and girls, such as safe houses 'because men are the ones who hit women'. While others spoke about the importance of recognising that men can also be victims. One young person said, 'they usually support girls' and 'only listen to the woman'.

> **It's always like, the guy is the problem ... lot of guys, and they don't get believed. Like, why would a woman hit you?**

Some participants advocated for places for young men to go to speak up about problems they experience. For example, we heard that there are 'a lot more shelters for females than males' and it can be hard for young men to come forward and disclose concerns as they 'could be ashamed'. One young person explained that in abusive situations 'it is physically harder for women but maybe mentally harder for men' to leave a bad situation as there is 'no infrastructure to

support you'. This can be intensified if young people are living in regional or remote areas where there are few services available.

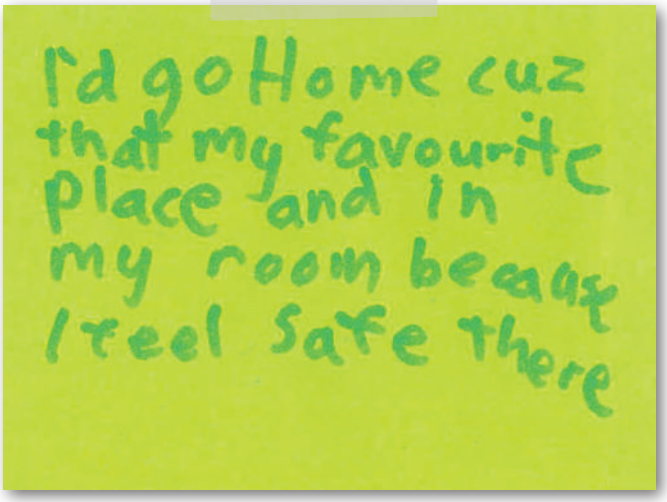
Gender differences in help-seeking have been raised in recent reports, with the *Adolescent Man Box* report noting boys are significantly less likely to seek help than female peers.[29] This is despite a high proportion of boys agreeing with the statement that 'In Australia today boys have it harder than girls'.[30]

Young people need opportunities to come together

Young people told us that there needs to be more opportunities for young people of different genders to interact in a relaxed way with one another. This would lead to greater empathy and opportunity to develop skills in communicating with one another. One young person described how a 'lack of understanding by boys of what girls are going through leads to violence'.

Some participants advocated for the chance to form 'casual and friendly relationships' with peers of different genders as this would increase confidence in 'being able to have those really friendly conversations' and move away from the 'little bubble' of single gender interactions. This may also result in young people feeling more confident to 'get rid of the bystander thing' and 'step in' when needed. Some young people reflected that 'it was easier when you're younger' to be 'all friends with each other' but 'when you're older that kinda goes away and it's more separated'.

For some young people this extended to how they were taught information about relationships in school, with one young person commenting 'it's good to not have sex ed separately gendered, or sex assigned … it's good for everyone to be learning the same thing'.



3.2 Housing is a catalyst for domestic conflict

Young people told us that housing is one of the biggest issues driving family conflict and instability. They described how the lack of secure housing can lead to arguments, breakups and even homelessness, which is backed up by recent research.[31]

Children said that the housing system is failing them. They feel that services do not respond quickly enough and do not 'actually speak to the kids' to hear about their issues. They talked about how 'families are losing money and they go to bad areas through housing'. This then has a knock-on effect on children's wellbeing because the 'schools are bad' in these areas, and they feel unsafe with neighbours because 'all the parents are bad around that area'. This also reflects evidence emerging in the sector about the lack of child-focused housing services.[32]

Children said that they have seen how the next step from bad housing is 'more and more people just become homeless'. They are concerned that this cycle of disadvantage is hard to break. The evidence agrees. Without government investment, prevention will be undermined and cycles of poverty and violence will continue or worsen.[33]

Some children from immigrant families said that early support may help families 'before the violence comes'. 'If people say what they want, having a house … if the government can say "we can help you with that … what do you need?"' – that could help to prevent family conflict. They want support that is clear and practical – to help navigate the system.

Housing insecurity is also shaping life decisions. If they are not successful getting financial support another way, some young people 'resort to having a kid which also gets them more money and a decent house'. They said that the relationship itself is secondary – 'they're just doing it with anyone who will do it with them'. The young people said that this kind of relationship is not healthy because 'they end up yelling at each other which means either one of them has to be kicked out'. The cycle of conflict is made worse when there is nowhere safe to go.

3.3 Poverty and financial stress drive violence

> **A lot more people struggle when they don't have as much money … a lot of families … and that can make relationships harder sometimes for families.**

'I reckon it's the money situation'. Young people told us that 'with the cost of living creating financial hardships for parents' it is no wonder that there are 'breakdowns in the family'. 'That is a real thing' for some people. One child explained, 'domestic violence can equate from many things … high levels of stress from work or bills'. For example, 'if there's serious medical concerns with kids or parents or close family that the parents are worried about [they] will take it out on the kids'. Another child described how money can help couples be 'stable with each other' in relationships, where power is shared and you can 'take turns paying or go 50/50' when spending time together. This echoes studies that show how the risk of FDSV increases as financial stress and economic hardship increases.[34] These pressures do not just affect adults – they shape the environment children grow up in.

Young people told us that financial instability affects how parents care for their children. In some families – often 'lower socio economic, minimum wage, single parent families' – the parents or caregivers 'have to work more hours to provide food, [so] they can't nurture'. Children notice when 'cost of living … [is] having negative impacts on relationships' and this affects how they learn about healthy and positive relationships.

Financial hardship also inhibits action. Children said that even when help is needed – with health or resources – 'it's really expensive to get help so that's why lots of people don't get it'. Children also talked about how violence and abuse is perpetuated because of lack of money, 'most people who are in those violent homes don't have the financial ability to sustain themselves properly'. This is backed up by research that highlights the choice many face, between staying in a violent situation or poverty.[35]

Children spoke about how money shapes identity and aspiration – and partly explained the interest in gangsta culture and gang imagery for many young people. For some, 'being gangsta' is seen as a way out because 'they're all rich, got money, they're tough, Big Man, strong'. However, with the gangsta culture may come unhealthy ideas about relationships and masculinity too.

For children and young people, part of the solution was to empower them with more financial agency – 'up youth allowance' and 'give us more money [through] Centrelink'. They also wanted a fairer tax system so people 'get the money you work for'.

3.4 Intergenerational trauma perpetuates the cycle of violence

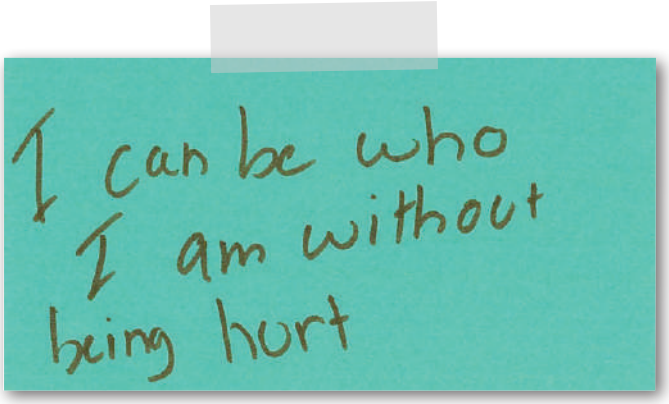
Young people said to us that 'if we're talking about stopping violence before it begins', then we would have to look at the bigger picture, because 'the parents will have stuff going on in their lives from their childhood that they haven't gotten over – for example, intergenerational trauma'. Indeed, some research says in violent families, maternal and paternal trauma can be transmitted over generations.[36]

> **Your past experience takes a big toll on what you do in the future.**

One young person told us that 'hurt people hurt people. If you are abused [it's] all you know', with others describing it as a 'cycle of abuse'. People 'who have been abused as a child … think attacking people is normal'. Violence becomes normalised when 'someone who's been treated harmfully … doesn't know what it's like to be treated like well' – so learned behaviour from family becomes a rationale for using violence in the home.[37] One young person saw the gender angle, where 'guys will learn the cycle of harming their partners and learning really toxic mindset about it'. In some cases, 'the dad abuses the wife then the son sees that … and then it can constantly go on'.

Some children also talked about the problem of 'generational bias … if the people around you are doing it, and the generations before you are doing it, and your partner's doing it, you're not going to think it's wrong'. Then parents who should be supporting their children to learn about healthy relationships are not equipped to; 'she's just as traumatised as I am … she's not going to be able to know how to help her child'.

Young people also highlighted how cultural and familial structures can reinforce cycles of abuse. For example, 'certain cultures have certain roles … the man is in control, and the woman is never in control'. One young person said that this is 'still an abusive relationship, it's just been passed down and no one can get out of it'. They said that people from some cultures 'aren't exposed to any other ways



of life … it's just going to keep going until something changes'. The research gives some more nuance to this. While cultural diversity does not increase risk of using or experiencing violence, some cultures have different attitudes towards gender roles and family dynamics, which can impact the way FDSV is perceived, with some expecting that women and girls defer to husbands and fathers or stay in violent relationships.[38]

The only way to get that change would be to 'break that cycle, kind of thing'. One young person was sympathetic about their mum who 'went through heaps of shit', but also felt 'that doesn't mean that I have to go through shit'. With the right supports around them, children can see themselves as capable of moving beyond this perceived legacy of violence.[39] For this young person, having parents who can 'go through therapy' to heal and recover from their own traumatic experiences would help make it so their 'kids don't have that life too'.

> **So … I'll give you an example. So, you put a hypothetical kid – we'll call him Blake – in a house with adults that are just constantly swearing and not abiding by their own rules that they set for their kids, like swearing and coarse language … but they're showing it themselves … So, Blake, like, he will go out and cause trouble with friends 'cos that's what he knowing his parents are doing and people are getting in trouble for. And the law is bad to them, so they just … can't stand it. 'Cos why say no? Like their own parents have failed them why would they take any authority from a government figure?**

3.5 Racism inhibits relationship building

Some people 'get seen differently because of their culture, and people are less likely to like that kind of people. I think it's racism I'm talking about'.

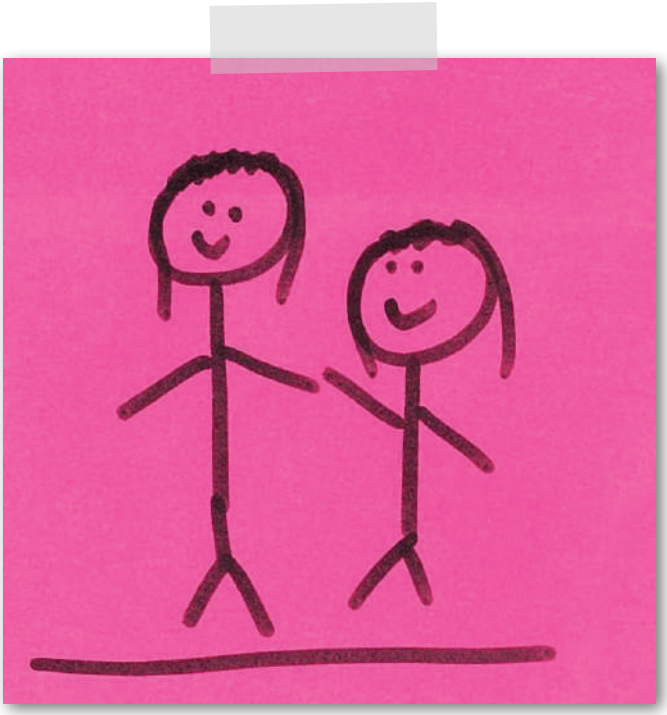
> **Different cultures treat each other different ways.**

'I feel like if people are racist to you, that will impact, like, exposing yourself to others, like trying to make friends' in the future, because 'you have trust issues' from that early experience. And these 'trust issues' affect building all relationships.

The racism that many young people were describing was not just individual. Many talked about it as an institutional – and very public – issue they dealt with every day. Part of this came from the police who 'are racist in town, they talk shit, talk racist words', part of it comes from the community, both 'on the street there are enemies, racist people' and online where 'they are rude towards us'. Young people experienced racism in schools, ''cos it's just a lot of people looking down at you because of culture. Just purely racist'. The conflation of racism and culture was common, with young people calling it 'disrespect'. They talked about being given racist names, 'a name they give us, we don't call ourselves that'. For these children, it was about 'other people trying to make us look bad'.

> **... when we are walking, they chase you, in cars. These are any people, people we don't know, they just see us on the street outside. They scare us.**

Children spoke about how language and cultural differences – for people who 'weren't born here' – make it harder to feel part of the community. They said, 'In Australia there are lots of people ... they don't speak English' and they are made to feel 'they're not part of this community'. Integration can



be hard. These communities deal with racism, language barriers and poor understanding of how services fit together. These barriers, combined with racism, make it difficult for young people from these families to access opportunities and services – and to 'make their dream to be real'. This comes up in research too: that families from CARM migrant backgrounds experience a 'range of compounding structural and interpersonal factors that limit help-seeking and exacerbate the impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence'.[40]

Coping behaviours among children vary. The police behaviour towards them caused some young people to 'make trouble, disrespect them, because they disrespect us'. This may escalate the problem, but young people feel there are no other ways to cope. To stay safe, young people said 'we always stay together, even when going to places like the ATM or something. Always together. We circle around each other if we going to the ATM and stay together if we going to the toilets'.

> **We called the police for help and asked them to help us, it was dark and they said they were too busy, this was at nighttime. As soon as she said that we were black, we were Indigenous, they didn't want to help us.**

There was a sense among the young people we heard from that when a child's communities are not strong – because of racism or discrimination or isolation – they turn to 'the streets', 'drugs', 'all these kids, they're lost'.

The potential knock-on effect of racism on relationships cannot be underestimated. The stress that racism and exclusion can bring on can also heighten the risk of FDSV. Persistent discrimination, fear for safety and feelings of isolation – often compounded by economic hardship – can create conditions for violence in the home. It is known to exacerbate intimate partner violence.[41] Racism and colonialism can also see a higher degree of normalisation and condoning of violence against certain groups, acting as a 'reinforcing factor' to FDSV.[42] This could be complicated further if children and their parents or caregivers feel they cannot get help because they mistrust authorities – police or social services, for example. This can then further contribute to feelings of disempowerment or perpetuating intergenerational trauma.

4. Getting information and help about relationships

This section explores what children and young people told us about where they might go for information and support with relationships, how these are helpful and unhelpful, and how these could be improved.

They talked to us about seeking information and support from family, friends, schools, online, pop culture, the justice system, support and community services, and community and culture.

Recommendation 2:

DSS develop local place-based pilots that implement an integrated approach to building whole-of-community capacity to promote child and family safety, including ending gender-based violence. This must include:

- coordinating and integrating initiatives across different national frameworks
- localised grants for smaller scale community activities to address the above issues
- evaluating the effectiveness of pilots for children across all priority cohorts
- identifying innovative and emerging practices to inform further investment in ending gender-based violence.

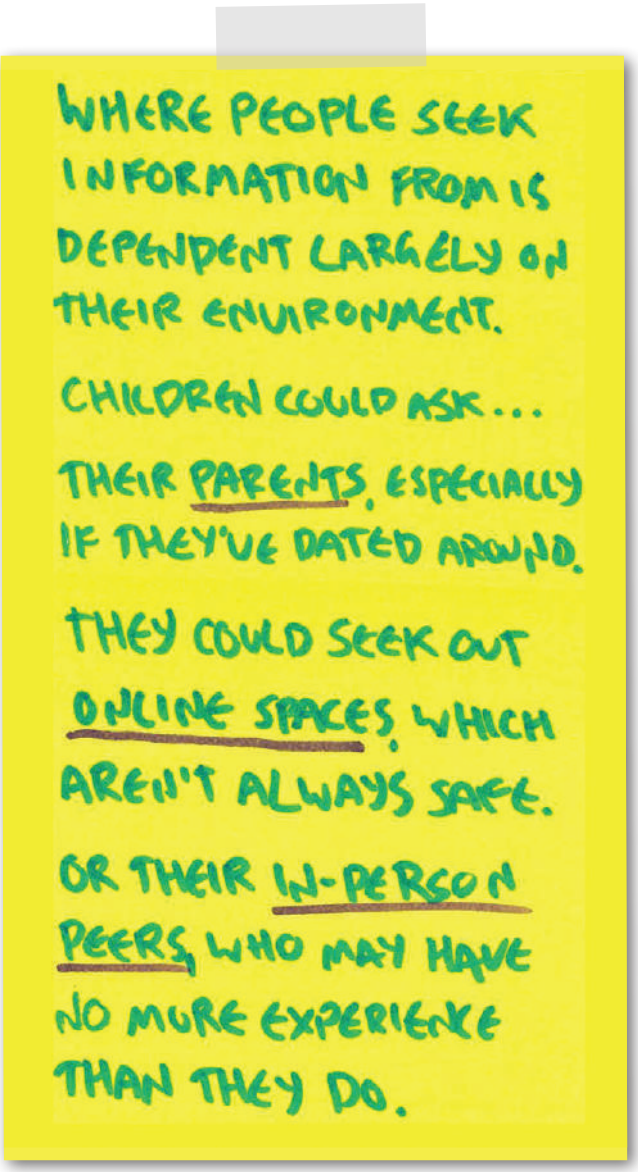
Recommendation 3:

DSS ensure that all national frameworks that affect children and young people contain mechanisms for child and youth participation, including elements of youth leadership, genuine co-design and monitoring and evaluation. This must include:

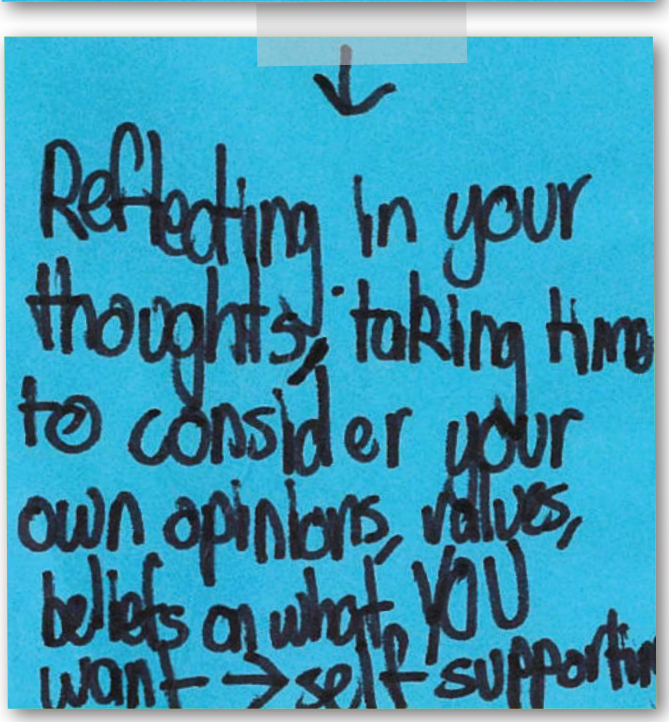
- engagement with the most marginalised and affected cohorts of young people
- appropriate measures – including ethical considerations, engaging experienced professionals and undertaking due diligence in consultation preparation and support – to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people during participation
- support through existing independent mechanisms with relevant expertise – particularly the National Children's Commissioner, as well as the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, and the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner
- resourcing to support this.

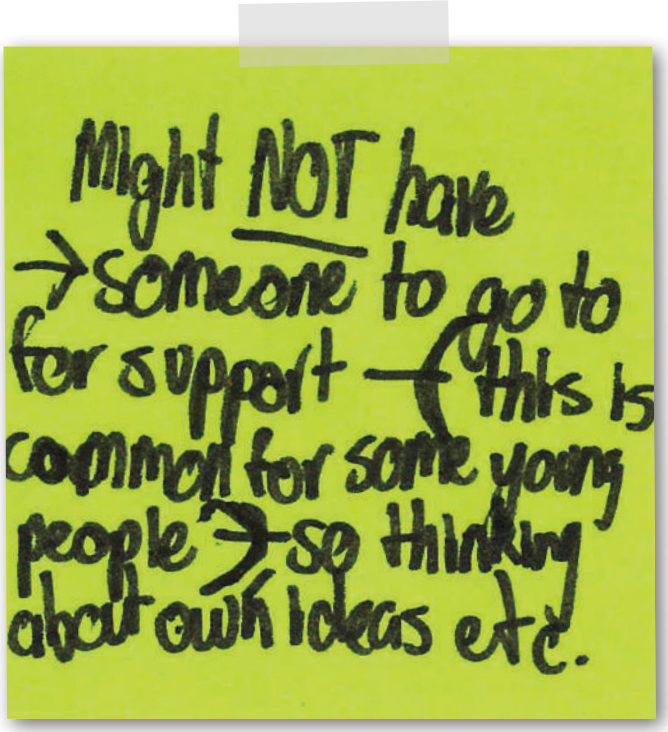
> If you're taught about relationships in a certain way from a young age and you don't face any issues in the future, you'll just take it for what it is. But if you struggle in a relationship and you were in a difficult spot because of a relationship, you would then seek out information about relationships.


NO FEAR OF
JUDGEMENT


WHERE PEOPLE SEEK INFORMATION FROM IS DEPENDENT LARGELY ON THEIR ENVIRONMENT.
CHILDREN COULD ASK...
THEIR PARENTS, ESPECIALLY IF THEY'VE DATED AROUND.
THEY COULD SEEK OUT ONLINE SPACES, WHICH AREN'T ALWAYS SAFE.
OR THEIR IN-PERSON PEERS, WHO MAY HAVE NO MORE EXPERIENCE THAN THEY DO.


Yourself


Reflecting in your thoughts, taking time to consider your own opinions, values, beliefs on what YOU want → self supporting

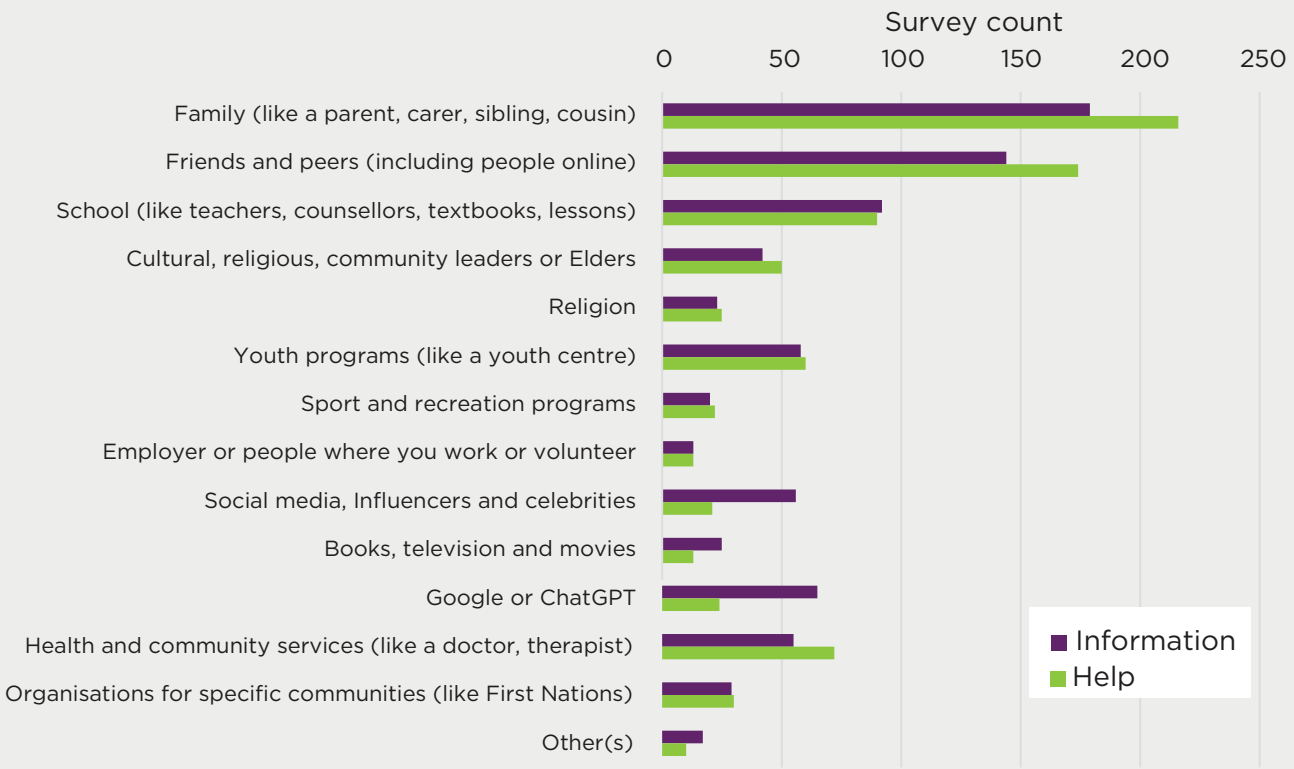

Might NOT have → someone to go to for support → this is common for some young people → so thinking about own ideas etc.

Children and young people told us the reason they would look for support with relationships is if they suspected something was wrong. Commonly, they said that what would lead them to seek out information is 'suspicion or knowledge' that 'they don't have a good relationship' or do not think the relationships they have are 'healthy'. We heard that most young people do not look until 'they're seriously worried', 'like if someone's doing something that doesn't feel right' and they 'want some answers' to 'figure it out'. In that situation they may want to check, 'is this okay?'.

Not everyone can access help: Several young people, often young men, told us that they would be unlikely to seek information or support with any relationships. Some said that they had 'never reached out to anybody' and simply 'don't really have a go-to place' that they feel comfortable approaching for help. We heard this from people in both metropolitan and regional settings. Some young people described how sometimes 'you don't get much help' when living out in remote or rural environments, that physical access, especially for 'face-to-face' help, can be limited. One First Peoples young woman spoke about how the dynamics of some small remote communities can be hard to navigate when you do not feel accepted or understood, are othered or visibly discriminated against, saying 'there's a lot of racial discrimination, my friends also experience it in the city but not as bad as here'.

We also heard that in the absence of other supports, some young people opt to rely on their 'own thoughts, beliefs and values' for guidance. While they noted that this could be positive, they also spoke about how 'taking the time' to self-reflect required 'maturity'.

Figure 2: Where would you go for information or help?

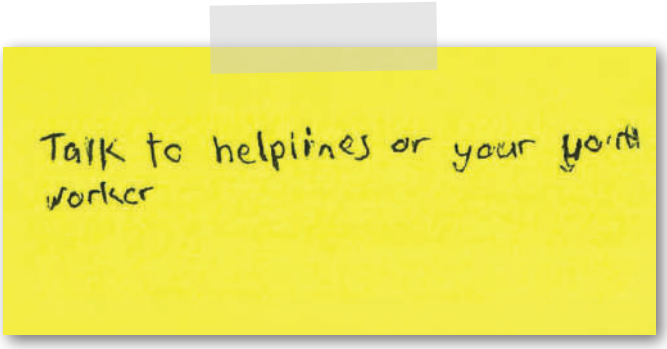


> **To be honest, young people … we don't really like to look for help, we don't go ask for help, we just like try and figure it out ourselves.**

Some young people may not know they need help: Other young people 'might not even recognise there is a problem' to go looking early. Young people explained that 'exposure' is important. Sometimes you do not realise something is wrong until you search online or are talking to people who 'might have experience'. This can plant the seed to look deeper. Sometimes the reactions of peers and other trusted people can highlight concerns. For example, 'if you're in public with friends and others raised an issue' you may be more likely to look further. Sometimes awareness may come via information days at school, like 'special days at school like "Consent Day" and "Healthy Relationships Day". These types of days help to identify unhealthy relationships'.

One young person spoke about many of their peers being 'innocent' and unaware that what they had experienced was harmful or abusive. They commented, 'I know so many girls who have been assaulted, and they don't even realise until they … asked about it and searched things up'.

Understanding unhealthy relationships can be confronting: Some young people spoke about how confronting it can be to get information or help with relationships, especially if this highlights harm or abuse. Sometimes this information challenges the situation you are in and necessitates taking action. Some may suspect they are 'in toxic relationships but they don't want to know'. They suggested that there needs to be a level of preparedness to 'come to terms' with the information you find. For example, this may be accepting the reality that 'if this person really loved me, they wouldn't hurt me' and then action to 'say something'. As one young person explained, 'you love that person, and if they're doing that it's going to be hard to confront'. Having access to information which is non-judgemental and relatable is critical.



Some young people want help when they invest in relationships: Other reasons for seeking information or support include if young people wanted help to get into relationships, make friends or improve the relationships they have, including with family. We heard that entering into first dating relationships is a key time young people may go looking for information and support about relationships. One young person explained 'maybe they are in their first relationship. They've got a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and they are trying to work out the dynamic and not how it works but what to expect'. They may want to know if something is healthy or what can they expect. Others said that their search could be prompted by a desire to 'fix the relationship' they are in, to turn it around. They explained that if a relationship 'isn't going to plan' or is 'starting to go a bit off' they might look for information to help them and the situation.

> **If you feel like you are in an unsafe relationship you may ask or check: do you think it's a red flag and see responses to your relationship.**

Children seek help and support from several parts of their life: Children and young people told us about the people and places that were important to them when accessing information about – and help with – relationships. We have grouped them into 9 domains, noting that these domains may connect and intersect.

4.1 Getting support from family

Recommendation 4:

All relevant Australian Government departments further expand programs to improve education and awareness of safe and positive relationships, including:

- an early years program for parents, carers and children delivered through early childhood centres and health services
- content for families in media environments they use, such as podcasts, streaming services and social media platforms. This should be informed by the voices of children in this report as a starting point and use the full potential of storytelling to raise awareness
- working with popular content creators to develop positive content about relationships on platforms that young people use. Content must be strengths-based, include representation of diverse cohorts and be co-designed with young people
- working with employers to ensure workplaces are a source of information and support about rights and safety for young people.

Family is the closest connection for many children

'their parents'

'family'

'siblings'

'cousins'

'guardian'

'with mum'

'young aunty'

'grandmothers, friends of mothers, mothers of friends'

'aunties'

'my brother'

'sisters'

'parents are the closest people, they bring you into this life'

Family is 'the groundwork, it's the base, it's what holds everything together'. Young people told us that family plays a vital role in helping them understand what safe and positive relationships look like. Children said things like 'parents are the backbone', showing how deeply they value the support and example set by those closest to them. Many described turning to their mum, dad, siblings or aunties when they needed help or advice: 'I reckon I would ask my mum ... I don't know what to do, help me' and 'I've got my brother'. They spoke about growing up with love and encouragement, 'my mum urging me to be greater' and 'I

grew up with love', and how family shaped their understanding of respect and healthy relationships: 'when I was raised it was drilled into me by my parents'. One child summed it up by saying, 'I feel like I wouldn't be the person I am today without my parents and that positive aspect in my life'. These comments are consistent with other research which demonstrates the important impact of parents and family in influencing behaviour and attitudes.[43]

> **I understand wanting to do your own thing, I understand thinking that your parents are wrong all the time, but they're not wrong all the time and sometimes you actually do need to listen. They do know what they're talking about.**

Families have a 'deeper connection': Children and young people said that families are 'number one', 'because that's the first person you see when you are born'. This bond is hard to break and they learn to communicate through families. They described it as 'an automatic thing' to turn to a parent or sibling when something happens because 'you can't separate us'. Young people shared that while friendships can fade, 'parents' and 'grandparents' influences are 'embedded'.

'Communication is key and connection is critical': Young people told us family is important to conversations about relationships because they can have open communication. Children said that coming home after a stressful day and talking things through with their parents 'help you with your emotions'. They described relationships where 'I can tell them everything'. Some shared that their parents 'don't really get paid to do it', but did it out of love. Others reflected on how things are changing – 'parents are becoming more open with their kids', and topics that were once taboo, like sexual abuse, are now being discussed. Children said they go to the parent they know best. For example, 'if they know their mum more, they might go to their mother'. Sometimes they go to extended family, like 'my girlfriend's mother', for advice. They talked about 'learning from each other' and also about the importance of 'talking language' for some First Peoples families.

Families model behaviour and 'set good examples': To understand relationships and know how to behave, children and young people said to 'watch your parents', explaining that 'the family is teaching the child everything'. Parents were seen as central figures – 'dad is, like, an inspiring person' and 'my mum teaches me'. They also talked about learning through observation: 'The people you hang out with, the family, how they act they learn and that's how they figure out.' Others said that having parents helps them build 'a positive and safe relationship', and that 'you can learn [from them] when it comes to romantic relationships and friendships'.

Some children highlighted how family helps them understand cultural knowledge, like 'skin groups, who you can marry'. Some First Peoples children described how Elders pass down knowledge, saying 'when we are young our Elders teach us the good test and bad test', and that 'my grandmother teach me not to do bad things'.

Parents 'have more experience': Children said they turn to family members, especially those who have 'been through a lot', because they have 'learnt stuff and they can teach', having 'probably done what you have done'. One child shared, 'I usually go to my brother for help because he's had more experience

than me', while others said they 'learn from family', especially leaders like grandparents. Children told us that 'parents have lived experience and can help you', and that 'older siblings have probably lived through it before you'.

Families 'make me feel safe': Family 'have our backs' and 'can be trusted because in their heart they want to help you', because 'you are their child'. Many liked home, saying 'I feel safe there' and 'I can watch TV and fall asleep at home'. They shared that 'you can trust them' and 'they want the best for you'. Some said they 'go to my parents for everything' instead of services because 'a random stranger' may make you 'nervous'. Others spoke about extended family: 'I tend to go to my aunt and uncle for help … they always listen to me, they don't really judge'. First Peoples children also said family helps keep them safe, saying they 'keep us away from the trouble and the police', and reflecting on how they 'feel safe around my brothers' because 'they protect you'.

Not all families provide the support children need

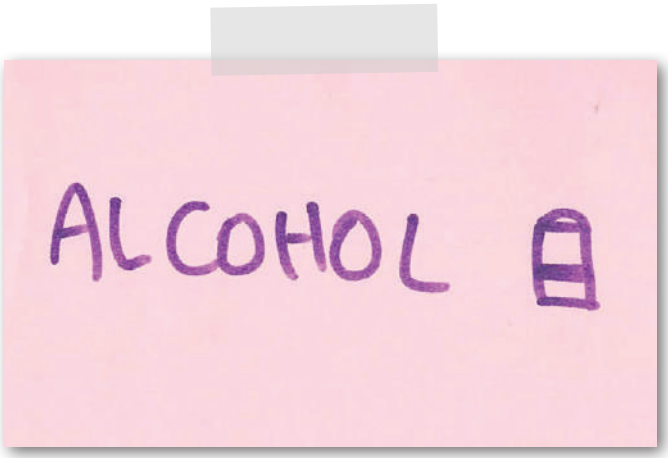
Getting support from families is not guaranteed because 'it depends on the type of relationship that you have with family'.

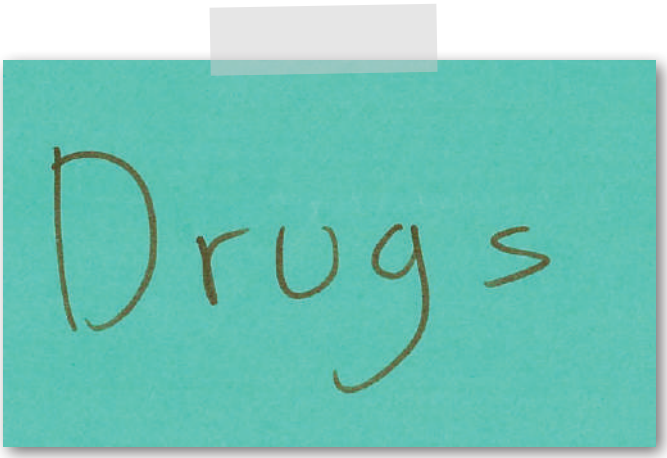
'Some parents can't be bothered': Children said that 'it's kinda their job to, like, look after … and sadly some parents don't do that'. They described situations where 'with the drinking, they go mad, steal', where 'they have bad parental figures' or where they are 'completely junkified and gone'. This shows how deeply some children feel let down by the adults who are meant to care for them.

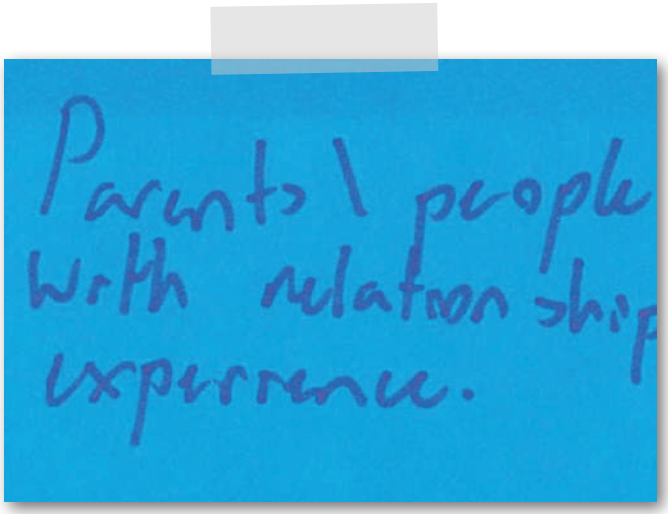
Children 'don't want to be judged' by family: Children explained how complicated sharing with family can be 'if … you can't actually talk to them'. Children said that sometimes families 'might have issues with things you have done' and that 'sometimes the parents might take sides', which can make it feel unfair or unsafe to share. They told us, 'you should be able to trust them' also saying they 'don't want to be judged, they don't want to get in trouble'. Others felt that 'your parents and friends have a bias', making it harder to get honest support. Some children said sometimes it is easier to talk to siblings or aunts because 'they cannot punish you'.

> **What if you don't wanna tell them?**

Some children have negative role models in their home: Children and young people talked about the dangers of copying behaviours: 'When I was a kid, my dad would say bad things to my mum and I would go to school and say those things to my teachers'. They told us that when adults do things like drink or act out, 'it might look like it's a good thing … so when you tell me to stop, and you keep doing it, there is no difference'. Children said that watching their parents' relationships – especially if they are negative – can shape their whole worldview: 'I think watching your parents' relationship … that's what you are accustomed to'.







> **Like, say a kid in their younger years had a bad household, say there was abuse, alcohol abuse, this stuff – they're gonna grow up taking in what they grew up on. I just, I've seen that a lot.**

Some 'parents are uneducated on relationships': Young people told us that being a parent takes more than just remembering what it was like to have once been a child. They said, 'I think most parents are uneducated on relationships', and that many adults simply repeat what they experienced growing up, even when those views are outdated or harmful. For example, children said some parents try to 'keep the norm that people shouldn't be trans or gay'. One young person said that 'even though parents will be the most trusted source they're not necessarily the most accurate source'. Some children also felt that 'parents can be controlling sometimes', suggesting that a lack of understanding can lead to behaviour that makes it harder for young people to feel heard or supported.

> **They didn't learn, and they don't really … because when you get to a certain point the brain stops learning, and you kind of get fixed on your own thing. Like, the older you are, the more stuck in your ways you'll be.**

Children want and expect guidance from their families

'Family could be more of a guide' when it comes to relationships. Issues young people face should be met with 'some sort of parental intervention'.

> **I don't think there's much formal education on how to be a parent.**

Relationships support hinges on 'educating the parents': Because learning 'does start from a really young age', 'we need to talk to parents about it and, like, educate them about what to teach their children'. Children and young people felt that parents could help by reinforcing messages at home, such as 'tell them bullying is bad and tell them to stop or ground them if they don't stop'. Children implied that parenting here needed to be active; that parents 'need to be aware and know all the information that they need' to support their children, with one child suggesting they 'copy off a book or something'. So 'the government should be … giving information to parents on how to educate their children', especially since 'most parents want good for their children'. Learning 'the basics' should start early: 'when you get pregnant you should have to do a course of like how to work with kids … like mandatory parenting classes'. They suggested that 'educating the parents – just telling them be way more mindful when your child is in the room' could make a difference. They felt that 'learning how to raise your kids' is crucial, especially when it comes to dealing with bullies: 'I think deal with their parents'.

Government-sponsored events would 'educate them about it and they would be able to take that information, understand it or try to understand it and then put it onto their kids'. Children also said that 'advertisements' could help raise awareness. Children want adults to 'have a bigger understanding' and to be able to 'deal with stuff like this' because 'this is what you signed up for'.

> **… you would be taught … "oh yeah, this is fine, my parents told me that, it's fine" and then when you grow up you're like "wow, I'm glad I learnt it that way".**

Parents need to 'listen' to 'what their child is saying': Children told us that parents need to be better at 'hearing out their kid, understanding how they are feeling, just thinking back like … "I used to be there, I used to be their age, like, maybe I should just step back a bit"'. Some children felt that parents need to 'be there more', and that it is 'not hard to do at all'. But they also said care should not be forced – especially in tough moments when you 'need to slowly work with them'. Instead of yelling, one child said parents should 'sit down, ask what's wrong'. But first, many children felt that parents need to indicate their commitment to being available. So, when a parent asks how their child is doing:

> **a parent who is fully supportive, like, is there for the kid 24/7, [who] actively engages with them on a daily basis … when they are that, because the parent is more trusted as a friend, they will get a better answer like, "I'm okay, stuff is just tough at school right now" or "I'm not focussing in class" or whatever it is.**

They want parents to listen, not judge and to support them in becoming 'who it wants to be' – not necessarily what the parent envisioned.

Government needs to support parents to help the kids: Children said that 'parents just getting help themselves first' is important, because 'it's unfair for a parent to have a kid if you're not, like, ready for yourself'. They spoke about the need for support systems for parents that include therapy and rehab – 'mandatory when needed' – especially when 'most of it happens under the abuse of something, drugs, alcohol'. They said that the police need to proactively help. One child even proposed that 'a minimum for having a kid has got to be 18 years'. Children are thinking deeply about what parents need to raise them well and supporting parents is a vital part of supporting children.

Monitoring of at-risk households: Young people told us that government should 'have a look at the parents first', before they have children to see if they are capable. There should be monitoring of parents, 'making sure the kids have a good home life, upbringing' and 'tell parents, when they do bad things, teach them lessons'. But others raised concerns, saying that any kind of test for 'good parents' could be 'easy manipulated to be racist or sexist' and therefore 'parents that would actually be good at being parents would not actually get to be a parent'. Still, there was a strong sense that children should be asked about their parents and that monitoring could help 'make sure … the children [are] satisfied'.

Children need to be safe and protected first: One young person said, 'a child, I believe, has to grow up in a safe, protected and unviolent home so they don't become violent themselves'. Children told us that parents need to 'tell them [their children] what's good and what's not good' and that families should make children feel safe 'to get happy'. Some young people talked about parents needing 'to get better at getting a job' so they can work 'for money … for food, medicines, lounge, beds, tablet, TVs, food' – all the things that children need. They reminded us that it is not just about physical safety, but emotional and environmental safety too, and that nurturing care is what helps children thrive.

Spotlight on: disability inclusion

Both the CRC and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) are underpinned by principles that emphasise respect for the evolving capacities of children. Children with disability often face more significant barriers to accessing information and support about relationships – and to opportunities to express their opinions – than their peers.[44] The intersecting factors of age and support needs can result in communication challenges and reliance on support people that may create obstacles to their participation and ability to make independent decisions.

Parents, carers and other trusted adults can act as gatekeepers, playing a key role in shaping what information and services these young people access.

These decisions may be protective and empowering for children. Conversely, they may be based on ableist assumptions about capacity or risk that can limit access to information and support in ways that are disempowering and harmful for children.

As well as meeting with young people with disability in generalist settings, we held a few consultations this year with specialist disability services. Children who use alternative methods of communication participated using assistive technology such as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and communication boards (pictured below), with support from trusted adults, such as class teachers and speech therapists.

Our approach to consultations was adapted to be developmentally appropriate for these young people. This was done in close consultation with trusted adults in their lives who had established relationships with the young people and helped us to interpret their responses and behaviours. More information about this adapted approach is available in Part (e) of the Methodology.

Through these bespoke consultations, young people with disability told us that they feel safe with family. They indicated that communication tools, such as AACs, communication boards like the ones they were using, and the Zones of Regulation, support them to express their feelings and communicate with the people around them. They told us that toys and sensory tools, such as ice cubes, along with taking breaks, going outside, and having snacks, make them feel safe.

In this instance, the trusted adults empowered young people to participate in a process they might not otherwise have been able to access. This took time and investment in the relationship, and considerable planning. It broadened our understanding of what voice can be and the multitude of ways there are to listen. It also offered the opportunity to hear what young people with disability have to tell us about safe and positive relationships.

4.2 Relying on friends and peers

Friends can be reliable, relatable and truthful

> **My relationship with [NAME], he's always a positive guy and he makes me feel safe around him. I don't think he'd switch off me. I feel like I have a safe connection with him, makes me feel comforted by that, knowing he's my mate.**

'Most people go to their friends first': Many young people reported that 'friends would be the first place' they would go to get information or support with relationships. They described a 'close connection' with friends, saying that friends usually understand you and your situation well. While it can 'depend on the relationship you have and how open you are' participants explained that there are certain things that you feel much more 'comfortable' speaking to a friend about. As one young person explained, 'they wouldn't tell their parents things, only their friends'.

Several young people explained that with friends, you can just 'blurt it all out'. You can be confident that they 'won't blab to anyone' and there is less worry about being judged or disappointing someone. You can tell a friend what you are going through, and they understand that. Whereas if you tell a parent or 'older authority figure' they 'might get mad' or there may be other negative consequences. We heard that 'if you don't want your parents finding out, the first thing young people look to is their friends', especially 'a friend they really trust' who is able to 'give them advice' in a non-judgemental way.

> **You're going to tell your friends more than you tell your parents – you're not going to be "oh my boyfriend called me a bitch" to your mum but you might say that to your friends.**

Young people described different types of friends: those they know in real life and others, like online friends, who they may have connected with through social media or gaming. They described how it is easier to open up to friends 'on a deeper level' and 'ask advice' about things like relationships. This is especially the case if they are the 'OG's' and have been with you for several years and you have developed trust and understanding.

> **If it was a best mate, you would tell them things on a deeper level, say "hey this happened to me ... it's been tough".**

Friends are available and relatable: It is simply 'easier' to talk with friends. You often see them every day, unlike more formal supports. One young person commented: 'we don't need these big education frameworks; they take years. You just go up to someone, and they will tell you, and you come out of that knowing'. The advice young people give to one another was described as relevant and relatable. Many of them expressed a preference to be helped by 'people more your age', 'someone who understands what they're going through', who does not judge or have an 'old fashioned mindset'. They spoke about friends sharing the same 'cultural space' as you and how they may have 'grown up in the same town, the same society'.

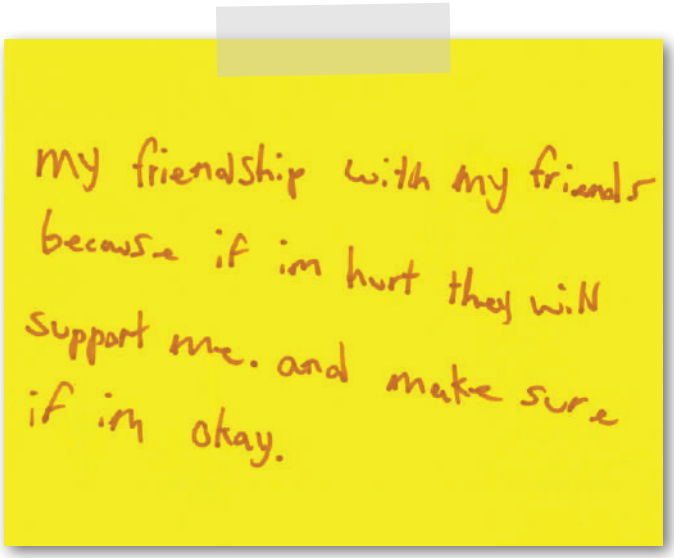
> **Choose friends. They have more similar experiences than my parents.**

Friends tell it to you straight: Good friends are also more likely to be direct, so you can 'put weight' on what they tell you. When asked what type of advice they might give a peer regarding relationships, one young person said that she would be brutally honest: 'I just tell them! Tell them stop going back to him! Leave him!'. Friends will be frank and:

> **say if it's right or wrong … [they] are more likely to give you the actual truth, not sugarcoat it. You being happy in the long run, that's what matters to them.**

Friends may have experience: Friends can give you the benefit of their own experience, even 'bad experience'. Often young people look to one another for examples, especially in their early relationships. They 'share' and learn from one another. This is especially the case if their friend is 'in a relationship that they can tell is healthy'. Several young people talked about how they would develop 'insight' into romantic relationships from their friends – the 'good stuff and bad stuff'. This can be useful 'feedback' in knowing 'what's wrong and what's right'. Many young people spoke about the benefit of hearing other people's stories, explaining that this created 'deeper' understanding if people 'tell you their own experiences' as it provides 'reassurance'.

> **Most of my friends have a lot of experience or knowledge on relationships.**



Friendships can be model relationships: As a relationship model, friendships can provide valuable skills in communication, empathy, trust and boundaries:

> **I think you learn not from friends telling you about relationships, but rather from building the relationship itself [with your friend], through experiencing and building that friendship over time.**

Some friends can be insensitive or too inexperienced to be helpful

Not everyone is lucky enough to have trustworthy and reliable friends. Some people have 'fake' friends who are insincere and unhelpful. Many young people talked about the fact that they would not know how to assist a peer, with a few acknowledging that 'sometimes you really need an adult involved', someone with more 'life experience' to guide and assist you.

> **As much as your friends do care for you … they can't give you the same impact as an adult can.**

Many young people talked about the fact that someone their own age may not 'know what they are going to say' or will 'say things out loud which doesn't help'. Peers may be insensitive and not equipped to respond in trauma-informed ways. One young person described reaching out to a boyfriend when she was having a panic attack for him to reply, '"just have a lolly", and I'm like "no, it's not going to help, bro". Whatever'.

We heard that it can be 'overwhelming' to be in the position of the listener or helper. As one young person described, 'they are just dumping all this information on you and it just hits you like a brick and you have no idea how to respond, what to say'. If the situation is serious and someone is in a violent or abusive situation you can simply 'not know what to do'. Some friends:

> **might feel pressure … especially if you say 'don't tell anyone, it's a secret', because you're putting pressure on the person you trust, on your safe place, and then eventually they go crazy because they have to deal with their own problems and yours.**

> **they don't know how to help you and help themselves at the same time.**

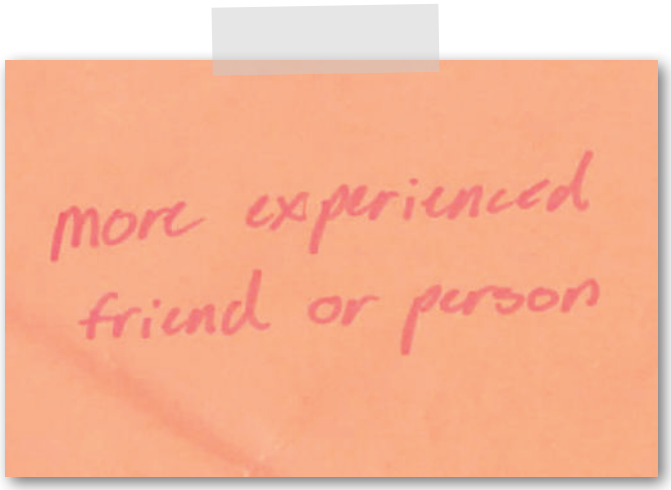
Participants spoke about how they would look to other peers, a trusted adult or online sites for information to assist a friend. They said that there is a risk that the information they give is unreliable, especially if it is sourced from places like social media.

Children need friends to be better listeners and more knowledgeable

Being 'better informed' was suggested by many young people. Participants talked about the importance of raising awareness amongst all young people around relationships and safety. This would not only help young people with their own situations, but also better prepare them to support their friends, so 'we know what to do'. One young person described this as to 'know what you're talking about' and 'how to make someone feel better'. We heard that this education should come earlier than it does, instead of 'when we're almost an adult' (see section 4.4).

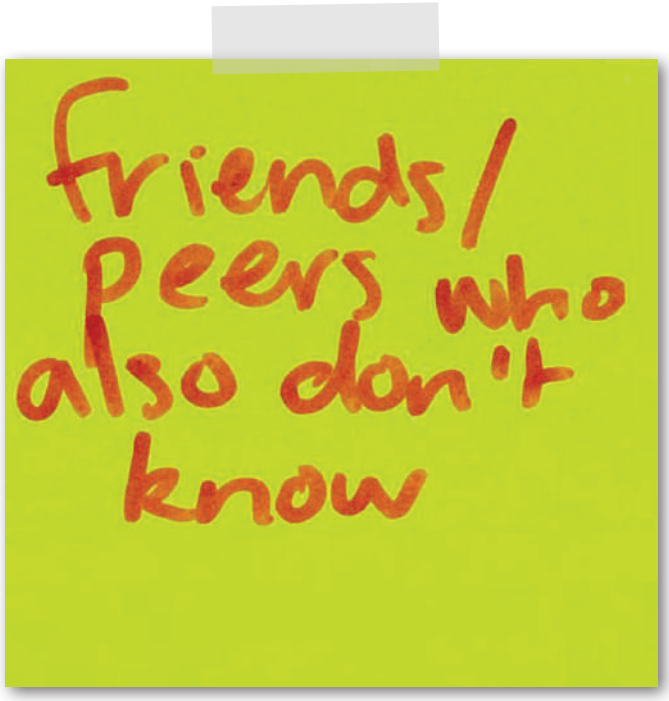
Young people thought that empathy was important – having skills to keep 'the conversation going' and be focused on the friend, instead of 'talking about your interests, talking about theirs'. They described 'just trying to show them that you understand what they are feeling' by sharing your own experience. Children want to 'normalise talking about your feelings with your friends. Normalising that it's okay to talk about bad stuff that's happening, being more open with each other'.

Some young people talked about the need for better awareness and education in how to be a supportive 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' as often they simply 'don't understand' and are ill-equipped to provide advice or support. One solution suggested was to assist young people with skills and opportunities to interact and communicate with people of other genders in a less pressured and more relaxed way.



Young people spoke about wanting to feel that they can raise issues with one another without burdening each other. It also depended on the seriousness of the issue. Some said they would go to a friend 'for a school drama or relationship breakup' but to a professional for 'something like depression and mental health'. However, knowing where the line was and when to seek extra help is not always clear and young people may need some help with identifying when they should be looking for external support.

Having peers who normalise help seeking is potentially influential because 'if your friends go' then you are more likely to think 'I should go'.



4.3 Being in a context for relationship learning in school

School, especially teachers, can be important relationship resources

- ‘school’
- ‘coaches’
- ‘teachers’
- ‘principals’
- ‘people who check on them’
- ‘the chill teachers’
- ‘boarding school’

Young people told us that school plays a big role in shaping how they understand relationships. Children said that they ‘learn about respect and listening at school’. School was described as an environment for peer interaction and social learning, with some saying that you do not develop your own opinions about relationships ‘until you reach out to new people [in] high school’, and that ‘a lot of young people usually date in high school. They can learn from that what it is like in a relationship’.

> **If I like the teacher then I’ll go to the teacher.**

Many children and young people highlighted the vital role of teachers in providing support about relationships, because ‘they are an authority figure but they are also a teacher, a person, so they are chill, and they understand’.

Teachers are trusted adults: Children said they feel safe with a teacher ‘who knows you’ because ‘you feel comfortable around them’. Also ‘being a teacher, [means] you have your WWCC’ which makes them more trustworthy. One child shared, ‘just to be able to get it out feels better’ highlighting the importance of having someone ‘just listening and not saying anything back’. Teachers were described as stepping in when other supports are missing, ‘especially for those who don’t have friends and family’.

Connection matters: ‘A lot of kids feel like there are certain teachers they connect to’, which helps students ‘feel a lot more seen’, especially for ‘queer kids’. This commitment is impressive because ‘they [teachers] don’t get paid to be support workers, so they’re doing it out of the kindness of their heart’. For young people, ‘it’s all about impression’ – ‘if they come off as easy to approach and open-minded then it’s going to be a lot easier’. One child talked about how ‘half of the time we are in school’ so ‘they know you more’.

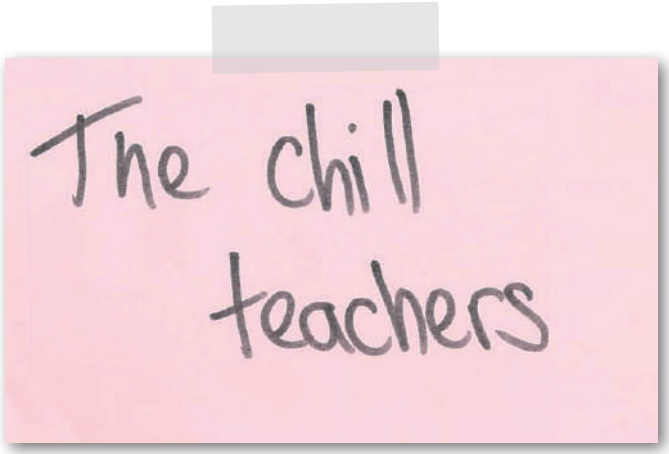
School environments are not great for all children

‘School psychologists are pretty average’: Children said they often do not trust school counsellors, especially because ‘there is literally no privacy in there, no matter what they say’. ‘If there’s harm’ school counsellors ‘will immediately tell that child’s parents’, so some young people feel they need to ‘keep it to yourself’.

With some counsellors described as ‘useless’ and ‘not the best’, there was also a feeling mental health was not being prioritised by the education system. Some young people thought ‘there’s not enough incentive to become a school psychologist, which means we just get, like, lower-on-the-ladder psychologists that don’t do anything about anything’. One child said it was because ‘nobody wants to deal with kids’.

Lack of respect and listening culture: There are some children and young people ‘who have an open mind and want to get advice’ but find it ‘hard to be in a group that doesn’t want to listen’. For some, it is ‘not cool to be listening to Respectful Relationships talk’. One young person said that there was a gendered element, noting that ‘more boys don’t listen’. Another young person said that it was more about the school culture, with listening not possible when ‘kids run amok there’.

Bullying and negative language inhibit help-seeking: Several young people talked about bullying at school and ‘that people think being mean is cool’. Some young people wondered if this behaviour suggested that the bully ‘must be going through something’. Others were worried that ‘putting people down becomes a standard’, such as normalising harmful language. For example, ‘I used to call things “gay” as in “bad”, not in the sense of being homophobic … because



everyone was saying it’. This young person talked about realising the ‘consequences of my actions’, which might mean ‘people around me who are gay might not feel safe anymore’. They talked about how that could be ‘pretty hard’ for LGBTIQA+ people, who may not be able to ‘be yourself’, making learning about relationships as your ‘own person’ very difficult.

Lack of inclusive support for LGBTIQA+ students: Schools often fail to support LGBTIQA+ students in meaningful ways. One child shared, ‘there is no way of anonymously going … to the unisex bathroom without going to a teacher or go through the school and have your parents do it for you, so you have to use the gendered bathrooms’. This lack of access creates barriers for students who need privacy and safety. Even requests ‘to have a gay/straight alliance’ are denied, ‘we have asked for years. Our principal refuses’.

Sometimes there is no familiarity with people delivering ‘sex ed’: One issue is that ‘these people … come in from outside’ so there is no connection and ‘it’s not something that kids … learn from’.

Make learning more engaging and involve trusted adults

'Education as a whole' has a critical role to play in preventing FDSV. What and when children learn is important and this is covered in the next domain (see section 4.4). Just as crucial is how children gain understanding about relationships and who guides them – that is, their learning environment.

> **School is just a preventative measure. If they're already in an unsafe relationship there's not much they can do. But it's like setting them up to not be in one of them. Talking about little issues that start little and end up big.**

When it comes to relationship education, 'the way they go about that is really important too'. Children and young people said that finding a way to teach relationships 'that kids actually pay attention to' should be a priority.

> **Engaging, rather than being like "here we go again".**

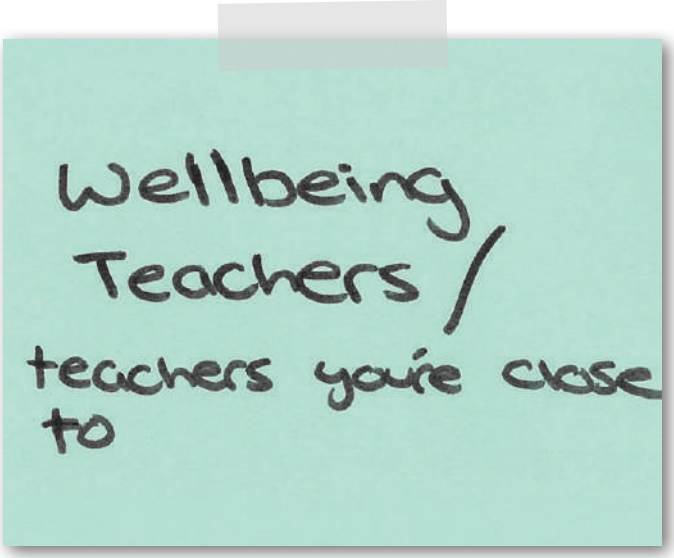
Engaging ways to learn: 'There need to be more engaging presentations in schools on looking at the signs of violence'. One child said that the 'only way people are going to get educated is if they want to be educated' and several ideas were raised in consultations about inviting young people to learn:

- 'Something that is interactive that keeps the students engaged so they actually want to have a change'
- 'Wellbeing days', which one child said have sparked reflection in their school
- Using 'anecdotes or statistics … without jamming it down their throat'
- National 'programs and events like this [consultation processes]' that include 'teens, pre-teens, from age 10–11 years'.

Make relationships education relatable: For many, learning about relationships should be about 'normalising having uncomfortable conversations with people who can relate to you'. This approach is 'more personal than a teacher just trying to do their job'. One child thought teachers should 'try to talk more to students, ask them how their day is going'. As one young person put it, 'some teachers, if you mess up, they say "Why is this happening? What can I help you with? Is there something going on at home?"'. This kind of response made them feel 'more cared about … not a number'.

Be sensitive to children's needs: Educators needed to recognise that 'some people learn differently to others'. They reminded us that 'it really depends on … the person that they're teaching to', especially when topics might 'bring up, like, trauma and stuff like that'. Children said they feel safer when they can speak up anonymously – 'in abusive situations you are scared … anonymous is good, then no one knows it's you'. With this subject matter, children expected a high degree of sensitivity, which includes 'not sharing their information with other children', and suggested 'mandatory reporting changes' so children could talk to someone without fear of being exposed and losing control of their story.

Children also highlighted the importance of safe spaces – 'maybe, like a quiet place' – and smaller group settings where 'you'll feel more comfortable opening up without being judged'. They suggested 'anonymous boxes' or even 'a website … everyone has laptops

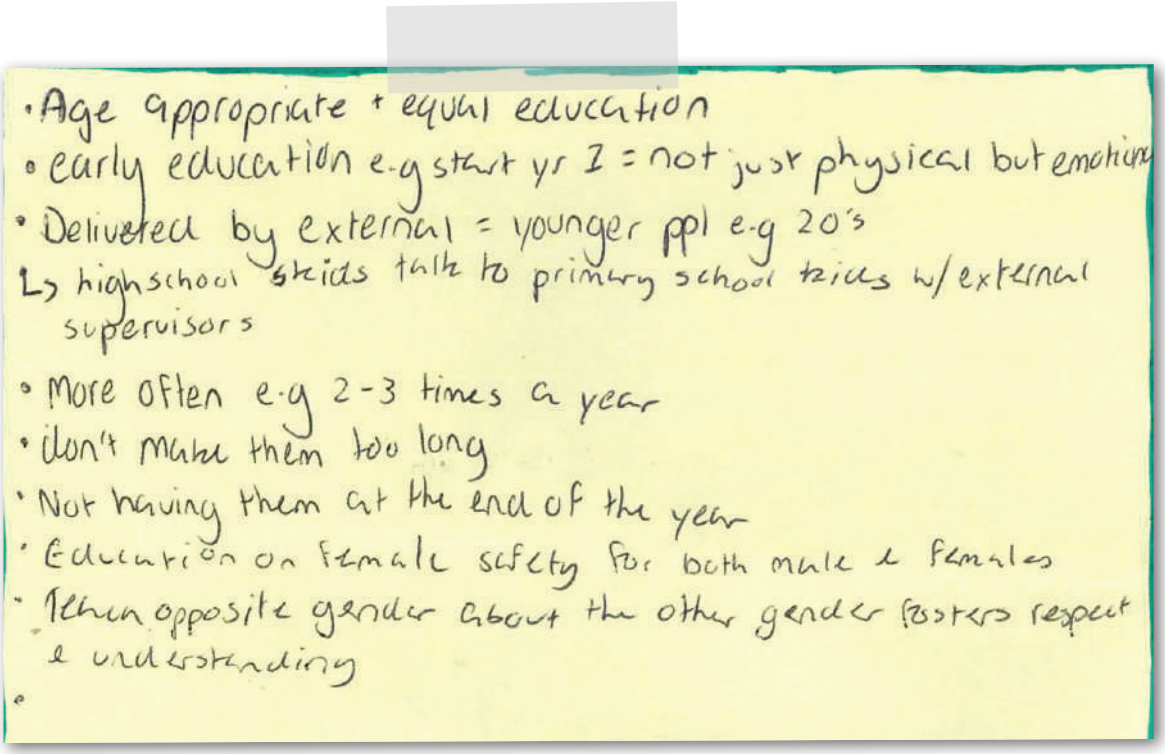


at schools' to help them share concerns privately. One young person also called for 'extra sexual health services, domestic violence services' to be integrated into all schools.

Respect and support current lived experience: One young person pointed out that 'relationships need to not be banned, they need to be taught', suggesting that when schools avoid certain topics it can lead to 'having unsafe sex'. Children said that 'having, like, gay/straight alliances and stuff advertised in schools' would help LGBTIQA+ students feel safer and more accepted. One student shared, 'if we had one of those, it would be great, it would make it so the queer kids would feel a lot more safe in our school'.

Monitor implementation of relationships education: Having a relationships education curriculum might be one thing, but 'how are we sure they are actually going to teach their kids something that will affect them positively in the future?'. Children said that both parents and teachers need to be actively engaged. Furthermore, 'sex ed' services 'need to be talking to more state schools', with one young person from a flexible school sharing that 'over the last three years I have learned so much more than I ever would have in a mainstream school'.

For teaching, balance external experts with someone familiar: For some, 'an expert' is better when learning about relationships. Others noted they may not 'remember or listen to what they're saying unless it's someone you like'. With a teacher, for example, 'everyone's going to be listening, so it's probably better to have somebody that

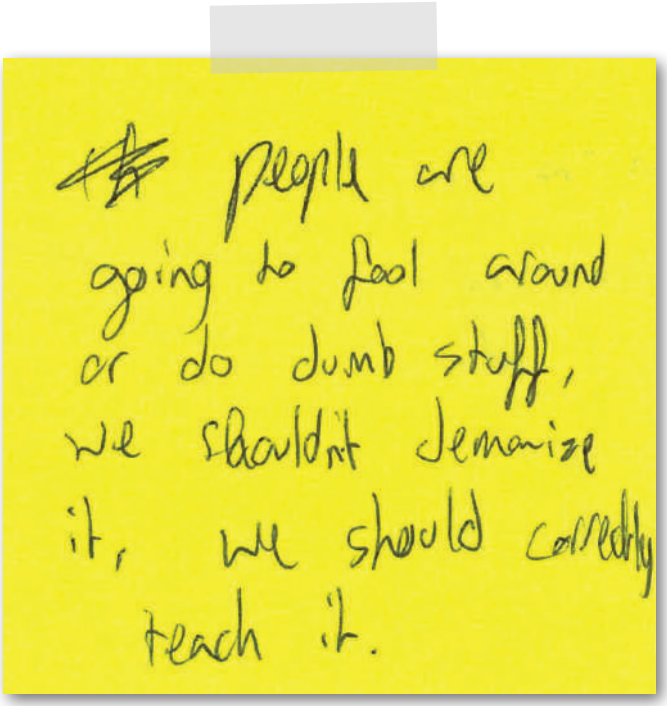


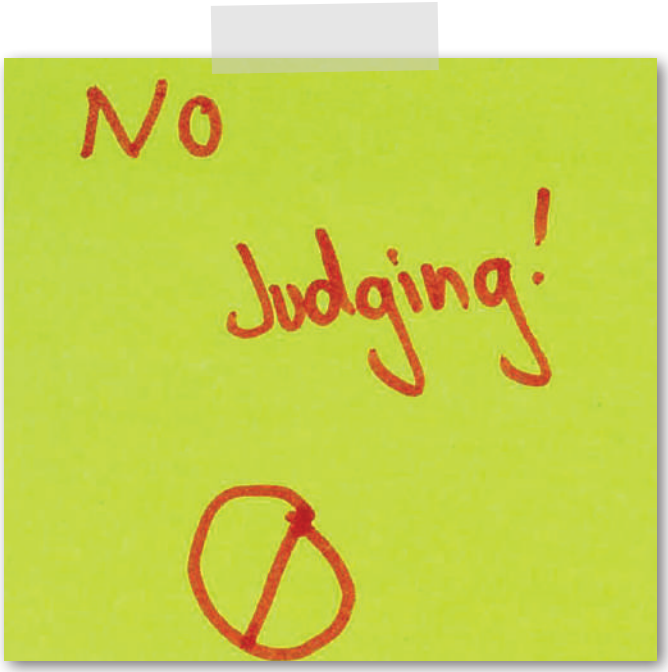
they know rather than a professional outsider that no one has seen before'. It is recognised that they are about to learn something serious 'but you just met these guys two second ago yeah and now we have to "talk about consent" ... it's the most awkward thing'. One-offs by strangers aren't effective because 'they go, and I've never heard about it again'.

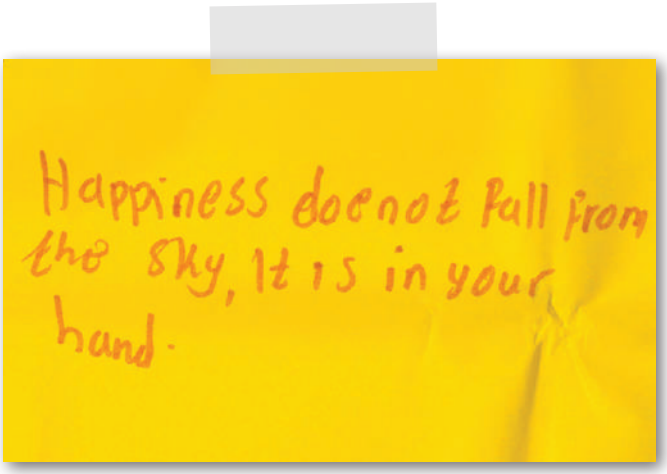
Train teachers on relationships education: Children said relationship education can be 'scary for teachers too'. Without proper training, teachers 'might not know what to say or how to help us'. They called for teachers to get 'more training and support so they handle' the demands. Young people highlighted the importance of teachers having the 'right information' so that what they share 'doesn't really have bias towards certain groups'. There was also a strong message about including trans and queer relationships in education and teaching 'those relationships with respect'. This is about 'reteaching teachers ... keeping the older generations updated'. One young person thought of it 'like first aid', with teachers getting regular updates so 'they know what to do' when a student needs relationship information or support. This includes 'education on the signs of an abusive relationship ... what to do, how to do it'.

Use 'peer mentors and student mentors': Children told us that 'students often listen to those closer in age to them as they have more recent experience and are more relatable'. Others shared that it is not just about who the mentor is, but how they come across – 'if they come off as easy to approach and, like, open-minded then it's going to be a lot easier than some old dude that I barely know'.

> **It would be a good idea ... having a young person teaching it and talking about it, someone who can relate to them.**







4.4 Receiving content about relationships at school

Recommendation 5:

Education Ministers to continually improve and review the curriculum to ensure nationally consistent learning, which includes emotional regulation, conflict resolution, consent and respectful relationships education. This should:

- **start from the first year of school, and evolve with developmental capacity**
- **reflect a whole-of-school approach, which includes a parallel program for parents/caregivers**
- **include opportunities for peer education, providing young people with support and practical skills to respond to peers, such as active listening, proactive help seeking and bystander action**
- **articulate clear standards for teacher training and of delivery tailored to the audience**
- **provide for regular review and evaluation with the participation of young people.**

School should be the go-to place for relationships education

Young people agreed that school should be a good place to get information and understanding about relationships. Some said, 'what a healthy relationship looks like' is 'well introduced in schools from a young age'. Children spoke in broad terms about learning at school. For many in these consultations, the vital role of teachers was important to providing information to them about relationships (as seen in above section 4.3).

Teachers are knowledgeable: Teachers were important because they share lived experiences. Students appreciated when teachers 'give recommendations from past experiences'. One young person talked about a teacher who had 'gone through his own experiences and has healed from it and grown'. Another said, 'they're really helpful in directing you in the right way' and they 'actually tell you all the stuff you need to know'.

> **So a good part about having teachers … is they're really helpful in directing you in the right way and helping you if you're in a situation of what's right and what's wrong, and what to look out for if something does go wrong, and like websites to go to, who you can call, 'cos they are taught all of that before they become teachers, a lot of that.**

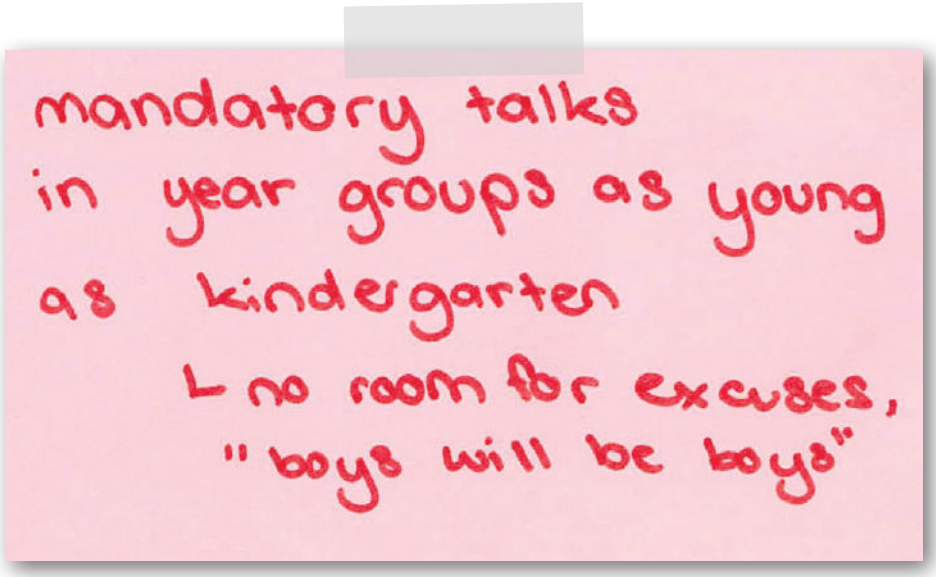
Children are not getting comprehensive education about relationships

Most children and young people who discussed this said that the content and information available to them about relationships fell short of their expectations. As one young person said, 'how can we learn it's wrong if it's not talked about?'. Children described how lessons on relationships, consent and domestic violence were either absent, uncomfortable, or not taught in meaningful ways, with one young person saying, 'I think what does exist isn't very engaging'.

> **I would say the sexual education I have received across my high school experience has been from nil to zero.**

Relationship education is 'not part of the curriculum': One student explained that they 'only learn about it in legal studies and that is because you have chosen to do legal studies'. Another young person described how fleeting the sex education was, where they got to 'look at a diagram, name some genitalia, and that's really it'. One child said that the closest some children get is when they 'learn about like mental health and stuff like that, but it was very limited and it's not memorable at all'. One young person said that 'it needs to be a more standardised practice'.

Existing 'sex ed' is insufficient: Children told us that school often does not teach the 'actual stuff that you need'. Another said their 'sex ed in year 5 and 6 … was uncomfortable … everyone just trolled it'. In addition, when it is taught, children said the teaching needs to join the dots. For example, 'we haven't learned about DV. We're not allowed to talk about because it's triggering – but how can we learn about it?'. In some lessons, children are 'taught about consent, but not a lot about violence'. Some talked about getting sex education – 'they're like "use a condom"' or 'if you're drinking you can't give consent' – which is too 'obvious'. They do not learn about things like 'the signs of a toxic relationship' like if 'they start isolating you or start belittling you that that's a bad sign', or ways to work out 'how you know it's wrong'. There is also an issue of contextualising education about sex, 'because if the kid doesn't have like a stable relationship at home and they they're not getting taught … about relationships, and then it's sex ed, so it goes straight, like, in the mind, straight to sex'.



Relationships education can reinforce gender issues: Some young people suggested that single sex schools risked gendering relationship issues, 'especially at all boys schools'. They were concerned that the schools helped boys 'believe … that toxic masculinity mindset'. One young person related it to how low self-confidence can have long-term consequences because 'when you have really low self-confidence, you … project onto people', warning that 'those are the people who will be causing these issues [in] 10-years' time … they commit these domestic violence'.

Children want clear, grounded education from a young age

More sex education: Promoting healthy relationships is about providing 'more knowledge for everyone, like, younger people especially'. That was the watchword for children and young people: 'more'. Children said it is not enough to 'only [talk about] the physical aspects', they want 'education and tools' to understand what healthy relationships look like. They spoke about the pressure of social media, saying it is important to get 'a view that's not one you see through Instagram'. Many felt schools are the 'easiest' and most effective place to start, with 'proper education for younger kids' and 'good role models' shaping how they grow up. They told us, 'there isn't as much of it as there should be' and that it is vital to 'actually learn about it'. 'Proper education about healthy relationships', they said, 'would definitely help'.

Start teaching in early years and do it often: Young people strongly believe that 'education is key' and consent and relationships should be a 'normalised conversation' across the school year. They said it should begin 'from an earlier age', starting in preschool or primary school and be delivered gradually in age-appropriate ways. They emphasised the importance of consistent, ongoing learning rather than one-off sessions, to help normalise respectful relationships and prevent violence.

> **So, start there, with obviously a child-friendly version of it, but telling them the truth and teaching them.**

Be realistic about relationships: When it comes to relationships education, children said it 'needs to be taught correctly'. It is important to 'actually learn about it – what's healthy what's not healthy, instead of just sex ed', highlighting that current approaches often miss the mark. They want schools to 'show them what they're not supposed to do, what doesn't work, what does work in relationships', and to 'just show dos and don'ts'. Teaching about relationships should include examples from 'your family, your friends and your partners'. They wanted 'education in school about what, like, is and is not okay in a relationship'.

> **People are going to fool around or do dumb stuff. We shouldn't demonise it, we should correctly teach it. Teens are going to have fun regardless. They're going to do what they're going to do. They're going to fuck, they're going to do drugs. It should be correctly taught.**

Teach respect and empathy: Children said that 'even as you enter the school system', they should be taught 'don't make fun of people', 'be kind', 'be respectful', and to learn 'what a healthy relationship is'. One young person gave the example of 'sex ed and everything', saying it should 'teach trans and intersex'. When it comes to same-gender relationships, they really wanted schools to 'teach those relationships with respect', including 'in independent and Catholic schools' – 'this is super, super, super important'. One young person said it required a deep level of education so that people 'truly understood the concept of what it's like to be different'.

Equipping children with the right language: One young person said that 'children, especially younger children, should be taught the proper biological name for their sex'. They said it was really important because 'people who work with children are missing clear signs of abuse' because 'a little kid who will not know the word'. For example:

> **like a girl will not know the word for 'vagina', and will say 'cookie' or 'flower' because that's what their parents call it, and if a kid walks up to you and says 'my uncle crushed my flower' or 'my uncle took my cookie' you'll immediately think it's just a kid being a fucking kid.**

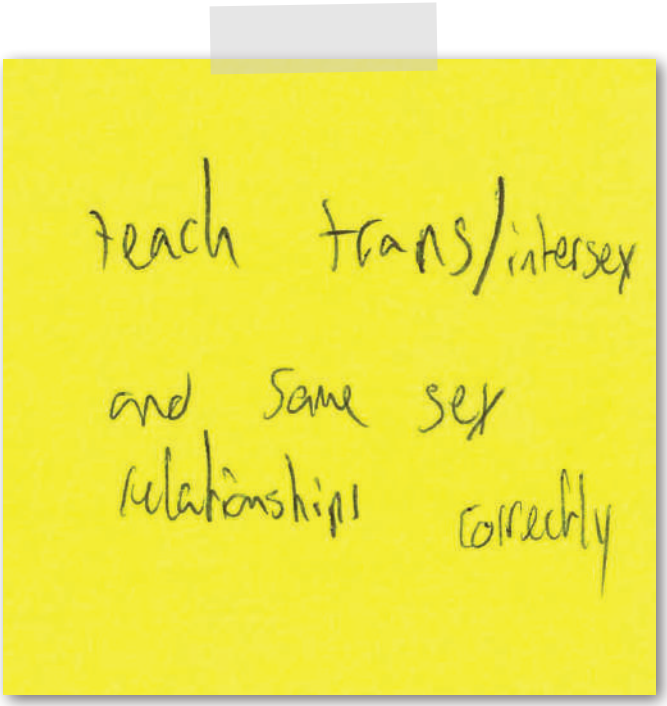
Teach life skills: 'School needs to start teaching life skills'. Young people were concerned that 'now, you just sit in a classroom. You're told to keep quiet', but in life 'you're meant to go out and talk to people'. There was a sense that, as well as learning practical real-world skills such as communication and social interaction, there is a need for big picture education, like teaching children 'about the problems in society so we don't keep doing them'.

Learning about red flags: For relationship education, 'I feel like they could put out more information on, like, warning signs of all kinds of things'. This included 'signs before it gets physical', 'the signs that someone is getting abused', 'signs of narcissistic behaviour' and 'what violence actually is and how people can recognise it'. They also called for information about how to 'get away from bad situations

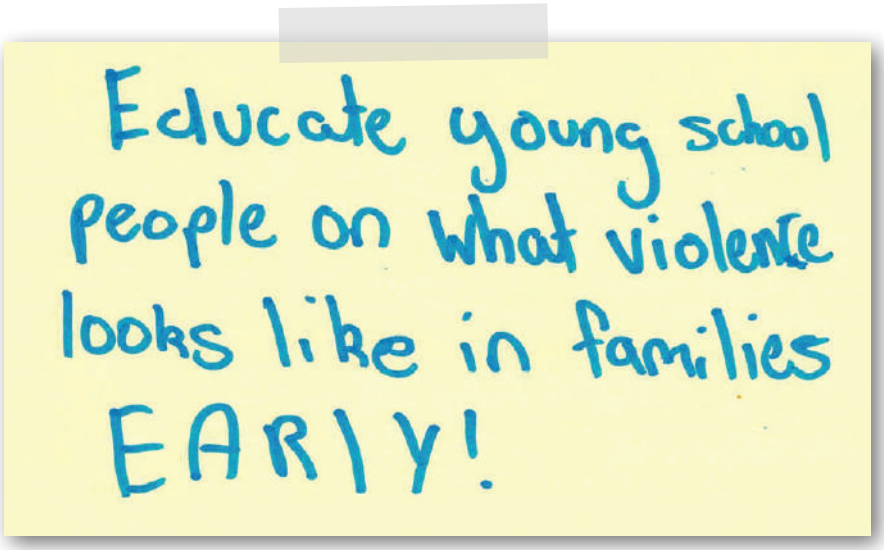
and bad people safely'. They wanted 'information that's easy to access' and 'a number you can call' when things do not feel okay. One young person pointed out that this all applies to 'girls and boys too, because it does happen to men as well'.

> **We had these two external people come through and ... for the whole day we had an interactive lesson about unhealthy relationships and what to look out for, and it was in romantic relationships ... sexual relationships. I actually feel like the kids I did that with took it really maturely and there was a lot that was taken away from that because they don't sugarcoat it, I guess. They really talk about it and try to get everyone to interact, and I think that really helped, so I feel like more initiatives like that would be good.**

Include anti-bullying messaging in lessons: With bullying, children told us that schools need to 'stop this before it starts'. They spoke about the importance of giving support and 'actual information' to bullies themselves, 'directly supporting these kids, understanding why they are doing this'. They also challenged the idea that teasing is a sign of affection, saying, 'when girls and boys pick on each other and it's like "oh they just like you". You shouldn't be reinforcing that bullying behaviour'. Others went further, highlighting how bullying can be a gateway to violence in relationships.



Reflect broader social violence in the curriculum: One young person said that schools need to 'teach kids not to use violence' and instead teach them 'to use their words', 'talk about it' and 'communicate'. One person said this required active learning, saying 'it's in the hands of kids'. Some young people wanted learning about 'self-defence, if you need to protect yourself'. Other thought that shock tactics might work whereby 'you can show them violence and they will be scared of violence and then they won't do it'. One young person shared, 'I feel like there should be more about the effects of domestic violence in school curriculums'. Others expanded on this, wanting children with lived experience to learn 'about what violence is' so they will learn that 'what's happening at home is wrong'. Lessons could then look at 'how to break the cycle, how to move away from that'.

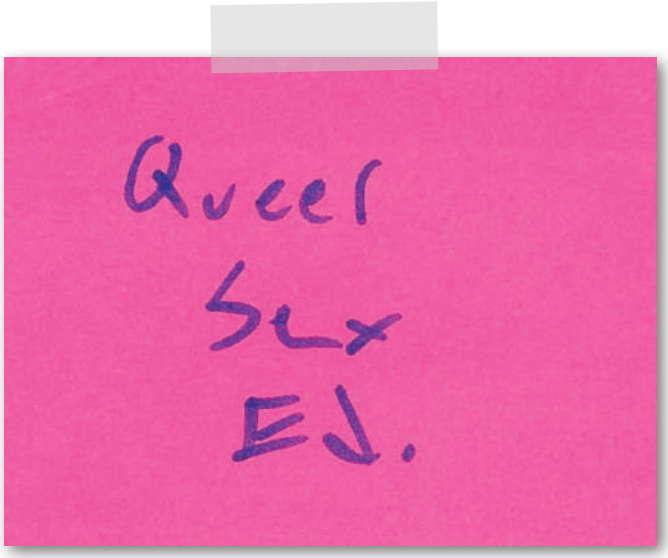


> **It is really important to show what a violent relationship is – not just telling what it is.**

Integrate lived experience into learning plans: Children talked about valuing a 'real-world view on what violence is and the impact of it'. In relationship education, 'have something dedicated for violence, and people who are going through stuff'. Relationships education needs to:

> **show the actual real-world ramifications of your actions and how they can affect people and harm people because at a young age it's very important to show that your actions have consequences.**

Explore gender and consent more comprehensively: Children said gender needed to be addressed in relationships education for young people. It needs to start young, teaching 'less gender stereotypes' because they will negatively 'influence the way they think and how they'll act in their relationships later on'. They spoke about the need for consent education 'to be given to boys and girls at the same time and with them together' because it needs to be 'universal'. There was a strong message that sex education should include queerness, sexism and misogyny. Some children highlighted that education about female safety is not just for girls but must include boys too. There were also ideas about how education should be different: 'girls need the education of what's safe and what's not, but boys really need what's okay in a relationship'.



Fill the gap in relationships education for boys: Young people said that there needs to be 'education programs and prevention programs … looking at all boys'. We need to take a 'stronger stance on stopping it' – particularly social media influencers and 'that toxic masculinity mindset' – by giving boys 'better advice'. They also said that young men should be taught how to have 'proper good healthy platonic relationships with women and men'.

> **Men are taught to do it, but women are taught to run from it … [there] needs to be an equal education between everyone.**

Teach critical thinking: Young people said that children need to be taught how to question the information presented to them 'because probably what they've been brought up on is disinformation and misinformation'. These skills can help them to 'understand the difference and actually understand what kind of relationship they've been in online and in real life and how to get themselves out'. This is also learning about 'who to trust', which can include people close to them. One young person gave the example of home, saying that it is important to understand that 'even if their parents are telling them "oh, this is how this is", that's not always the case'. Children need to understand that, in some cases, 'what their parents say isn't always the truth'.

> **The when is also really important.**

Regular, frequent relationships education: Children said that learning about relationships needs to be something that happens 'year after year', not just 'for five hours on one day towards the end of the school year'. Relationships education should be 'more environmental', something that is 'continued' and consistently taught. Children shared that when relationship education is delivered as a single presentation, it might be 'interesting in the moment', but it does not stick – 'the next week you just don't remember anything'. They want it to be 'regular in health, like, every

term' or 'a yearly thing' to really make change. Children are asking for consistent, age-appropriate learning that builds over time.

> **Some government program where every class will learn the same thing, and each year they might tackle like more complex ideas about relationships and stuff like that. Is probably what they need to do.**

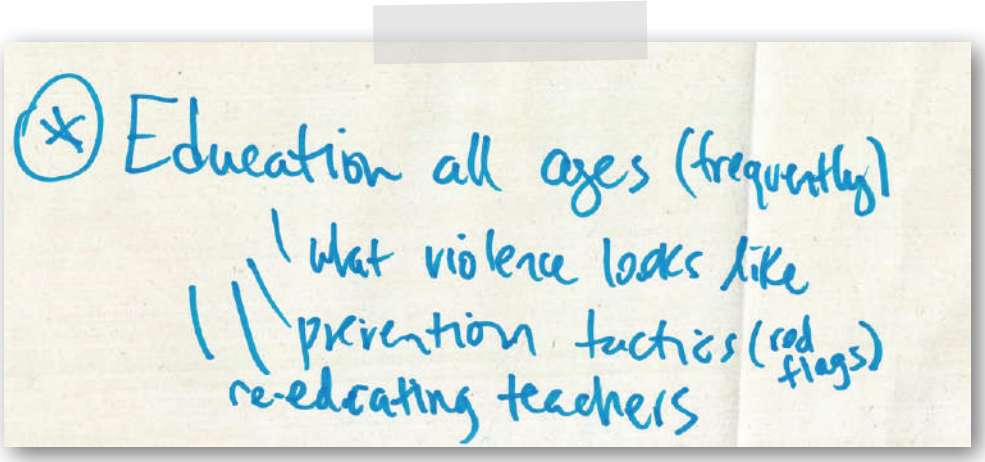
'Educate kids from a young age': There should be 'more teaching about healthy relationships at a younger age at school' and 'it should always be taught at a younger age'. Young people explained 'if it starts early, you'll think of that as normal, and you won't really know what's not normal and you can avoid bad things'. Related to this, children observe relationships 'from your parents and things like that'. They actually 'start to form those ideas at a young age', so providing education is important to help structure those ideas. They also believed younger children would be able to remember simple messages like 'boys don't have to be big and strong, women don't have to be small and weak' and 'violence isn't okay'. Ideas about exact age varied, but they agree that it should start much earlier than it currently does: 'start at 5 or 6 years old', 'as young as kindergarten' or 'as soon as they can understand'. Many suggested upper primary years, saying 'probably before year 7', 'year 5 and year 6', or 'later primary, or earlier even'. One child explained, 'as soon as they enter the school system … you do it'. Children also highlighted the importance of timing, noting that 'your brain's still getting its new connections and stuff when you're younger', so early learning is more likely to 'stay with you'.

> **Sex ed, point blank, should be happening young.**

> **It is scientifically proven the earlier you are exposed to sex education the later in life that you actually start having sex and relationships.**

> **I talked to my younger sister, and she was told "this is safe touching or not safe touching" she is 14 now and it has stuck with her.**

Design a curriculum that grows with the child: Delivering relationships education to children should be 'kind of like drip-feeding kind of things'. If starting young, children cautioned that 'you have to be careful to not make it scary for them' – 'start very early and lightly'. You can start with 'what is really, really good for a relationship first and then teach them what the bad signs of a relationship is once they're starting to mature'. Another said, 'you just need to do it gradually and safely', and that even concepts like consent can be introduced early, 'even when they're like 3, 4, gradually and age-appropriately'. They recognised that 'you can explain a complicated relationship easier to a student in year 12 compared to a kindergartener', showing an awareness of how understanding deepens with age.



Spotlight on early childhood participation

Article 12 of the CRC affirms a child's right to express their views and to participate in decisions that directly affect them. While children are being heard more in policy conversations, children in their early years – the children who are most vulnerable to harm – remain largely unheard in shaping safer environments.[45]

Families, communities and governments often regard young children 'as undeveloped, lacking even basic capacities for understanding, communicating and making choices. They have been powerless … and often voiceless'.[46] However, researchers stress 'the importance of listening to our youngest children'[47] because it supports children to make sense of the world around them, and contributes to the development of lifelong wellbeing and safety.[48]

Focusing on gender-based violence, we were advised by our Expert Reference Group to hear from children and young people aged 10–17 years, as part of safeguarding. We were able to gain key insights about younger children, with participants sharing their personal memories and observations of young children they knew, such as siblings or neighbours. They said that young children struggle to articulate safe relationships, highlighting a gap in early childhood education and the need for age-appropriate learning on safety and trust. These reflections suggested that children under 10, as well as being the missing voice in consultations, are the missing voice in education about relationships and safety.

Those who raised it strongly believed that children needed to learn about safe and positive relationships as soon as possible, appropriate to their developmental stage. This aligns with the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) Commission's report, which calls for stakeholders to 'embed child-safe cultures in early childhood education and care'.[49] Tying together inputs from the consultations, this child-safe culture demands comprehensive education covering relationships, sex, sexuality and guidance for navigating information in today's world. This would equip them to recognise online risks, like pornography, misinformation and disinformation. It would also help them to stay safe in everyday settings, including the playground, where they may encounter harmful content or behaviours from peers.

Motivation to learn is strongest when children are part of their own knowledge creation.[50] When children are actively engaged in their learning, they begin to understand and internalise concepts of safety and positive relationships. This empowers them to identify unsafe situations and seek help. Participation helps children to feel heard and valued, contributing to their sense of agency and wellbeing – key protective factors against abuse.[51] To support this motivation and active engagement, we must invest in creative, developmentally appropriate methods – such as play and storytelling – and foster a culture of listening to younger children, both within and beyond educational settings.

4.5 Seeking help and support online

Recommendation 6:

All relevant Australian Government departments work closely with eSafety to develop accessible resources to promote children's right to safe media and online spaces. This includes:

- **the development of youth-led skills training to assist children and young people – and their families – to navigate and curate their online experience**
- **an education campaign to build family skills in identifying harmful content in books, podcasts and other media, and how to have constructive discussions about this.**

Online is easy, widely available and provides community

Online search engines and social media platforms were frequently raised by young people as a key place they would turn for information and support with relationships. Some of the information discussed was similar to that raised during consultations for the 2023 *'Do things with the information we tell you'* Report.[52]

What do we mean by 'online'?

Google, ChatGPT, Snapchat, forums, discussion boards, websites, Reddit, Wattpad, Instagram, TikTok, Discord, Insta DMs, threads, twitter, Facebook, Quora, subreddit, Fortnite, gaming platforms

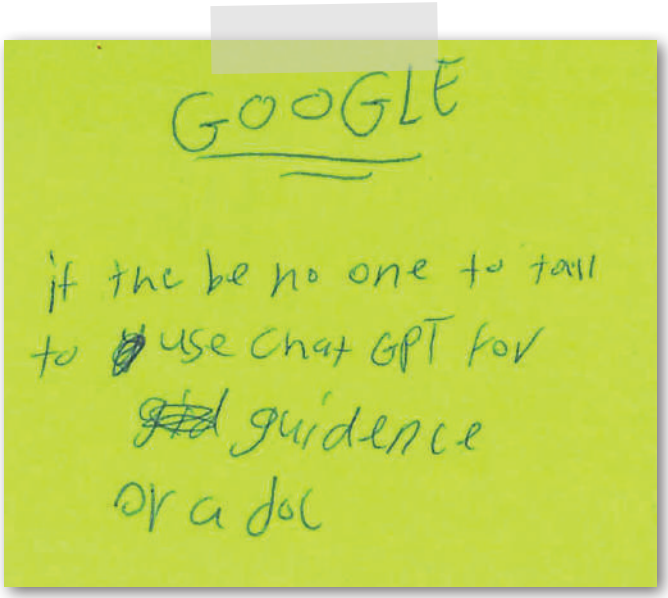
'It's so easy to access': Young people spoke about the appeal of being able to quickly 'search up' information on anything and 'everything'. They highlighted that search engines have become the default for any new learning. If you want to quickly learn something new, often the first step is to 'google it'. Unlike approaching a service, adult or looking in a book, 'you'll get a result in less than a second'. It is also 'free' and 'you don't have to go anywhere'. Young people explained that you can easily, in a 'private and confidential' way, look for what you need. Many young people valued how 'direct' online information is – you can get a 'straight answer'. Some young people talked about using Google or ChatGPT because 'they wouldn't really want to ask mum or dad'. In addition to search engines, young people talked about using forums, discussion boards, reels and YouTube shorts, where they would 'go to comments', looking for other people's 'wisdom'.

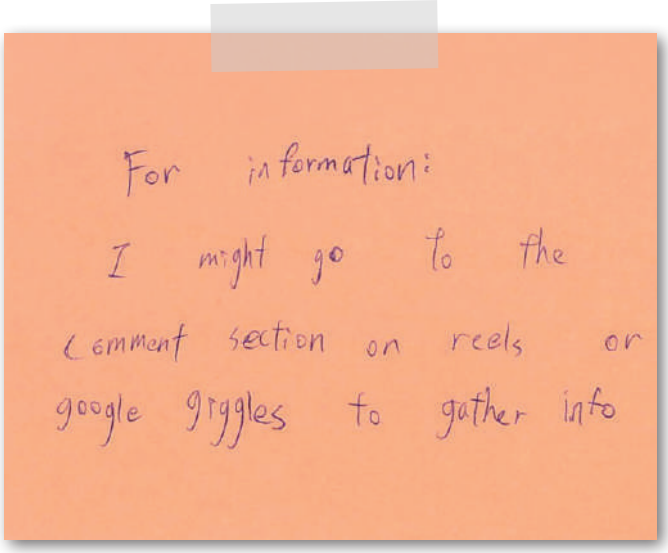
> **If I'm trying to like figure out something I'll be like, maybe I'll Google or TikTok.**

Online reaches people that may not be able to use other avenues: Young people explained that it is 'less confronting' to raise concerns online, especially when you 'have the choice to be anonymous'. This can create a freedom to openly share your own experiences and concerns. They explained that going online is helpful for young people who are socially isolated, have 'social anxiety' or who 'don't feel comfortable talking face-to-face'. By searching online, they can access information and make connections. Sometimes this is informal support, like gaming or chat forums where you can hear from other people's experiences. As outlined in Section 4.8, it can also involve access to more formal support services like helplines or Headspace. Looking online can link you to services and provide contact details for places close to you.

> **That's why a lot of people go to the internet because they feel like it's a no judgement zone.**

Online offers a community: Many young people talked about the value of connecting with others online. Some young people gave the example of periods of lockdown. At such times 'social media was a really, really, big thing … 'cos that's how I connected with my friends'. Several young people spoke about the benefits of this connection, being able to share experiences, gain 'wisdom', learn from 'different perspectives', and find 'like-minded people'. Others spoke about how accessing a 'big conglomerate of people probably asking the same questions as you' can help young people feel less isolated and alone. Young people post 'a lot about their relationships on there', which is often reposted. Reposting is evidence that the person can 'relate to it', so it is an easy way to 'see common problems in a relationship and find people in the same boat as you'. Some young people spoke about how valuable it is to connect with people the same age or with similar interests. They said that it is especially helpful to learn how others dealt with problems. Many preferred this style of learning about relationships over more passive ways like reading information.





Online can be unreliable and unsafe

While highlighting the positive aspects of online spaces, participants also spoke at length about the challenges. They identified concerns with misinformation, harmful content and coming into contact with unsafe people.

Not always reliable: Young people talked a lot about misinformation on the internet. They said that much of what you see online is 'probably not reliable' and can be 'subjective'. They said that you need 'to know where to look' as 'you can't really know' if websites and other platforms can be trusted. Many young people spoke about the importance of using 'good sources' for information, such as Google Scholar or government websites. Others spoke about the sheer proliferation of information online, in a context of mistrust: '30 years ago, a kid like me wouldn't be reading newsletters and now I can go on my phone and [see] like 30,000 stories'.

Young people described being tech savvy and often suspicious of online content. Many participants were mindful that information on social media platforms and other forums can be 'manufactured' with 'advice not coming from real people'. Influencers, in particular, can provide 'false information' and bad examples and have a strong 'monetary incentive'.

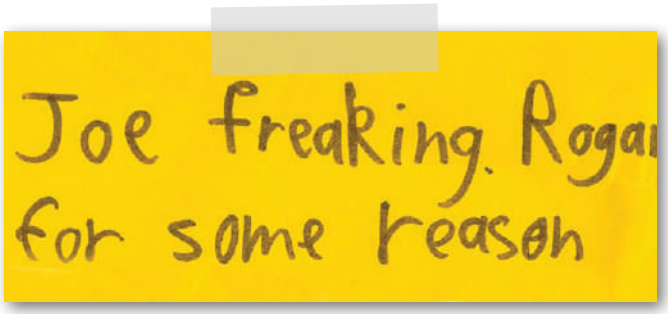
> **Cannot trust the info from influencers ... the majority of them are fake ... they're clickbait, just people hiding behind a screen. It's like they'll be talking about other people's relationships, and they have never experienced a relationship of their own.**

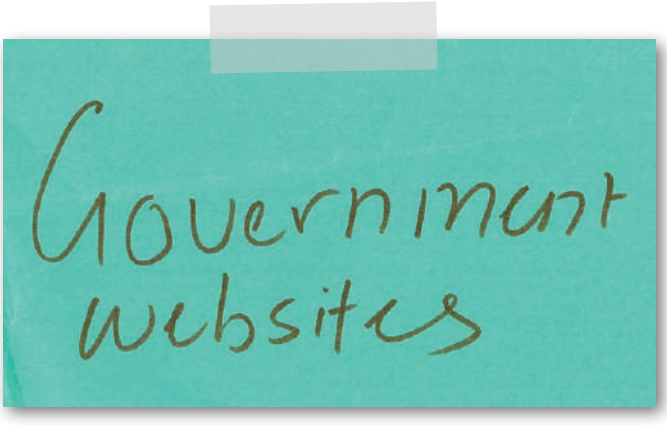
When influencers were discussed in consultations, it was usually to highlight their negatives and the risks of their promoting unsafe or unhelpful information. Some gave examples of famous influencers who present one way online but offline 'it's completely different'. They talked about some being subject to scandals. As one young person described:

> **In the 90's or 80's to be an influencer, you basically had to be by word of mouth or on TV, which meant it was very controlled what got out. Now anyone can get on your phone and post something not okay, and it will just go out ... and anyone can see it. I think that's the problem ... people can do whatever they want without proper repercussions.**

Trusted but dull government websites: One young person was critical of existing government websites describing them as 'boring and there's too many words'. Another acknowledged that while '.gov.au' is trusted, in reality they would 'only use them when I'm doing an assignment', not for a personal situation, as 'not many people are going to be talking about their personal experiences in a relationship on a government website'.

Learning in an echo chamber: The algorithm used by social media platforms often came up in discussion. Young people talked about how 'it will give you what you want to hear'. They explained that 'if I am getting different information' based on gender or search history, it may lead to 'different thinking and ... feeling differently'. In this way, what you are exposed to can impact on your views and opinions, both your overall worldview and your thoughts on relationships.



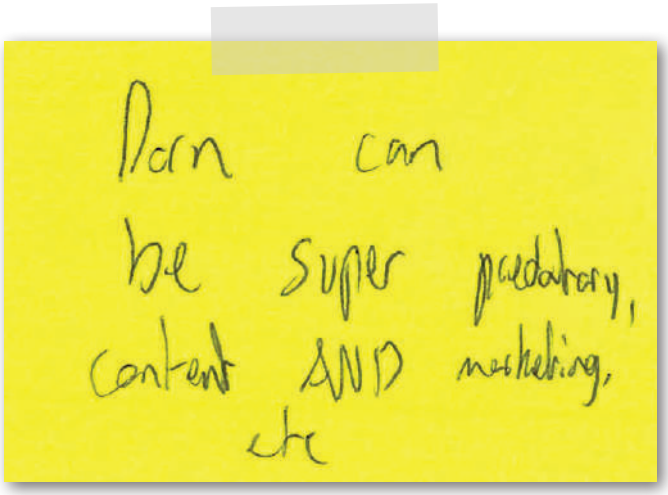


For example, 'I'll go onto like, Reddit and it'll tell me that everybody is trash and don't talk to anybody'.

Unsafe connections and content: Children talked about how you do not need to search to find harmful content online because 'it's available everywhere'. This ranged from cyberbullying and violent and graphic images to sexualised, pornographic material. Some young people spoke about their peers consuming extensive harmful content, noting that 'porn addiction, especially in young children, is so fucking common and so detrimental'. Some young people raised their fears about AI creating sexualised images, especially of children. One young person cautioned that time online 'can get dangerous really quickly'. In making their own judgements around the reliability of online content, some participants talked about how they would look at 'the headline', 'the kind of resource' and 'the person who made it' to decide whether to trust the information. They spoke about the need to take some information with 'a grain of salt'.

Others talked about poor modelling of behaviour, with one younger participant commenting 'sometimes on social media I see these kids yelling at their parents and I think that's very disrespectful'. Another group talked about behaviour such as 'cheating …[being] so normalised … on TikTok and Insta'. Some were quick to note that social media is not the 'whole problem', others highlighted that it is amplifying concerning content to young people who may not otherwise have such exposure. This is combined with a sense that content is being regulated or restricted, including 'a lot of bullying that happens even in TikTok, social media comments, people are just taking [the] piss out of someone'. One young person talked about 'a lot of videos with people with disability and people are just brutal, especially on Instagram because there's less [restrictions]'. There are also 'videos of people dying on there and there's no restrictions'.

> **if the media you constantly consume is hateful … it comes into your conscious and it forms how you are.**



Pornography negatively affects learning about relationships: Young people spoke about the long-term impacts of consuming violent, graphic and 'inherently misogynistic' content. Pornography – easily accessed – was often raised as an example of how consuming content can lead to a warped perception of what is 'normal' and 'what [relationships] should be'. They spoke about how such content 'dehumanises the girls' and sets 'unrealistic expectations of girls'.

They commented that this is both young people seeking out content, such as by 'going to porn hubs' and also inadvertent, unintentional access by 'young people … as young as 9'. We heard that some pornography like OnlyFans content is promoted on TikTok and Instagram. Some participants suggested that it is deliberately designed to appeal to younger people with 'very colourful and happy pages'. There was concern that when very young children see this, they will think 'this is what a real relationship looks like', that girls 'want it all the time' and 'thinking consent is something completely different from what it is'. Many young people told us that there is little age verification to access pornography.

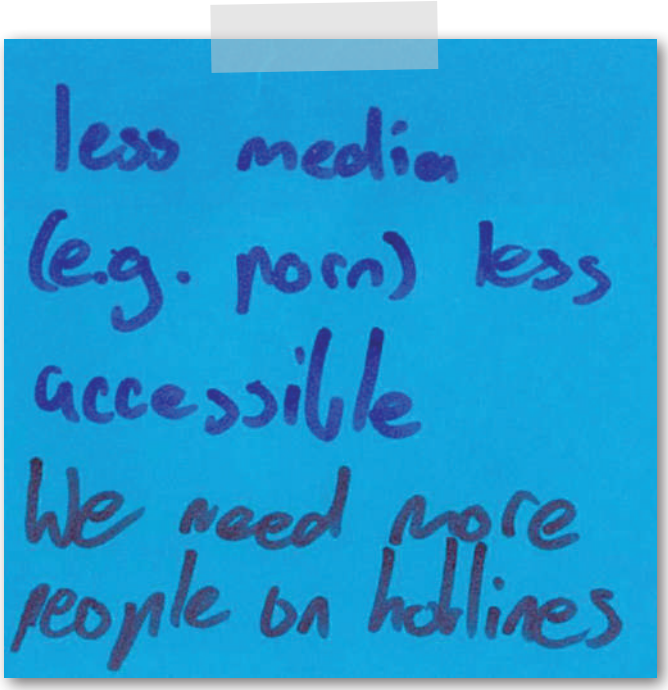
Risk of exploitation: As well as harmful content, young people talked about coming into contact with 'random strangers' online and the risks of 'paedophiles and stuff on social media'. They spoke about the risk of child exploitation in 'chat rooms' as 'the internet is not a safe place for kids'. There was concern about how some apps like Snap Maps can create safety risks for young people. These can pose a risk of stalking and other predatory behaviour.

Children want guidance to use online sources for helpful content

Since many young people seek information and support online, there is a valuable opportunity to use these platforms to share positive content about relationships and safety. Online use is commonplace for young people because 'technology is the best'. For information and support, young people want to be met where they are, in formats they use, with information that is relatable and resonates with them.

Guide children to be safe online: Several young people talked about needing skills and guidance to 'curate your online safety' and learn about 'double checking your information'. One young person said, 'you've gotta read into it', not take things at face value and instead 'do research'.

Provide educational websites to learn: Several young people advocated for 'more websites to learn about violence and how you can deal with it'. They also identified a need to learn 'what healthy relationships look like' and 'how we help friends or … how to help someone in a situation'. There are certain situations that may lead young people to look for information, such as 'the first time having a boyfriend or girlfriend', or if 'they feel uncomfortable in the situation and they don't know if it's safe or unsafe and they don't know who to ask'.



Young people shared other content they would like covered, such as 'red flags to look out for', and 'something to help people identify what's going to happen before it happens … what to look for'.

> **What's on the borderline of, like, having a safe and healthy relationship and what's not, and what's kind of in the middle. Not like this is good, this is bad, it can be in-between like a mix.**

Having links to support services would be helpful for young people to 'reach out' in a safe and private way.

Any website needs to be engaging and keep young people's attention. Some young people spoke about regular online use resulting in them having a 'shorter attention span' from constantly 'scrolling' content. They said that there is a temptation to 'press 2-time speed' on videos and rush through content. Avoiding boring content was therefore important.

Young people advocated for a way to leverage the trusted nature of a government website but have it more engaging, interactive and youth-led. One young person praised a platform they use where you can ask anonymous sex education questions but wished that there was a 'more mainstream and accessible version' for young people where you could be confident the content and advice was accurate.

Some talked about it being useful to have a chat function – or way to connect with a real person – as it 'probably feels better if you're talking to someone who knows rather than just reading off a website'. Online support can be an easier way to express their feelings as sometimes 'they can't say it but they can type it'. Others spoke about being in WhatsApp groups where there are counsellors within the group and 'if someone's having issues, you can go to one of the counsellors'. Access to online peer support is also important as online is very good at 'grouping people with similar interests together'.

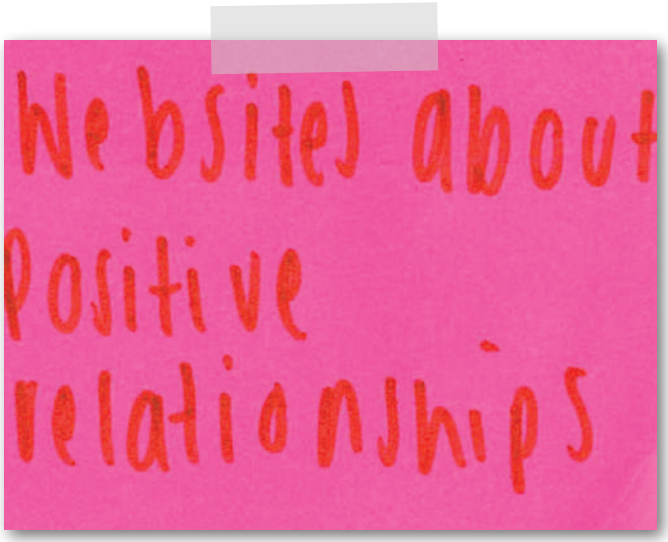
Use social media for ideas and add positive content: Participants suggested that it would be good to have realistic, positive stories of

relationships. It is most effective to see 'a bunch of people your age' who are 'going through things you've been through' as this can inspire you to have positive relationships and 'get out of bad things'. In this way social media or online platforms could be used to provide 'good stuff online', with some advocating 'a campaign, like the anti-smoking campaign' highlighting 'what a healthy relationship is', including information about peer relationships. Ads and content could be posted in places young people go, like Spotify, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube.

> **Maybe we can use social media for ideas, because it seems to be the place ... to stop the violence. We have to stop it from being on social media. People are using social media with this stuff, so maybe we can add positive stuff on social media to help us to get rid of violence.**

Young people said these messages would be more effective if they were 'talking to people like you. People around your age maybe, people that have similar interests to you'. Having personalised approaches can feel 'like they're actually talking to someone instead of just talking to the government'.

Tighten up laws and regulations about porn: Many young people advocated for tighter regulations on harmful content – to 'filter out' misinformation and remove violent and abusive material online. There should be 'less porn' and 'we need to make it a lot harder



to access' – 'there shouldn't be ads about it'. They advocated for 'really big restrictions on AI' to avoid 'illegal images' and people creating porn.

Regulate online behaviour more effectively: Tighter controls were also suggested for online dating to avoid 'dangerous meetups', and tighter restrictions on what you can post, noting 'violent things on Instagram, bullying ... lots of slurs and it doesn't get banned'. Some suggested that there should be quicker action to remove fight videos and cyberbullying.

Find a nuanced way of addressing social media concerns: The social media age restriction was often raised in discussions about online safety. Some participants argued that 'people under 14 should get off social media' as they are 'too young' to have access to unmonitored and unsafe content. They also questioned whether children are 'mature enough to consent to something being on the internet forever'. Age verification was suggested by some as positive as it could direct you to more useful sites and content. Others were critical of restrictions, because by the time someone turns 16, they are 'old enough to get a driver's license' and already had much life experience. These participants suggested that education around online use could be more helpful. This should be about engaging young people in a conversation, because:

> **you can try and tell kids "harmful media is bad", but lecturing them too hard will tell them it's cool to do this and they'll go do it themselves because teenagers are edgy. And not lecturing them about it at all will leave it clearly empty and they won't have any warning system.**

4.6 Learning about relationships from media and pop culture

> **Like in Bluey the parents are really cute. My little sister watches it. I think it shows little kids how to treat each other and they're gonna replicate that in their little kid relationships.**

Pop culture can help young people navigate relationships

Children and young people told us that pop culture and media are powerful influences on how they understand relationships. From TV shows and movies to books, fanfiction, music, podcasts and online content, media is everywhere – and it can shape ideas about sex, consent, love, respect and connection.

Books can be useful for young people: Some young people spoke about 'self-help books or like real-life biographies', echoing ideas about learning from lived experience. Books and fanfiction were described as safe spaces to explore diverse identities and relationships, especially for queer young people. One young person from the LGBTIQA+ community reflected that 'reading it but also writing it … has really helped me to explore who I am'. Young people described how media, especially fiction, helps them understand relationships from multiple angles. They spoke about how seeing characters navigate conflict, love and identity gave them tools to reflect on their own lives.

> **I think that books can also be a really good place for like asexual people, aroace people or aromantic people 'cos there's just not enough resources anywhere for us, so I think that books … can be a good place to explore what relationships people are writing about – and what they look like from a fiction perspective.**

Media can teach about relationships: Media can be a comfort and a guide, especially when real-life examples are lacking. Children and young people described media as a space of opportunity for learning about safe and positive relationships. They talked about fanfiction as 'a great way to explore relationships in a really safe way', explore who you are and process experiences and emotions – 'it'll make you feel better'. One young person talked about how media and pop culture provide an opportunity for reflection and healing from past experiences. Another said that:

> **reading and writing … is a good way to get your experiences out if you've been traumatised by these things. It's a healthy way to reflect back and cope, and process with the thoughts and feelings that you get about that.**

Some talked about how television and movies can provide insights into other people and relationships and provide examples of how difficulties can be worked through.

Cultivating empathy: Another young person described how fiction is great because 'you get exposed to a different perspective you wouldn't have seen otherwise'. Another went further, noting that media helped them realise that 'my way of thinking was flawed and there's a better way to go about it'.

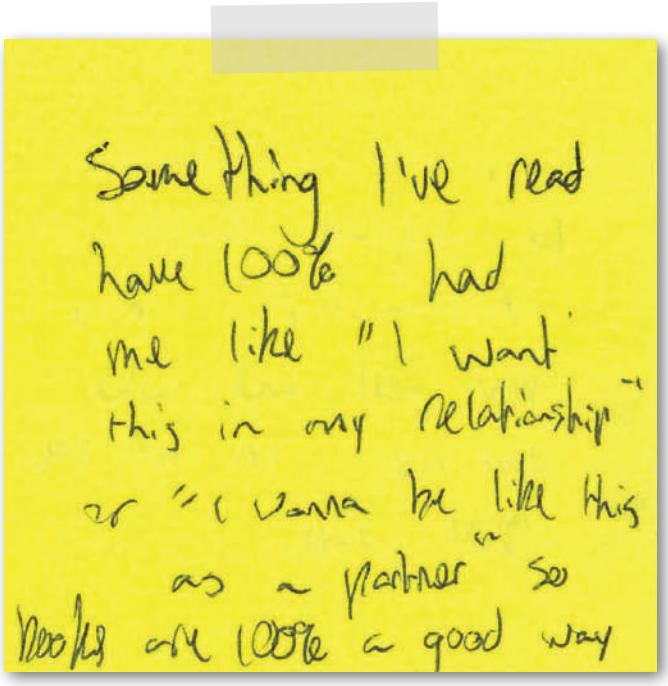
Media and pop culture are not always safe

Despite its potential, children and young people were clear that pop culture often sends harmful messages about relationships, sex, sexuality and gender. They described how toxic dynamics are normalised and, in some cases, romanticised in books, music and online spaces. They criticised young adult romance fiction in particular for the repetitive 'archetypes' and unhealthy tropes around sex and sexuality.

> **A lot of young adult romance is always so weird to me, and it borders on just being generally creepy. Because a lot of the relationships are sort of like a copy and paste same kind of thing. It's this like short, defenceless, petite girl and this guy that is old enough to literally be daddy don mafia man, who's also like a fucking millionaire and invented Wi-Fi. It's always the same archetype. I feel like it's very unhealthy.**

Young adult fiction can be too sexualised: One young person criticised young adult romance fiction for using highly sexualised storylines that are 'very anti-asexual' and have problematic dynamics. They spoke of these books being 'all about sex' with 'minimal boundaries' and 'bad representation': 'I went to a bookstore just to get, like, a normal romance one, and why is it, like, porn'. Some said the same, but about the young adult genre which is 'all just straight up like porn', with some young people saying that it is mostly about 'toxic relationships'.

Stereotypes can be perpetuated: The popular storylines in these books are described as relying heavily on gendered, 'unhealthy stereotypes' around power and sex. They cautioned that if the 'literature is exactly the same ... really toxic relationships', it starts to provide a skewed blueprint of what relationships look like. When reading this, 'you need to know it's weird and it's not normal'. The problem is when 'you see it everywhere then you start conflicting it in your head' and toxic relationships start to take on 'a romanticised view'.



The tropes and character role models may not be healthy: These young people felt that this trend in fiction was causing 'the normalisation of reverse feminists'. They said it was particularly a risk for younger children. Exposure to these stories may be 'the only experience that you've had in a romantic setting', so when you start to date, 'you're going to go out and look for that kind of relationship and that's going to not lead to the best place'. These portrayals can make it harder to recognise abuse or manipulation, because:

> **when you start romanticising something like a freshly 18 girl with a guy who's in his 60s ... you open gateways to people seeing these being like "well this is normal" and not reading textbook signs of grooming or abuse.**

One young person talked about problematic representations in Disney films and how they tend to equate levels of attractiveness to qualities of good and evil. They said 'I find they always try to make their villains look, like, ugly. They always make it like the conventional idea of looking ugly'.

> **Fandom is really common in queer youth. Like every queer person I know has read or watched or like indulged in fandom or inappropriate bad content … all of my other queer friends, they really love fanfiction stuff which has good sides but it's also the internet so … if you get into the wrong part of it then … you're kind of fucked.**

Elevation of misogyny and violence: Music was called out for normalising and glorifying violence and degrading language, especially 'stuff against women'. One young person said 'most of the music people listen to these days … it's got a lot of violence and whatnot, guns, stuff like that'. Another described how degrading lyrics are often masked by catchy beats, making harmful messages more palatable. Some talked about how 'it's sung by people they admire, they think it's cool'. Violent video games were also called out for normalising and glamorising violence: 'kill this many people and you win'. One child said that 'violent video games at a young age, they made my brother really angry'.

> **Even in R&B, you're going to hear the kindest most relaxing beat and then you're going to hear the most disgusting, most degrading lyrics you're ever going to hear in your life … it's going to have so many degrading terms towards like the opposite gender but if you only listen to the beat you're going to be like "oh this is such a cute, romantic song". And people don't even realise it.**

Exposure is not age-regulated: They also raised concerns about how easy it is to find content that is not age appropriate, especially for younger children. One child expressed concern around Year 8 students being exposed to *A Court of Thorns and Roses* through the library at school, saying:

> **they're all getting exposed to all kinds of content at a really young age. And at this age it's really developmental to who they are as a person later on in their life, so yeah, they might not be able to properly perceive a healthy relationship.**

Another young person spoke about how:

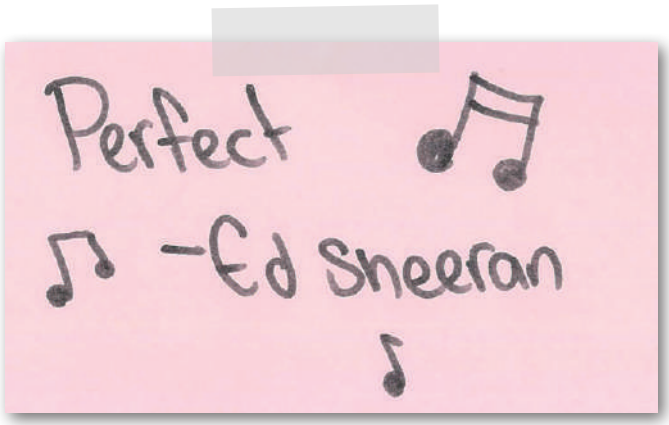
> **when people write about kink in fanfiction and stuff it's always the worst possible way you could be doing it, because that's what they think is hot. And then someone finds it and they're like, "I like this too" and you're like, "buddy, you're 12".**

Children and young people are not simply passive consumers of media and pop cultural representations. They interact with it and 'for different people it can have positive and harmful effects … depending on the kid. It can influence or shape how they see those kinds of relationships'.

> **With media, fictional work, take it with a grain of salt and you should, but I've seen a perspective that emanated my life and I've got a different outlook.**

Make pop culture safer, with better representation

Young people had clear ideas about how pop culture and media could better support understandings of safe and positive relationships. They called for better representation, more regulation and stronger education. They want media that reflects diverse identities and healthy dynamics.

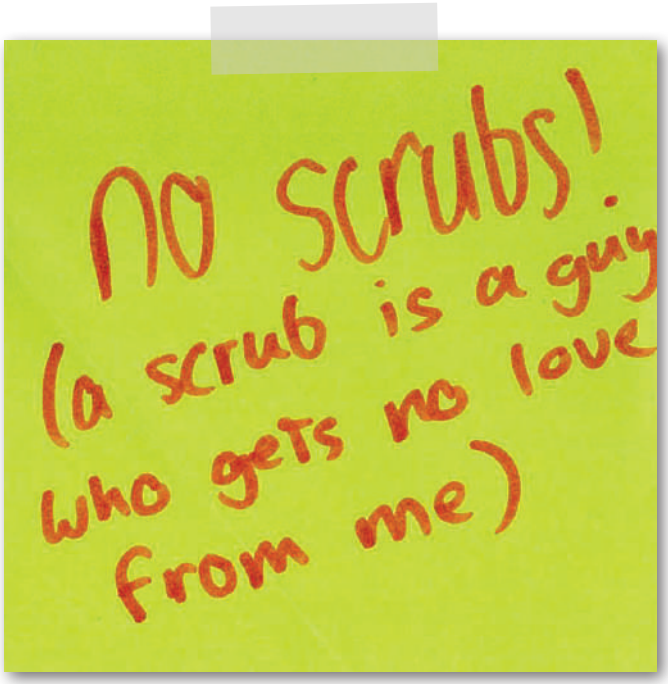


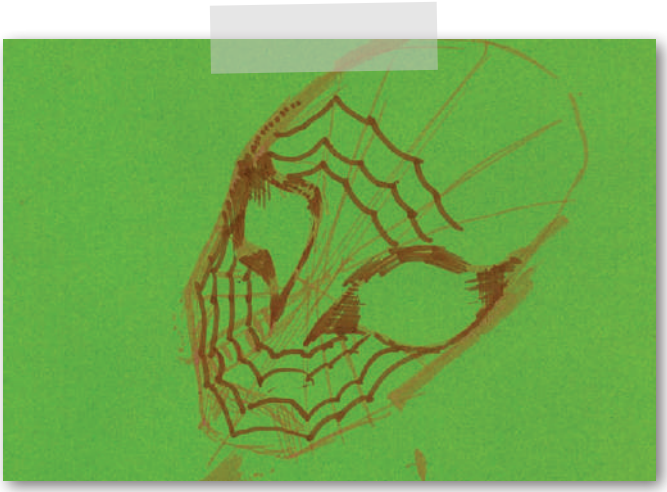
> **Can someone just write some cute, queer fluff already? One good storyline!**

Improve content warnings: Young people told us that there should be age restrictions for some content and clearer content warnings. One child suggested that in the same way they 'wrap inappropriate manga in manga stores, they should be doing the same with books like *Icebreaker*. Yes!'

> **If … how you go to see an R18 movie you need to be, like, ID'd for it because they don't want children in there … If it's like an adult book, they should be ID'ing people buying those books.**

> **You might see someone in a similar situation and see how a fiction character has reacted, and you could implement that perspective in your own life. It hasn't changed much my relationships, but other aspects of my life. Lots of media has changed my perspectives and outlooks for the better.**





Expand positive representation of marginalised groups: Young people called for better representation in fiction, especially of queer and asexual identities, and more realistic portrayals of healthy dynamics. One young person said 'one of my comfort shows, *Our Flag Means Death,* has a lot of positive relationships in it. It's like pirates. It's a gay pirate show'. They also called for more positive representations in media content, 'especially on television. Because some people are protected from social media, but everyone watches TV. Even like Bluey – Bluey is a great example of that. Giving grants to produce content'.

Invest in advertising children will look at: Advertising was seen as a powerful tool for education, with one child saying that we 'need more advertising and funding'. Young people recommended using TV ads and school programs to promote messages about consent and respect. One child talked about a:

> **consent ad … at a party, she said "I don't want to". The consent ads are … those kinds of ads will attract people, story, like, that is really good, a story.**

If there is investment in ads, it is critical that they resonate with young people. One young person warned about the potential inefficacy of ads, referencing 'those "stop bullying" posters. They don't do nothing. So, I don't think they should be investing in those'. Involving children and young people in the creation of advertising is key to ensuring that the messages are effective.

Spotlight on LGBTIQA+ representation

The CRC affirms the rights of all children to be treated equally, without discrimination. For LGBTIQA+ young people, experiences of FDSV can be compounded by discrimination and systemic barriers to accessing inclusive support services.[53]

LGBTIQA+ young people can experience identity-based abuse (queerphobia, transphobia) and may face intersecting layers of disadvantage due to race, geographic location, economic status and disability. [54] There can be limited representation of LGBTIQA+ experiences and expertise in the development of policy and service frameworks. Narrow framing of FDSV can create challenges for some LGBTIQA+ people in recognising unsafe and abusive patterns when they occur in the family or in other relationships.[55] It is critical to support LGBTIQA+ advocacy efforts and build positive peer networks that empower LGBTIQA+ young people to contribute to policy development.[56]

As well as meeting with youth from the LGBTIQA+ community in generalist settings, we held a few consultations this year with specialist LGBTIQA+ services. These groups of young people were notably articulate and insightful in discussions around FDSV, mental health and the importance of therapy. They often had more sophisticated language and understanding around safety and relationships than young people we saw in generalist settings. Many of them spoke about having to educate themselves about relationships. They reflected on how lucky they were to have found supportive services and community around them.

Young people spoke about having to search out information around queer relationships as this is not readily available:

> **I feel like a lot of people I know probably wouldn't know what a healthy relationship is, and I feel like, well, at least in my experience the main reason is because we don't get good representation of what healthy relationships should look like for queer people. It's always toxic or doomed. Because there's no good queer relationships, or like if there is it's very limited – you have to, like, hunt for it.**

They described challenges in trying to find 'good, helpful sex ed and relationship advice' especially for trans youth and called for examples of positive diverse relationships across media and other platforms. Young people also spoke about the need to 'feel a lot more seen' across the board. They highlighted the importance of 'gay/straight alliances' in schools and information about diverse identities and healthy relationships for LGBTIQA+ people being available to young people in schools, communities and specialist supports.

Some young people from the LGBTIQA+ community spoke about fanfiction communities as one space where they can find representation of diverse relationships. Others spoke about books as 'a really good place … to explore what relationships people are writing about and what they look like'. These, and other media, offer possibilities for increasing the visibility of safe and positive relationships beyond just the heteronormative. Insights like these can improve specialist supports and programs for LGBTIQA+ youth and affirm the right to positive representation, inclusive education and access to supportive community for all young people.

4.7 Wanting the justice system to protect children

The justice system needs to be keeping children safe

Children described this domain as being about laws, legislation and the justice system. Some young people said you 'go to the police station' for help, with another saying police were the main trusted option, 'the only humans I would go to'.

However, the justice system was largely absent from discussions about where to go for information and support about safe and positive relationships. The main reason police and the justice system came up at all was in reference to violence in the community, racism or much-needed responses to FDSV. Children and young people felt that the justice system should be 'making sure everyone is safe'. They saw it as a domain that should protect them and hold perpetrators accountable – and respond to the spectre of violence in their communities.

The justice system does not work for children

Children and young people were very clear on what they do not like about how the justice system functions. The way the system treats victims and children – and whether it is fit for purpose – are critical issues that were diminishing young people's trust in justice.

The system is ineffective: Some children and young people were frustrated that sentences for serious crimes, including murder and domestic violence, were too lenient, like 'people bash mothers and get away with it'. One young person compared it to the punitive way children are treated in the justice system for 'little things'. They described reports of FDSV being 'brushed aside too easily, too quickly', and cases dismissed because 'the victim doesn't have enough proof'. In these cases, 'there's not any real justice from it'. Another was concerned about outcomes being 'enough, especially for the victim and their families'. One young person thought that lenience – 'we call the police, he goes to jail, he's out the next day' – helps to maintain the cycle of abuse and 'the trauma keeps going and going'.

Police do not try to understand children: Children and young people felt unheard and underestimated, and that the police 'think just 'cos we're kids we don't know anything'. One young person said, police 'chose [listening to] the adults over the kid', because children were 'too minor for people like the police to deal with'. Some young people said that the police 'assume that because it's also a minor … can't do anything for you'. Police attitudes and experience may come into play when 'a lot of cops in general … they don't understand it, 'cos they've never been through it'. Stereotyping and a lack of understanding of abuse dynamics end up with the police doing 'the bare minimum' for children. Some young people also felt that not all police 'know what to do' with people experiencing mental health issues and 'should be a little more calm'.

> **If an adult said something they would take them seriously but if a child or a minor said something they would take it less seriously.**

Police sometimes role model violence: Some young people felt they could not trust the system when 'even the police officers do violence'. There may be a rationale to it – 'to make the kids scared so they don't do it again. Teach them a lesson' – but for some, this was poor role modelling as well as

perpetuating the community violence that concerned them; that 'they can bash you and get away with it'.

The justice system is too complicated: Children said restraining orders were 'really hard to get' and reporting processes are 'really long'. They worried about safety when speaking up: 'If people know that they're gonna remain anonymous then they're obviously gonna speak up'. Mandatory reporting has been criticised in other domains (see section 4.3), but here there was concern about 'how far the reports actually go' because 'there are not enough police to check on these children'.

Children want safety and respect

While young people would not necessarily go to police – or anyone else in the legal or justice space – for information and support about relationships, they still wanted action for their own protection. While the consultations focused on prevention and early intervention measures – the information and support that was needed about safe and positive relationships – many children and young people raised the critical need for a justice response to FDSV and violence in the community.

> **We need to be putting more effort into this, making sure our laws and legislation align and making sure everyone is safe.**

Strengthen laws and penalties: Stronger laws and 'penalties for people who use violence' are essential to keep people safe. Young people pointed to new laws like coercive control as 'a giant step in the right direction'. Children thought 'they should make the penalties higher for domestic violence', with some calling for 'jail time'. They spoke about the need for stricter laws to avoid 'those bad people … getting released and released' and called for 'committing more years to actual, like abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, mental abuse'.

Also, for community safety, some children wanted 'cameras everywhere … making it tougher on people'. Others thought the same, even in the home – that authorities should 'start listening to people's houses' – indicating how important safety was for them.

There was also a call for clearer rules around age of consent and relationships. Children told us they are worried about 'a lot of minors getting into relationships with 24 to 25-year-olds … which is arguably a more abusive' situation. They want stronger protections to stop this from happening. Some said that children needed autonomy as well as protection. Laws, like a 'Romeo and Juliet law … which allows minors … to engage in relations with other minors between a two-year age gap' would be appropriate. Others also called for consistency between Australian states.

They spoke about the importance of updating laws to 'keep up with societal needs and norms', such as the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth). This Act needs to be 'more for today's society' because 'it was written an extremely long time ago'.

Improve police training and empathy: Children want police to 'be better at understanding minors' and have more understanding of what is behind the issue. For many, empathy and respect were key: 'The police need to be smart – not doubt us', 'they should listen to us'. Young people told us that police 'should know what to do when someone has a [mental health] diagnosis'. They also stressed that police should be 'taking reports and investigations seriously'. They suggested that this was key to prevention, because 'if you had listened to them earlier on most of these issues could have been sorted or helped'. Young people felt direct engagement – getting 'a whole bunch of kids to go to the popo [police]' – should be frequent and regular. These voices highlight that improved police training must go hand in hand with genuine listening and trust.

Better reporting mechanisms: Reporting some crime would be safer and easier if 'you could stay anonymous'. Children and young people wanted to avoid being exposed. The authorities 'should make like a little thing where you could report to police, or you could report someone, but you could stay anonymous, like no one would find out'. In addition, 'they should probably do that and have like more police in certain areas and stuff like that'.

Implement more preventative programs: While many young people wanted a more robust response from the justice system, some thought that 'if we had stuff in place to prevent it from happening in the first place, they [FDSV services] wouldn't need to exist'. Others wanted the authorities to show at-risk young people the 'bad consequences' of violence and 'where they would end up'. This was about helping these young people 'feel the situation', possibly stopping harmful behaviour before it starts or becomes entrenched.

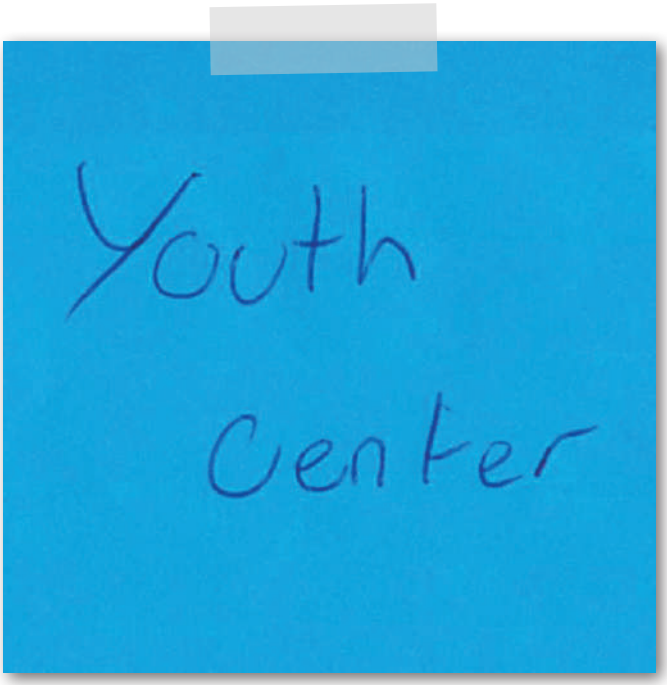
Strengthen school-level accountability: Bullying and violent students at school 'should get the same punishment as if they assaulted someone outside of school'. Young people thought the violence in school should not be diminished just because it was in school. They raised concerns about school authorities mishandling violent situations: 'They shouldn't just be suspended'. They want systems that matter, not token consequences, because 'if they're violent at school, they're probably a delinquent so they don't even care, they don't care about school'.

> **If they're going to get suspended for a day, their parents probably don't care. You need to give them a reason to stop, otherwise they're going to keep doing it 'cos they have no fear of the consequence.**

4.8 Being supported by services and workplaces

Community and support services engage and help children

- ‘counselling services’
- ‘support lines’
- ‘support workers’
- ‘therapists’
- ‘social workers’
- ‘Kids Helpline’
- ‘Indigenous programs’
- ‘Headspace’
- ‘SSI’
- ‘Catholic Care’
- ‘youth centre’
- ‘CREATE’
- ‘Relationships Australia’
- ‘Love Bites’
- ‘MRC’
- ‘health workers’
- ‘nurses’



Young people were generally positive about support services, frequently referring to them as a trustworthy source of information and help when they had questions or concerns about the relationships in their lives – especially if family or friends could not offer the support they were looking for. They told us about a variety of services that provided ways to learn about and develop safe and positive relationships, including health, government and community support services. To children and young people, variety was important. They had different reasons for turning to different people and different places at different times. As one young person put it:

> **what’s also really important is forming those healthy connections, doesn’t necessarily have to be a parental one … if they can’t find those strong, healthy relationships at home, have to find them elsewhere.**

> **Sometimes you want your problem solved rather than comfort and sometimes friends and family just can’t provide you with a solution they can only provide you with comfort. And sometimes that might not be what you want.**

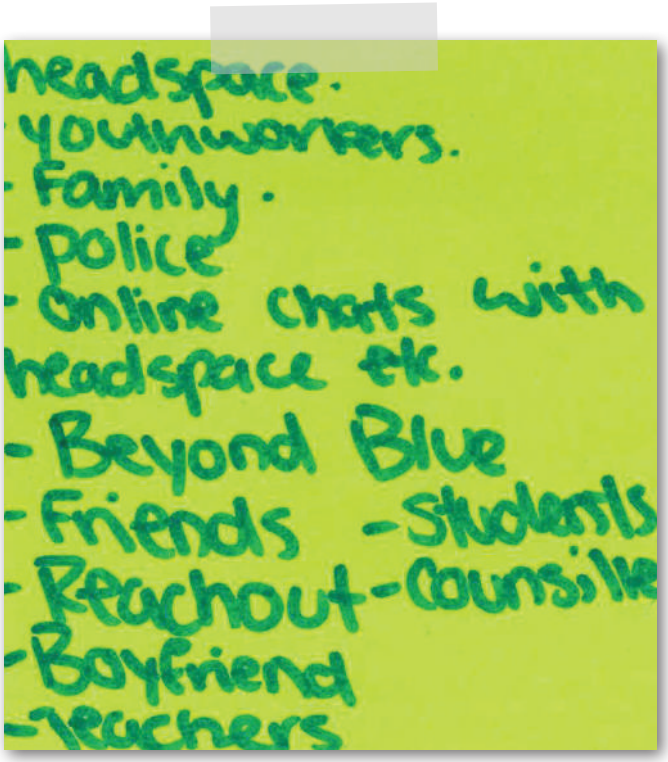
Support services can be useful if children and young people were unsure about a relationship in their lives. They told us that if they felt 'oh, this isn't right' and were worried that things 'could get worse', support services could offer information early, to help them understand the 'starting signs' and develop strategies to develop positive relationships. Others recognised how therapeutic supports play a key role in helping children and those around them to process and recover from hard times and break negative cycles.

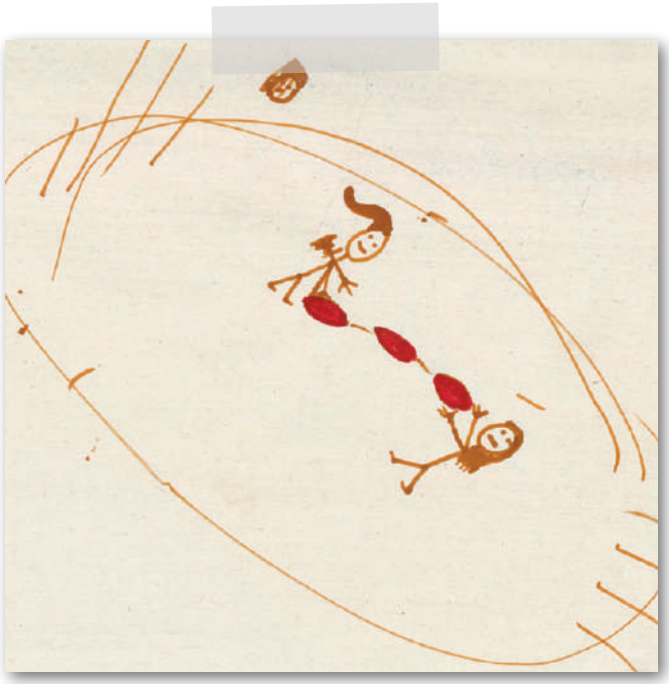
> **If you're in a relationship with someone and you're, like, questioning.**

Services keep children occupied and help them: Services specifically for young people were frequently mentioned as positive supports. Young people like the activities they provide, 'we do things like this – drawing, painting', 'cooking together, made a cake', 'have fun, food'. They spoke about the benefits of support services hosting events, such as going 'bowling' or to 'the zoo', as opportunities for young people to engage in activities.

Providing safe spaces to be with peers: Interacting with their peers was often mentioned, with support services providing opportunities and safe spaces to 'hang out', 'come to the drop-in to socialise with other people and make new friends'. Children explained that they started going to a 'help service' for the youth activities, 'for their drop-in zone where I could just chill and make new friends'. In time, 'I met staff there and got friendly with them, made friends with staff and elder people and from there I had a place to go when I was in trouble'.

> **Those places are really good for the youth because obviously you'll interact with a lot of young people providing many different activities, free services or whatever, obviously money is often an issue, especially in today's economy.**





Sport connects you and keeps you busy: Sport was often discussed, both as a means of keeping busy and a way to build connections in community. One young person told us that going to the gym offers 'a place to escape from your own mind, because it gives you some sort of purpose, to push yourself'. Others shared, 'I love footy … [you] can run around', it can help you to 'calm down', and 'exercise makes you happy'.

Young people also talked about the importance of 'being part of a team'. They said it was important to dedicate 'a bit of time in the training session to talk about things', which helped build trust and respect. Teamwork in sports offers an opportunity to learn and grow together, saying things like, 'we are one mind', 'we work together' and we 'keep going'. Sport also helps to build connections over time and place, 'I've played for ten years', 'I...met friends in Darwin for football', and 'usually you become pretty close with your sporting teammates, you can go into a more deeper relationship and talk about different stuff'.

Workplaces can be 'like a family': Employment opportunities keep young people engaged and connected. To stop violence, young people said, 'I would try to keep us busy, more things to do', 'more jobs', 'lower the [working] age so more young people can get jobs and stop people abusing people'. While abuse and violence could happen in workplaces, they also provided settings where a young person could get information and support, like 'more frameworks or help to talk and seek help if anything unsafe [is] happening in the workplace, like if your relationship with a manager is inappropriate, HR could report'. On the other hand, someone else said that 'I probably wouldn't tell my boss my issues, I see it as a professional place for me, I keep my personal separate'.

> **I have a close relationship with my boss and the managers under me, those people look out for me. Our work is like a family everyone looking out for each other, people check in.**

Services help children to 'get information': Young people told us that support services help them to 'learn different things, boost knowledge'. As well as accessing information through youth services, they also spoke about other services that supported them to access information about relationships. Mental health services, such as Headspace, 'help if you have issues' and can 'give you tips on what the definition is, how to go about it, ways to improve, all that stuff'. Homelessness services, like CREATE, 'for when you're taken away from home' support young people with 'relationships stuff as well'. Health services, like the 'doctor', 'clinic' or 'Congress' also provide support and information.

Other services that provided information included:

- 'a medical van that comes to town every night ... so much information in the van for, like, different places as well that you can go to'
- employment services where you can also access 'mental health, food, homelessness, clothes, charging your phone ... pretty much everything'
- youth services where 'they got music, they got art, they got absolutely everything. And there's so many, like, sexual health things there'.

They told us other positive aspects of these services were that 'they open after school', 'so many people go there' and 'it's reliable'.

Good services can be accessed easily: Young people told us that accessibility was important. 'Walk-in services' were welcomed, as well as places in the community that people can go 'for support' and 'different types of access'. One child shared that it is 'close to my house, they give us a lift'. Others mentioned the 'Youth Bus' and support workers who 'come and take us back home'.

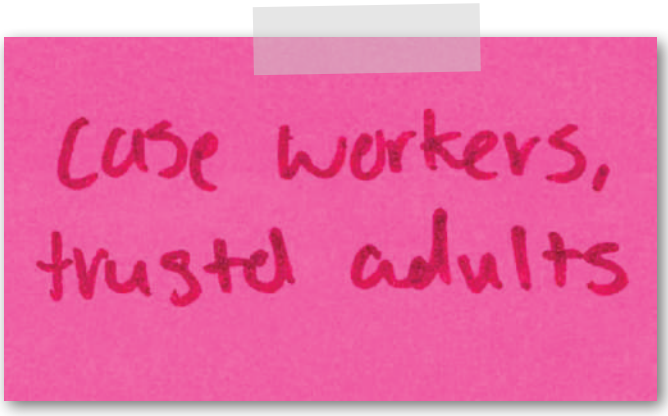
Kids Helpline can be useful: Some young people told us that there was not easy access to in-person services in their community, and that 'Kids Helpline is sort of the only one that we have' and 'in school … they, like, talked about that particular support line a lot'. One young person said that Kids Helpline was somewhere they referred a friend to because 'she was really struggling one time, and I didn't really have the resources to help her'. Another advantage of online support services, like Kids Helpline, was that they were tailored for different ages, so 'you just go into the section you need'.

> **If you have someone in your life, the first place you go for help is family and community but, if not, then you might go somewhere else.**

Services provide help when other people cannot: One young person talked about 'stigma around, like, mental health stuff, for young kids' and how some young people grew up in households that were 'very anti-therapy and that kind of stuff'. If a young person feels 'they have nowhere to go and they don't want to go to their parents, like, yeah they'll go to a help service or community service'.

Service staff can be 'trusted people': Young people suggested a range of reasons for seeking out support services. Many mentioned things such as 'they have expertise', 'they're professional', 'they're confidential', and 'they explain things'. Others observed that support services 'don't tell your parents about what you say'. One young person summed it up by saying, 'it's a counsellor's job to support you and to know what to say and to make sure you're safe'.

> **I know my parents, they don't know how to deal with it and I feel like psychologists and therapists are trained and they know how to cope with these things and they literally went to university and they know how to cope with these things and they can explain things a lot better and a lot of things they give you feedback and they tell you what you can do and they do not try to force you to do something.**



They talked about the importance of 'building a bond with them', and how in the first few sessions 'we just talked about, like, just stupid stuff like school'. This allowed young people the time to develop trust with the service and develop 'an actual bond' because 'if you don't have a good connection, then it's not going to be a good experience'. For many young people, once they felt that trust had been created, they felt safe to explore 'because we've known her [support worker] for a long time, we just feel more comfortable with her'. For others, 'it's very hard to gain trust from those kids who have been taught that it's not always a good thing to reach out for help'.

Connecting with lived experience: As in other domains, young people identified that a sense of connection was critical. One source of connection they discussed was that of similar experience. This could be professional experience, for example, 'if they talk to many kids like you', or it could be lived experience. So, if the 'people that you are learning off have experienced it before' they are more likely to 'know what we're going through'. This could also provide young people with positive role models, because 'they could have lived what you are looking for, like an answer'.

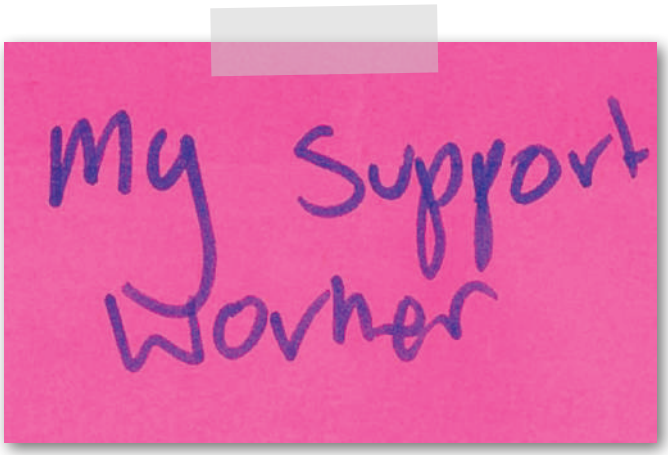
Services can be safe spaces: One of the benefits young people raised about support services, like therapy, was that 'they try to make you, like, feel invited … feel like a safe space'. Having someone 'just listen and give you advice, like, without you feeling worse about it' and 'calm you down from a lot of things that are going through your head'. One young person said therapists 'help you solve your issues, they give you comfort' and are 'empathetic'.

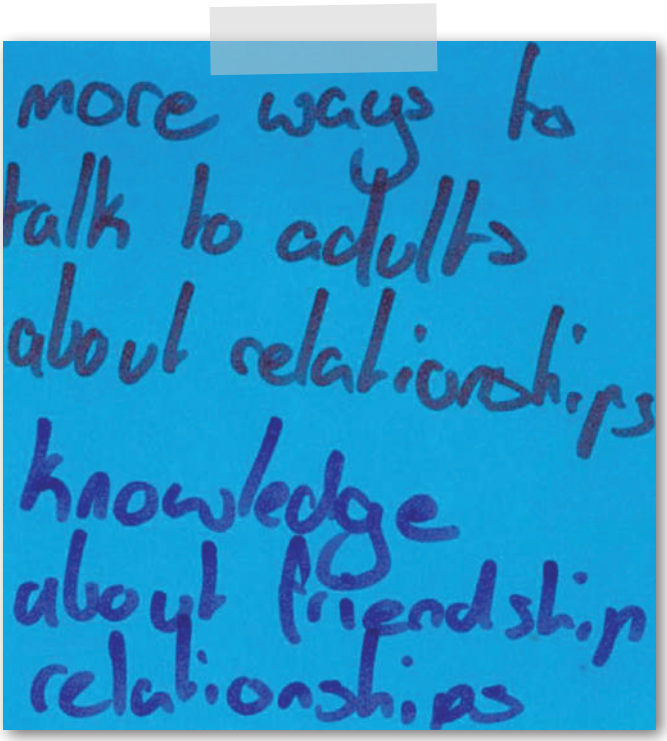
All age groups can be fun: Young people spoke positively about services that welcomed people of 'all ages', with others saying, 'over 10, under 25 years, everybody gets along'. Some described inviting people of all ages into school once a week to 'have fun, yarn, have activities'. The key priority was that services provided information and advice to make sure children 'are raised in safe family, safe environment'.

Support staff are unbiased: An impartial perspective was important because 'they don't know you so they can't make a judgement based on what they know about you, it's more like just based on the conversation alone'. Family and friends 'might try to cheer you up and sugarcoat it', or 'might, like, try to understand but they might not be very good at giving you the answers that you need'. People outside of your close circles 'might be more … objective about your problem'.

> **You speak to them and they tell you what like the start of a toxic relationship is, because there's signs that you can find, like coercive abuse where they, like, stop you from seeing close friends and family, and, like, keep you away so you've got no one, and then start physically abusing you after they've mentally abused you.**

Gendered services can be useful: Young people told us that support services could be different depending on your gender, pointing out that there are 'some services that are only to that [particular] gender. Like women's shelters are only to women'. They spoke about the 'huge difference' it can make when talking about 'sensitive topics', like relationships. One young woman said, 'when I'm talking about relationships in my life … if I'm talking to a guy about it, it just feels a little, like, weird'. Young people suggested that it was 'generally more comfortable to [talk] about some topics' with someone of the same gender.



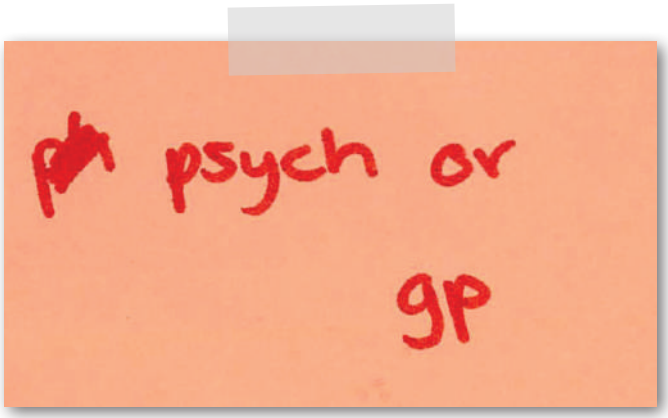


Support services can be hard to access and expensive

Comfort and trust are hard to build: Not all young people felt safe or confident approaching support services about relationships, saying 'it can be very intimidating'. Others suggested that they might not trust a therapist because 'they're just saying whatever to be paid'. Or some young people 'feel like no one will understand them'. Young people spoke about some younger children, saying they 'may not know that they can trust that person'. Some also expressed concern that support services may not maintain their confidentiality, they might 'tell my parents' and it would 'cause more trouble'. For example:

> **if they're harming themselves, or others, or if they're being abused by their family, they couldn't say something like that because they don't want their family to know, or they don't want CPS called.**

The fear that 'they don't have a choice, that they don't have control', can mean 'they just suffer in silence'. They also told us that it could sometimes feel like support services responded in a way that was out of proportion to the situation, like responses went straight to the 'worst case scenario'.



Access can be a problem: Sometimes the 'ability to access them' was a barrier, particularly if 'your parents or the people around you might not believe in getting help and things like that'. One young person, talking about 'queer organisations', described the difficulty of trying to find 'the support that I needed'. For CARM children, 'if they don't understand your culture, they might not understand what you are saying'. They described challenges obtaining parental consent due to cultural differences 'if their parents, like, don't believe in stuff like that'. These barriers may intersect, for example young people with disability may face additional barriers that compound others they already face as a result of their culture.

> **I was like 14 when I first started [therapy] and it was the most intimidating thing ever. I walked in and I was literally, like, so scared … when you hit, like, the age of 16 or 17, that's when you kinda get a lot more confident. I feel like I know my rights, I know what they're allowed to share or not allowed to share.**

Services do not account for age sufficiently: Accessing support services is difficult for children 'especially when you're very young'. One issue is that 'you don't understand the whole confidentiality thing until you're a bit older'. Another aspect of age that young people raised was in relation to the age of the therapist or support worker, telling us, 'one thing I wouldn't do, is let the area be run by older people 'cos older people, you can't really relate to them'. They suggested that younger people, 'like early 20s were more relatable'.

Support can be expensive: Costs were also a consideration, with young people saying things like, 'there's a lot of doctors that don't bulk bill anything', and 'when I'm sick, I don't even want to go because it's so expensive'. Other young people described situations where 'sometimes you show up and there's no one there' because support services 'need more … funding'. Others described having parents who wanted to help them access a therapist and finding out 'how expensive it was and how long the waitlist was … how hard it was for me to have good mental health'.

> **… one day you talk about your feelings because you want to get help and they just drag you away and do things that undermine you, basically because you're a child, you can't make decisions.**

Child Protection Service support may not help: Several young people talked about the 'government thing that's there if you're a child and you need help, there is CPS', but it was 'not helpful', and it 'doesn't really do anything'. One young person told us, it is 'too easy for people to catch wind … DV victims go to report and they get stopped … because, like, their abuser hears about it'. They described feeling 'let down by the system that older people have put in place'. They know the services that are available to support them but told us, 'I can't do that [contact them] without alerting people'.

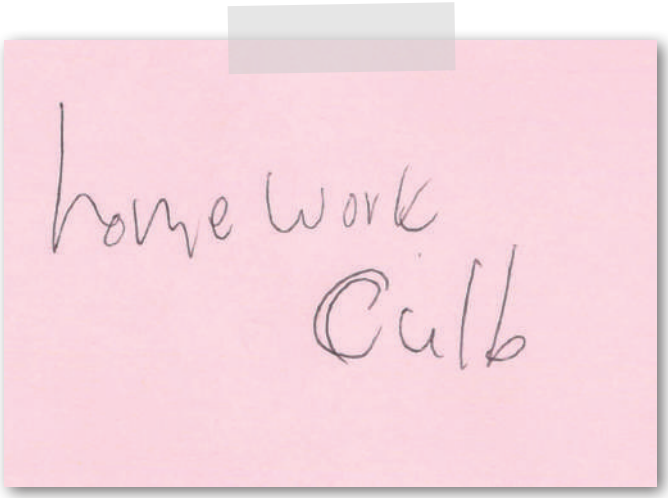
> **What I dislike is when you're, like, in a session with your doctor, or a therapist, and they say everything we say in here is confidential. And then you say how you feel and they're like, "we're gonna have to tell your parents that" and I'm like ... What's the point of you? What's confidential?**

Provide safer, more affordable support services where children are

Children and young people identified several opportunities for changes that could make support services more reliable and accessible. They also discussed some more systemic challenges for service systems to address.

Improve training for staff: Young people recommended ensuring that staff were adequately trained to respond appropriately to young people, particularly those who might be marginalised or distressed. For example, when support services are working with LGBTIQA+ young people, they suggested, 'don't emphasise their sexuality or preferences as a problem'. Another issue that young people raised was 'people at, like, helplines hanging up on them'.

Make services affordable and available: To mitigate the cost of accessing services, young people advocated for 'more free services'. They were aware of online and telephone support services but also noted there are not always walk-in services available, particularly in regional and remote areas. Opening hours for support services should be more flexible, particularly around school hours. Often by the time young people got home from school they did not have time to get to appointments noting, 'they don't normally open early ... and don't close late'. They also thought there was a lot of administration involved in finding the right person to speak to, which could be wasted time if they were then unable to make an appointment at a time that suited them.



Additionally, they wanted more flexibility in where they accessed support services. One young person noted, 'because of my anxiety, I want to go out more. But it would be easier if they come to us'. They also thought that it would be helpful for online or telephone services, like Kids Helpline, to know the location of the young people calling them. For example, if someone was self-harming, 'they could call the police and tell that person to not'. Support services could also address cultural concerns to improve the experiences of CARM children and young people accessing their service.

Develop more safe spaces for children: Young people told us they needed more 'safe places to go'. They suggested informal options for young people to play together in the community, like 'a playground', 'skatepark', 'maybe scooters, bikes, from the government'. They also explored possibilities in more structured settings with adult guidance available, such as 'an after-school thing or club where a teacher can hang around and can do activities' and 'more sports' which could offer 'a place where you could just go without having to ask' and may present the opportunity to build friendships with peers. Others told us that 'we need to be more connected' and put forward the idea of creating a 'trustworthy environment', or 'a place to meet in the middle somewhere'. They suggested this could be an opportunity to connect with a broader network than just peers.

> **[It is] quite important to stop discounting feelings.**

Think laterally to help children: Young people said they need 'safe avenues to communicate'. They suggested young people could be encouraged to develop more strategies for managing their emotions, like 'use a punching bag or stress toy'. Others put forward ideas for services to support young people to learn about safe and positive relationships including 'easily accessible support groups' and 'more generalised and mandated therapy'. One young person talked about passion for following their interests, saying 'you isn't never gonna see another Michael Jackson, isn't seeing another Einstein up in here, because there isn't really that passion anymore' and suggested we need more places for young people to pursue their passions.

Make helplines more prolific: One young person said, 'bonus points for the helplines, I think those things should be more accessible'. Another suggested services like Kids Helpline could provide more information and support for 'young people who have been taught that their mental health doesn't matter or isn't important'.

> **Kids Helpline should post more online on platforms that young adults use to help break stigma, raise awareness and make young people feel they can reach out for help because mental health is equally important to physical health.**

Bespoke support for genders: Young people reflected that 'more support for women to step away, get out of relationships' could be helpful. Others pointed out that 'it happens to guys too', so safe places were important for everyone. There were calls for more gender-specific services, including more 'domestic violence shelters. Especially more women's shelters' and 'someone there … to talk to, to fall back on' for young men.

Integrate more youth-led and peer support sessions: One young person suggested 'a "Regulation Centre", where you get a whole bunch of kids in one centre, get them to tell stories about their relationships and their feelings, just so they can get each other'. This would allow them to increase their social circles and find a wider range of people with whom they could discuss and build safe and positive relationships, 'because one thing you don't really get in a relationship is … proper talk … like, you don't really talk that much about your feelings'.

Open up spaces to support parents: Children and young people acknowledged that parents can sometimes need support themselves to support their children. They described situations where adults could access support informally within 'a community where you and other people can connect with each other. Like, "aw I'm struggling with this as well, do you want to talk about it"'. They thought that if parents or families could access informal support like this, it might help them to open up conversations with their children about safe and positive relationships.

Provide choices for the right kind of service: One of the things young people thought could be done more often was to 'give you a couple of options and you get to pick so you feel like you have a choice'. They felt that, for young people, choice and having some control over the decision-making process were important aspects of helpful support services.

Involve young people when defining confidentiality boundaries: Young people said they understand that 'if your situation's really bad, like it's like abuse or something like that, of course, you need to get CPS or something involved' but they felt that in many cases what they really needed was someone to just listen.

> **… kids should have access to everything, like support services, therapists, doctors, whatever, because at a young age, kids do not have that access without their parents approval or without their parents supervision.**

Provide support to all who need it: Young people told us that 'if people are violent, it can be hard to change' and 'the government can't really do anything about it'. They did suggest that governments should 'make it easier for people who are violent to seek that help', that there should be ways to find 'a solution without making it like a big problem'. They also suggested that there should be 'a system for people experiencing abuse to talk to people who went through the same experience'.

Respect agency and involve children and young people: Young people wanted a say in working with support services to improve their experience with them, and also to know that their feedback was considered and acted upon. Sometimes people might say to them, '"well this is the reason" or "it's in your control, fix it", but it's not always that simple'. One suggestion was anonymous feedback 'from all ages' about their experiences. It was also important to get 'responses if I report someone for doing something'. For example, one young person explained they had reported being 'choked' and then 'saw the person again the next day and they weren't punished'. Young people also want support in understanding and managing their emotions, they want to be heard, and to work collaboratively with services towards solutions to violence.

4.9 Drawing on culture and community

Recommendation 7:

All relevant Australian Government departments continue and expand investment in First Peoples community-led development programs and culturally safe services to build community connection and empowerment as a mechanism for prevention and early intervention.

Recommendation 8:

All relevant Australian Government departments continue and expand investment in safe spaces and community-led programs, such as sport and art, to build community connection and empowerment as a mechanism for prevention and early intervention. This should include mixed gender opportunities where culturally appropriate, be accessible to children of all ages and inclusive of all priority cohorts.

For many children, culture is everything

Children and young people talked about a range of people and places – family, friends, school, online, media and support services – and their role in learning about, and being supported to have, safe and positive relationships. These elements are also part of a bigger picture that shapes children's sense of belonging and identity – their community, their culture and for some, their religion. Young people said that 'community is a lot of things to me, like it could be a neighbourhood, or it could be like a friend group, or, like, your country'.

As all communities inherently have their own cultures, often discussions around community and culture would blur together. 'Community. Just like community from your country, your, like, friends'. 'Community is friends and family and teachers. Elders'. Communities are opportunities for belonging, connection and learning which can be found in many different places and spaces.

> **Every time I go to a more, like, oriental space I feel more at home, because I see people who are, like, more my skin colour and stuff. I guess I feel more comfortable hearing more familiar accents and people who share similar cultural views as me.**

Culture is how some children learn about relationships: Many First Peoples children talked about learning and belonging through bush trips on Country with mob, family, Elders, leaders and grandparents. Learning 'skin names, culture names, different to the whitefella ways', having the chance to 'talk about things back in the day' and 'talk about the Dreaming and culture are the main one'. Being out bush was described as 'coming together', 'fun', 'happy', 'more free', a chance to 'learn how to do stuff' and 'it's your own place'.

Elders were often positioned as trusted sources of wisdom and described as helpful for young people to learn about having safe and positive relationships. Young people described how they 'listen to the Elders intently, even if they're from a different nation/mob' because 'they have good advice experience'. They also suggested 'if the Elders tell them [young fellas] they might listen', to help them learn 'better' ways.

Religion can offer a moral compass for relationships: For some young people having religious leaders and text to turn to is important:

> **I reckon having someone there for young people, personally for me – 'cos I'm Christian – following Jesus gave me comfort and made me a better person, and not like a violent person, the teachings in the bible helped me a lot.**

Some spoke about how religion, and for some 'church', teaches them about how to behave and treat others. One young person said 'they go to church and learn from there, from the bible as well … how to treat someone … you can learn from the bible and the family'. Another said their religion helped to 'learn about love and being happy and because of this, I have the connection between me and God'.

Communities and cultures can complicate relationships

While culture and community can be spaces of safety and belonging, all cultures also have their challenges. One young person said that 'with different cultures and different beliefs … there are different standards of things, which would have an impact on how they think' about relationships.

> **I think maybe within cultures there's a stereotype … that hinders effective communication with people in your culture … different cultures may express those relationships differently … their culture might shape their expression, what they see as a positive relationship.**

Cultural norms can be stressful: Some young people spoke about the pressure to perform certain norms in relationships, particularly gender norms and heteronormativity.

> **There may be pressure, if you're in a stereotypical relationship, to get married, have kids, pressure to do that could lose relationships in your family.**

One child, when talking about rigid definitions of masculinity, said 'some countries and cultures are more accepting in their beliefs than others'.

Norms can inhibit help-seeking: Rigid norms and expectations within the religious context were also sometimes described as challenging for seeking information and support around safe and positive relationships. One child said it is hard 'if you come from a heavy religious family [that] may not be open to talking about relationships'. Another talked about how religiosity can sometimes affect parental attitudes towards sex and sex education:

> **I have known people and I have lived with people whose parents are not abusive in any way shape or form, but they are hyper-religious … and they're like, "I don't want my child … exposed to sex ed, stuff like that".**

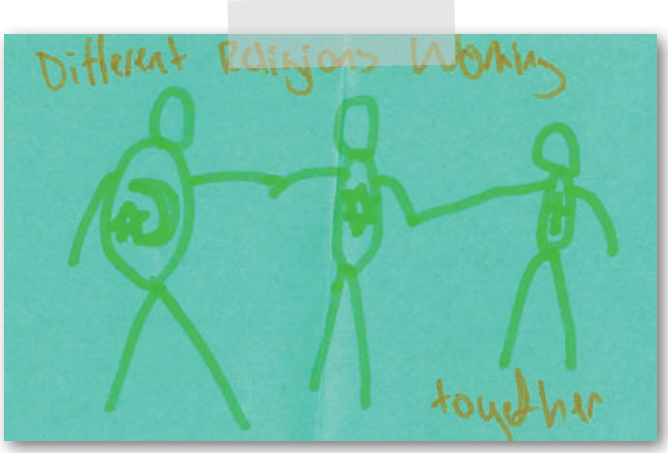
This can be a significant barrier particularly for LGBTIQA+ children and young people from religious families, schools and communities where 'there are people not as privileged to come out'. One young person shared that 'to my stepmother, being gay was a sin so I wasn't able to go to groups for mental health'.

Diversity is sometimes not respected in and between communities: At the same time, another young person spoke about the potential consequences that can arise when your cultural values and norms are not respected or understood. They emphasised the importance of

> **'acceptance for diversity. When a man comes from a different culture to this country, he will never feel understood if the whole world never listens … and that's where there is a lot of problems'.**

Children need 'to feel listened to and loved in the community'

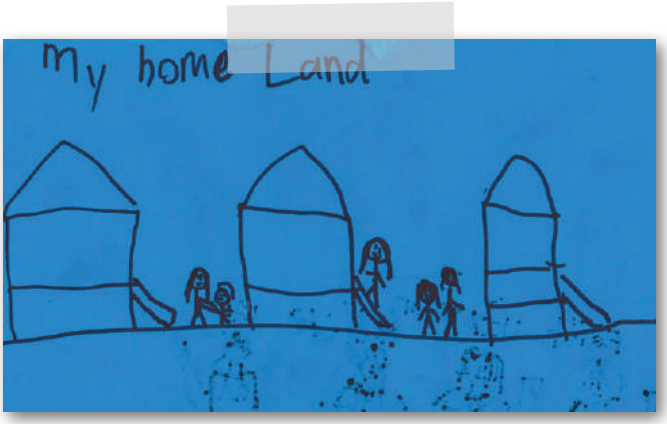
To address gender-based violence before it starts, young people need more programs to build up the community: 'we need a lot more events'. Another young person suggested 'a playground, to keep kids busy, something to do, have more fun. Place where you can run around'.



> **Get us the stuff we need when we get out. More support when we get out. Help us find our feet. Connect us with culture, like more Indigenous programs in here.**

Fund place-based First Peoples programs: Young people suggested a range of different programs for building community and cultural connection. One First Peoples child said that 'more actual Indigenous programs would be good that are for life skills and culture'. Things like 'programs for school holidays, they pick you up, take you to footy games, camps. Not just you, but with other boys your age who are Indigenous', and programs where they 'they take you out bush, teach you what food to eat and how to make stuff'. Another child described the utility of a community-led program for First Peoples young men where 'they can open up … because they feel like safe around them too'.

Integrate language support into more services: Another young person spoke about the challenges faced by those from diverse linguistic backgrounds, saying:



> **people need more language support so they can talk about everything they're feeling … If they want to talk about their stuff, they always have to go to church only because that's the people that understand them.**

They suggested a 'program where there's a language support for children to talk about anything like that, it'd be great'.

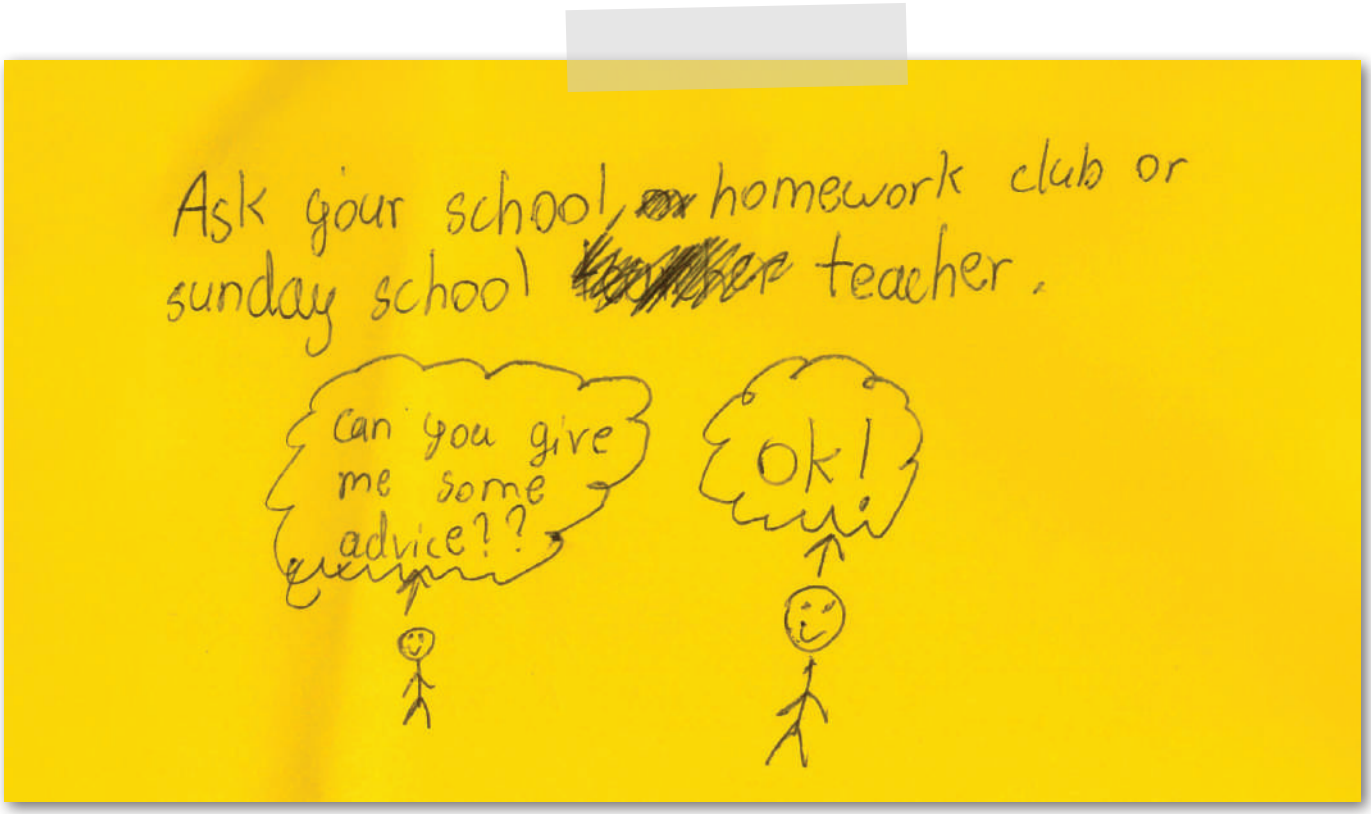
Reflect diversity in program planning and implementation: Young people said that central to how we approach different cultures about relationships is 'respecting their culture'. To do this we need to 'listen to them, like, what they like and don't like'.

> **My school tried to help all of … the African kids in my school, they tried to help us 'cos … the school would see us as bad kids, you know. So, the school bought in people from our community … they brought snacks, they helped us talk about what they need and how they can help us and stuff like that. So, I feel like the government should introduce more community, and like more helpful people …**

Some children and young people suggested engaging CARM communities in programs, saying, 'the government should bring more community' and engage community members in prevention and early intervention activities. Some felt that this would help to build trust and connection with children and young people. They thought this could be tried in schools. One young person thought this idea could be helpful for broader concerns about violence. They said that:

> **People are scared to leave [their houses] because of all the crime and stuff that's happening so I feel if there could be a way for people to make community stronger and get there safely.**

One child answered the question of where kids could go for information and help with safe and positive relationships succinctly: 'if they don't want to go to school, take them to the Community'.



Spotlight on First Peoples children connection in place

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) affirms the rights of all indigenous peoples to self-determination;[57] to have control over their lives, make decisions about what affects them and collectively shape the wellbeing of their children.[58] These principles intersect with children's rights under the CRC, acting as an important enabler for rights realisation. [59]

First Peoples children experience disproportionately higher rates of FDSV,[60] driven by the unique context of colonialism, systemic disadvantage and racism, child removals and intergenerational trauma.[61] For women and girls, these factors intersect with gendered discrimination.[62] First Peoples children are often given limited opportunity to offer insights or influence the support or services needed to heal and prevent violence. [63] Involving young people is crucial for realising autonomy and self-determination.[64] Where opportunities are rooted in place, young people can access and help shape trusted community-designed prevention initiatives that are tailored to reflect their experiences, including geographical remoteness, culture and language.[65]

We met First Peoples children in generalist settings and in consultations with ACCO and community-led partners in remote, regional and metropolitan areas. In remote communities, young people spoke animatedly about learning culture on-Country, describing feelings of safety, freedom and reinforced connection to kinship. The authority and care of grandmothers and Elders were central to inheriting the foundations of respect, and safe healthy living within community.

For some 'home' was the safest place they knew to turn, but many wanted more 'places to go' where children can 'open up to people they know', with 'someone you can really trust'. This reinforces the need for familiar and culturally safe services led by their own communities. One young woman reflected on the importance of these relationships for young people to learn 'how to solve problems', develop a strong sense of self-worth, and break violent cycles. Several young people said the coming together of community in a 'big meeting' was the best forum for addressing conflict and preventing gender-based violence.

In our consultations across Australia, First Peoples children expressed a strong desire for community connection and wrap-around supports. This included access to safe people, spaces and family, and community-led programs. Some spoke of needing 'Indigenous programs' to 'connect us with culture'. Another young man spoke of coming together on shared ground and how belonging and connection are gateways to help-seeking:

> **we need to … give more people that connection, to be connected to each other. To go ask for help … to feel free to come in and be connected. Anyone you know, it could be your mates, your teachers, your coach, youth staff and youth workers, teachers, family, everyone … to find a place to meet in the middle somewhere.**

First Peoples bring cultural knowledge, leadership and enduring traditions of care that are central to preventing violence.[66] Communities have long sought 'greater investment in place-based, Community-led prevention programs, healing places and on-country initiatives for families'.[67] This is echoed in the DFSV Commission's recent report, which calls for long-term flexible investment in ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' approaches to prevention.[68]

5. Reflections

> **My Mum was telling me from young … they need more useful ways to use their hands than violence.**

This young person's quote tells us so much about how children and young people are bearing witness to, and experiencing, violence. They often have a deep awareness and knowledge about violence and relationships.

Young people know about drivers of violence. They know about the way it manifests in society. They know that action can be taken to address it.

Young children are capable of being involved in this conversation.

They understand that violence is a learned behaviour, influenced by a person's environment – particularly when there are no positive outlets – and that it can be unlearned.

Young people know that being 'useful' can be empowering – and people who choose violence, or are at risk of choosing violence, must be constructively engaged.

And, drawing attention to their mother, this young person showed how wisdom passed down across generations can be a powerful resource for young people – and the entire community – to draw on.

Children and young people make these connections all the time. They spoke about them in consultations: the links between problems in society, violence in their communities and their homes, and the difficulties some children face understanding and having safe and positive relationships. They described drivers of FDSV as being interconnected. Moreover, they told us that addressing FDSV meant taking action with all the people and places children engage with. Consultation discussions often traversed the continuum of prevention, response, recovery and healing – requiring not just cross-cutting responses from relevant policy areas, but a whole-of-government approach.

Likewise, the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* calls for a holistic and multisectoral approach, involving all stakeholders. This whole-of-society effort includes settings and sectors which children and young people engage with regularly, such as support services, schools and educational settings, workplaces, media and pop culture, the health sector and communities.

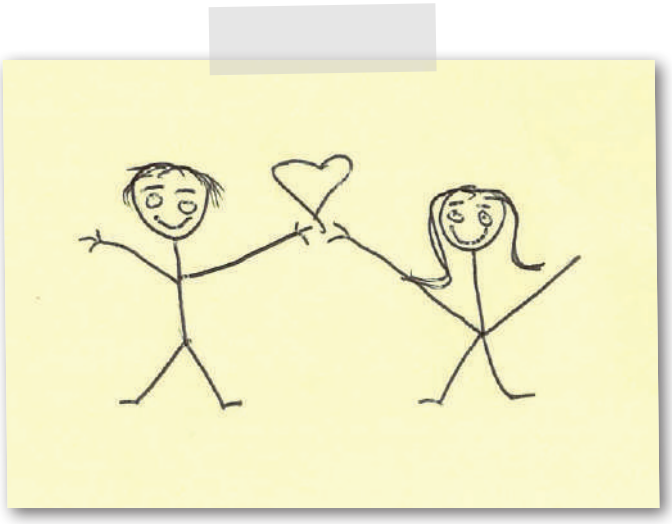
The children we consulted with had a lot to say about how these settings could better support young people with safe and positive relationships. Their ideas provide critical insights that can directly inform policies and programs for prevention and early intervention in these settings. They also reflect an understanding of the value of

responding to violence as part of longer-term prevention efforts that can help break the cycle.

Children and young people made a number of calls to action in this report. These calls made it clear that playing around the edges will not cut it. If the Australian Government is serious about ending gender-based violence in a generation, it must take advice from young people and tackle the drivers head on. A whole-of-society approach demands action and collaboration across all levels of government.

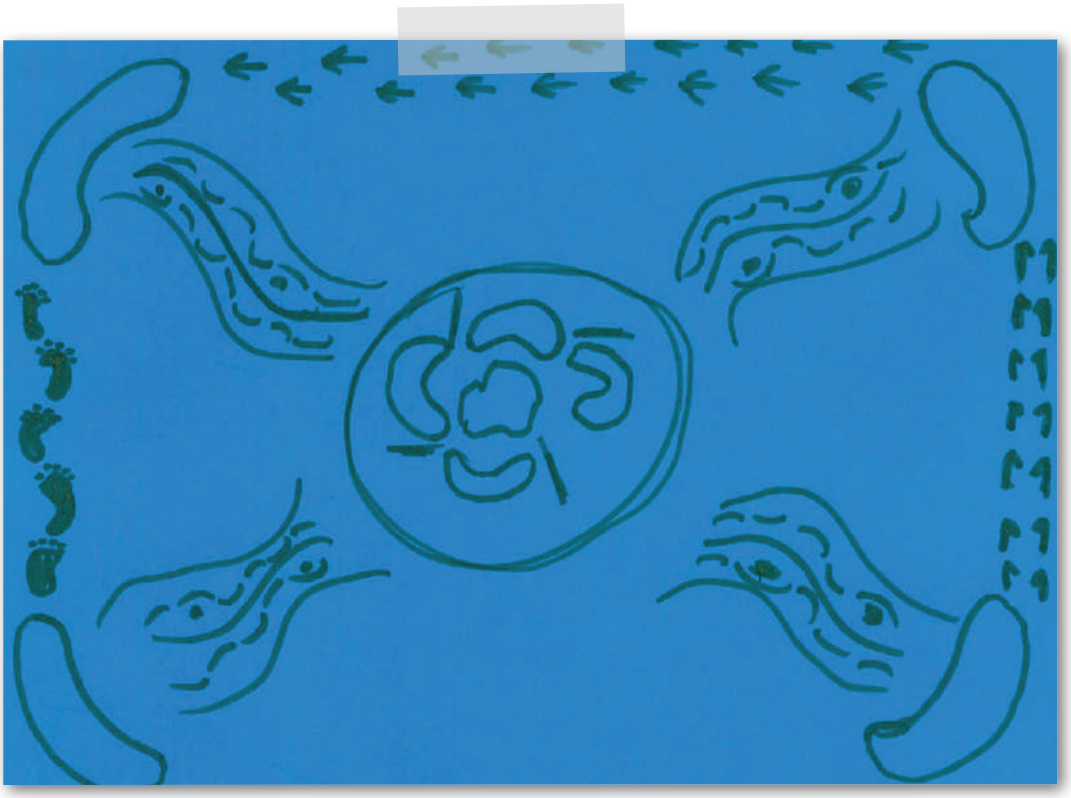
To be clear, this means putting the child first in all policy and program decisions. This could be achieved by centring children in a wellbeing budgetary process or assessing children's housing needs first. It also means meeting children where they are, by investing in place-based approaches and grassroots services. It also means targeting the needs of our most marginalised children first.

Perhaps the greatest takeaway from this process has been the hunger for participation. Yes, children and young people want to feel protected, valued and hopeful. They want to feel safe and loved. They want freedom to explore their world and be with friends.



But they also want to be taken seriously, respected and have their voice heard and acted on. Children and young people want to be part of this conversation. As this report shows, they have valuable insights to share. Their participation will only strengthen prevention efforts. They have a vested interest too: it is their society that must be reshaped for a safer future.

Children and young people want 'more opportunities to express our ideas to government. This should be key'.



6. Context

This section provides further information about the Supporting Quality Engagement project and its aims, policy focus and more detail about the children we consulted.

This section also includes more research on the prevalence of family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia and the policy landscape for children and young people. Lastly, this section discusses the importance of adopting a child rights-based approach and how this project has sought to help children to realise their participation rights.

6.1 More about the SQE project

Recognising a child's right to express their views freely in matters that affect them, the Australian Government provided funding over 3 years (2023–2025) for the National Children's Commissioner to increase capacity to consult with children and young people on the effectiveness of government programs.

The SQE project undertook consultation activities across 5 Key National Strategies and associated action plans. These are:

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (DSS)

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (DSS)

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 (DSS)

National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030 (AGD)

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (NIAA).

The consistent priority across these is to elevate the voices of children, and to recommend ways to embed these voices in decision-making for policy and programs. Accordingly, the objective of the project is to draw on the lived experiences and views of children to contribute to the evidence base informing the design and implementation of Australian Government policies affecting them.

This project engaged children in safe and trauma-informed ways. The lived experience of children directly impacted by the above strategies is sought and valued.

In 2023 the project looked at how to improve services and supports for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. This included children's ideas about what a website and helpline might look like, to help inform planned measures in the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030*.

The 2024 report, '*A ground to grow from'*, focuses on the concept of identity, and what children and young people need to develop a positive sense of self. This report uses their words, voices and experiences to inform the government's planned refresh of the *National Standards for out-of-home care*, under the Safe and Supported Framework.

Project reports are available on our website.

6.2 Year 3 Focus: Ending gender-based violence

The priority area for 2025 was the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. This plan serves as Australia's primary policy framework aimed at eliminating violence against women and children within one generation. It emphasises the need for a whole-of-society approach to address gender-based violence.

The first *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* was released in February 2011 and was the first plan to coordinate Australian, state and territory government action in this area. The original plan focused on the forms of violence most commonly affecting women – FDSV.

The second plan adopts a wider scope, continuing its focus on violence against women while also acknowledging children as victim-survivors in their own right, and including gender-based violence affecting LGBTIQA+ people.

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* is structured around four key pillars:

- **Prevention** – tackling the root causes of violence by shifting harmful social norms and reforming systems and attitudes that drive gender-based violence.
- **Early Intervention** – identifying individuals at risk and providing timely support to prevent the onset or recurrence of violence.
- **Response** – delivering crisis services and supports for victim-survivors, including law enforcement and a trauma-informed justice system that ensures accountability.
- **Recovery and Healing** – supporting victim-survivors through their healing journey, addressing the physical, psychological, emotional, and financial impacts of violence.

The *First Action Plan 2023–2027* outlines the first 5 years towards achieving the vision of the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. Action 8 focuses specifically on children and young people and seeks to:

> **Develop and implement age appropriate, culturally safe programs across all four domains, informed by children and young people, that support recovery and healing from trauma, and intervene early to address violence supportive behaviours.[69]**

This SQE report supports this Action by listening to the voices of children and young people about what they think needs to be done to end gender-based violence.

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* notes that early intervention is an area where there is a significant gap in our understanding. Developing capacity to identify FDSV and intervene in a timely, safe and supportive way is critical. For this reason, the focus of the consultations was primarily on prevention and early intervention.

6.3 The children we consulted with

Over 300 children participated in 53 consultations around the country. The project team travelled to all states and territories, including metropolitan, regional and remote areas. The consultations were a mix of small focus groups and individual interviews, mostly held in person. The target age range for consultations was 10–17 years.

All consultations were arranged through partner organisations that provide services to children. These included settings such as after-school programs, programs for LGBTIQA+ youth, disability services, services for migrant youth, child and youth services and ACCOs. The decision to consult with a broad cross-section of children was deliberate. The SQE project aims to reach children in their diversity and ensure we give voice to those children who have fewer opportunities to be heard. This means targeting specified priority groups as well as reaching children through generalist settings.

As in previous years, safeguarding was of utmost importance. All consultations took place with the support of a trusted adult (such as a teacher or youth worker) who was available to the child both during the session and afterwards. The project team provided

choice as to how sessions took place, offering a variety of options for participation including through discussion, writing and/or drawing.

To break the ice, we asked children to tell us about a relationship they admire (real or fictional). We then asked them to create a vision board describing what a safe and positive relationship looks and feels like. From there we mapped the places where young people might go for information and support and listened to their views on how these places could be improved. The consultation methodology can be found in Appendix 2.

We also heard from participants through an anonymous survey which collected demographic information, additional responses to the consultation questions, and asked for their feedback on the consultation itself. Overwhelmingly the children appreciated 'being heard' and 'being offered the opportunity to participate'.

> **I felt heard and felt like what we were saying mattered.**

Many children said they enjoyed engaging with and learning from their peers. One child said the best part was 'getting to hear other ideas and perspectives and learn from them. And understand more of our world we live in'.

Creating a supportive environment was essential to enabling meaningful discussion. Some children stressed the importance of having a 'safe space to talk' and 'getting my thoughts out with no judgement'.

This report aims to centre the voices of the children we spoke with. We have deliberately chosen to present these voices consistently and in a unified way. Children's experiences and identities are complex, multifaceted and intersectional. Therefore, we have brought together the accounts of all the children we spoke to, including those from diverse backgrounds, First Peoples children, children with disability, LGBTIQA+ children, those around the country from metropolitan to remote, and children of different age groups. Throughout the report, we have also included 'spotlight' sections to highlight the intersectional experiences of children.

Demographics and further information about how we consulted can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

6.4 Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia

FDSV is a widespread issue in Australia, with significant impacts on children and young people. FDSV refers to violence occurring in family or intimate relationships, as well as sexual violence in any setting. It includes family and domestic violence, intimate partner violence, coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse, and sexual violence; each of which may overlap.[70]

This violence occurs across many environments, including homes, schools, workplaces, communities and online. It is rooted in gender inequality, rigid gender expectations and social norms that reinforce power imbalances and discrimination. Addressing these drivers by challenging gender inequality, dismantling harmful gender stereotypes, and confronting discrimination is essential to preventing this violence.[71]

The 2021 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS) showed that while young Australians are gradually improving their understanding of violence against women and gender inequality, young men consistently lag behind young women and non-binary peers in recognising violence against women as a gendered issue.[72] This highlights a critical need for targeted education.[73]

The *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* (ACMS) found that 62.2% of people had experienced at least one type of child maltreatment. Exposure to domestic violence was the most common (39.6%).[74]

Children and young people exposed to FDSV face lasting harm, increasing lifetime risks of serious physical illnesses – including cancer, cardiovascular, respiratory, genitourinary diseases – and mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance misuse. Trauma from FDSV can lead to maladaptive coping, emotional numbing, and feelings of isolation and burdensomeness, which contribute to self-harm and elevated suicide risk. Early onset health-risk behaviours often persist for decades and compound long-term harm.[75] Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children.[76]

Nationally, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 8 men have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member since the age of 15.[77]

The *Personal Safety Survey* showed that 69% of women and 48% of men who experienced violence from a previous partner said their children had seen or heard the abuse. Among women with a current violent partner, 49% said their children had witnessed it. [78]

Young people, especially women, are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. In 2023, police data revealed that women under the age of 18 accounted for the highest proportion (57%) of victims in FDSV-related sexual assault incidents.[79]

Peer-to-peer abuse is also increasing. The ACMS found that children are now more likely to be sexually abused by another adolescent than by an adult. While adult-perpetrated abuse remains more common overall, younger Australians aged 16–24 reported significantly higher rates of sexual harm from peers (18.2%) compared to adults (11.7%).[80]

This type of violence also happens online. The ACMS found that more than 1 in 5 young people aged 16–24 had experienced online sexual victimisation before turning 18. Girls were almost 3 times more likely than boys to report these experiences. Young people with diverse genders reported even higher rates.[81] Additionally, with over half of young Australian men regularly viewing online pornography that frequently depicts aggression and violence against women, research highlights its role in shaping harmful attitudes and reinforcing gender stereotypes related to sex and relationships.[82]

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experience significantly higher rates of family and domestic violence compared to non-Indigenous peers.[83] They are overrepresented in child protection systems and face greater risks of neglect and emotional abuse, driven by colonisation, systemic racism, and inequalities in health and social determinants.[84] For instance, Indigenous children are 10.8 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) and on Third Party Parental Responsibility Orders (TPPRO).[85]

Violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is particularly severe. They are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence,[86] but many face significant barriers to reporting abuse due to fear, shame, and discrimination, leading to underestimates of the true extent of violence.[87]

Certain groups of children and young people experience disproportionate levels of violence, including those with disability, those identifying as LGBTIQA+, and those from CARM backgrounds. These groups not only face increased exposure but also encounter heightened barriers to accessing support and safety due to systemic discrimination, social exclusion and accessibility challenges. For example, 61% of LGBTIQA+ respondents to the *Private Lives 3: The Health and Wellbeing of LGBTIQ People in Australia* survey reported experiencing intimate partner violence.[88] Additionally, 1 in 5 adults with disability experienced abuse before age 15, compared with just over 1 in 10 adults without disability,[89] and 1 in 3 refugee and migrant women living in Australia have reported experiencing FDSV.[90]

6.5 The FDSV policy landscape for children and young people

Children and young people are a critical focus for policymakers working to reduce the prevalence of gender-based violence in Australia. Government investment spans the continuum from primary prevention through to response and healing. At the prevention end, initiatives involving children and young people often address areas such as:

Education:

Consent and Respectful Relationships Education (CRRE and RRE) has been a key focus for government policy to prevent gender-based violence. The updated Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0) is designed to provide students from Foundation to Year 10 with more comprehensive and age-appropriate education on gender equity, consent, and positive, respectful relationships, tailored to the needs of their school communities. (C)RRE programs exist in some form across all states and territories and can begin in early childhood.

In addition to formal education in schools through curriculum, there are also a range of respectful relationship education initiatives. For example, R4Respect, which is a Queensland based peer-to-peer education program which seeks to prevent anti-social behaviour and violence, including violence in personal or intimate relationships.

Public awareness:

The Australian Government has funded several campaigns to support safe and positive relationships, including campaigns focussed on developing youth-centred content. For example, The Line, is a social marketing, behavioural change campaign that helps young people aged 14–20 to negotiate healthy, respectful and consensual relationships (run by Our Watch). Another example is Teach us Consent, a youth-led organisation building the capacity of young Australians to practice affirmative consent and respectful relationships. These campaigns, along with others like them, also serve an educational function, creating resources and sharing content to support children and young people with safe and positive relationships.

Community-based initiatives:

These are community-centred programs that connect with children and young people through sport to promote gender equality and respect. For example, Young Luv, an early intervention and prevention program which provides information about and reinforces the concept of healthy, positive relationships for First Peoples teenagers through workshops (run by Djirra in Victoria). Another example is the Preventing Violence Through Sport Grants Program, which has supported the design and delivery of primary prevention programs for local sporting clubs across Victoria with the aim of promoting a culture that prevents gender-based violence.

Online safety:

There has been significant investment with the aim of increasing online safety for children and young people. Some examples include the work of the eSafety Commissioner (Australia's national independent regulator and educator for online safety) and the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE). In 2024, the Australian Government also passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, which came into effect on 10 December 2025 and introduces a mandatory minimum age of 16 for accounts on certain social media platforms.

6.6 A child rights-based approach

Child rights are grounded firmly in the basic human needs for life, protection, growth and development.

The Australian Human Rights Commission advocates for a child rights-based approach, which translates the CRC into practical actions. This is a way of working that gives children the right to be heard and to have their voices considered. It also helps children claim other rights, including putting them as the first consideration in all policy design and implementation.

Australia is a signatory of the CRC. Under the CRC governments have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring children are able to realise their rights. This makes the governments the primary 'duty bearers'. For example, Article 19 of the CRC outlines governments' duty to protect children from all forms of violence, neglect, abuse and maltreatment – including by their parents or other guardians.

The SQE project aims to help children to realise their participation rights by asking them their views on matters that affect them. They are at the centre of this process and their views are privileged in this report. Participation is an active, ongoing process. The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* acknowledges this. In its key action to meet its objectives, it calls on stakeholders to 'elevate the voices of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right'.[91] This action includes working with children and young people to inform policies and services – demonstrating the importance of the SQE project to foregrounding children in the implementation of the Plan.

What does a child rights-based approach look like day-to-day?

It means making everyday choices and actions that uphold children's dignity, ensures their safety, listens to their voice and acknowledges their individuality. It could look like this:

- Teachers listen to students' opinions and do not use humiliation or violence.
- Health workers treat every child equally, regardless of their background or whether or not they can pay.
- Social workers involve children in decisions about their care or protection.
- Policymakers check whether new laws or budgets benefit all children, especially the most marginalised.
- Parents and communities use positive, non-violent discipline and create equal opportunities for all children.

A child rights-based approach is about seeing the potential of every interaction with children as a chance to help them realise their rights.

6.7 Glossary

Aromantic and **Aroace:**

Asexuality refers to people who experience little or no sexual attraction to others. Asexual people may still have romantic relationships, form emotional connections or desire companionship, but typically do not feel sexual attraction.[92] 'Asexual' is included in our survey. During consultations, some young people also referred to 'aromantic' and 'aroace' people. Aromantic describes someone who experiences little or no romantic attraction. Aromantic people may still value close friendships and other forms of intimacy, but do not generally seek romantic relationships. Someone who is both asexual and aromantic may call themselves aroace,[93] meaning they experience little or no romantic attraction and little or no sexual attraction. People who identify as aroace still form strong platonic or emotional bonds, but these would not be romantic or sexual.

Children and young people:

Throughout the report, we refer to participants variously as 'children', 'young people', and 'children and young people'. Under the CRC, a child means 'every human being below the age of eighteen years'. However, we have had feedback that some children, particularly in their teens, prefer to be called 'young people'. We also had feedback that, in some cultures, it is appropriate to refer to older children as 'young people'.

Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM):

We use the term 'CARM' to describe children who are from culturally and linguistically diverse and racially marginalised communities. During consultations, culture, race and racism emerged as central factors in the discrimination faced by children and young people who are not white or from Western cultures. The term 'CARM' highlights how race and culture intersect to create barriers, discrimination and inequality.

First Peoples and **First Nations**:

This report uses the term 'First Peoples' to refer to children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. We acknowledge the diversity of culture and experience within these groupings, and that First Peoples children are not a homogenous group. We also use the term 'First Nations' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when quoting external sources.

LGBTIQA+:

LGBTIQA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (or Questioning), Asexual and other sexual and gender identities. The '+' symbol acknowledges the inclusion of additional identities that are part of the broader spectrum of sexual orientations and gender experiences. In this report, we used the full acronym LGBTIQA+ when referring to organisations who provide service to or represent this cohort and when referring to the general LGBTIQA+ community. We describe the relevant participants as 'young people from the LGBTIQA+ community' for consistency but note that none of the children and young people identified as intersex in surveys or during discussions.

Neurodivergent:

Being neurodivergent is when the neurological ways information is processed in a person's brain is different from the majority population.[94]

7. Appendix

7.1 Appendix A: Demographics

Number of national consultations and surveys

The Children's Rights Team from the Australian Human Rights Commission held 53 consultations with 303 children across all Australian jurisdictions between June and September 2025. This included metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Children were recruited through 34 partner organisations. These included generalist settings such as schools and other education programs (including specialist and alternative schools), homelessness services, disability services and services for LGBTIQA+ young people. They also included services for CARM communities, First Peoples children and young people, FDSV services, youth detention, and other child and youth services, including those in remote areas.

Most consultations were conducted in small groups of up to 10 children. However, some children expressed a desire to share their views individually. For that reason, 16 consultations were conducted as individual interviews. All consultations and interviews took place in person, except for one individual interview, which was held online.

Following the consultations and interviews, children were asked to complete a short survey. Two hundred and ninety-six survey responses were received. Detailed demographic data is only known for the children that completed the survey.

Locations of consultations

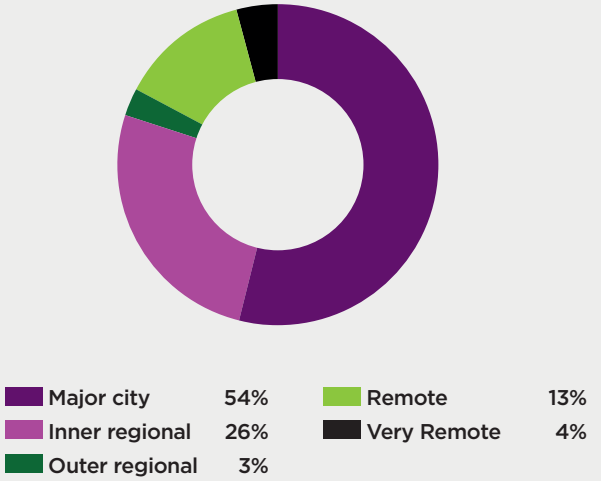
13 consultations were held in New South Wales (Bankstown, Gosford, Goulburn, Mt Druitt, Sylvania, Sydney, Parramatta, Malabar, St Peters); 9 in the Northern Territory (Alice Springs and surrounding areas); 4 in Queensland (Logan, Toowoomba); 3 in South Australia (Adelaide, Salisbury); 6 in Tasmania (Hobart, Glenorchy, Howrah, Huonville); 4 in Victoria (Morwell, Narre Warren, Point Cook); 9 in Western Australia (Leederville, Rockingham, Bunbury, Midland, Perth); 4 in the Australian Capital Territory (Canberra); and one individual interview was conducted online.

The high number of consultations in New South Wales is attributed to a large-scale consultation event where four consultations were conducted simultaneously. The number of consultations in the Northern Territory was also higher than in previous years, due to opportunities to partner with remote and very remote organisations. This expanded the reach to children in priority groups.

Figure 3: Consultation participation by jurisdiction

The figure below shows the usual residence of surveyed children by remoteness classification.[95] This question was answered by 269 children and young people. 17% of children identified as living in remote or very remote areas.

Figure 4: Children and young people by remote classification



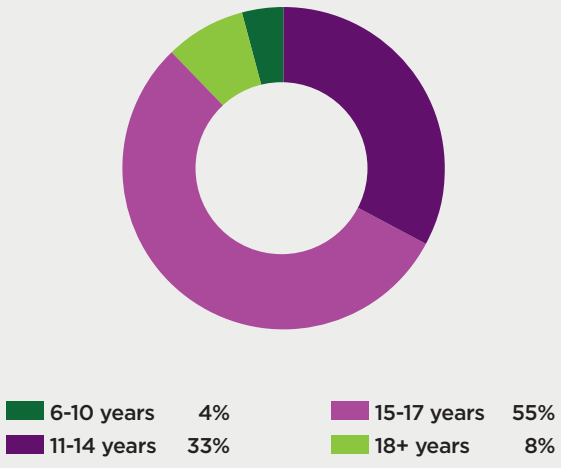
Who participated in consultations

(a) Age

The target age range for consultations was 10–17 years. However, some children who attended on the day of consultations were under 10 years or over 17 years. Age was recorded for 291 children.

Eleven survey respondents were aged 6–10 years, 89 were aged 11–14 years, 158 were aged 15–17 years and 24 were aged 18 years and above.

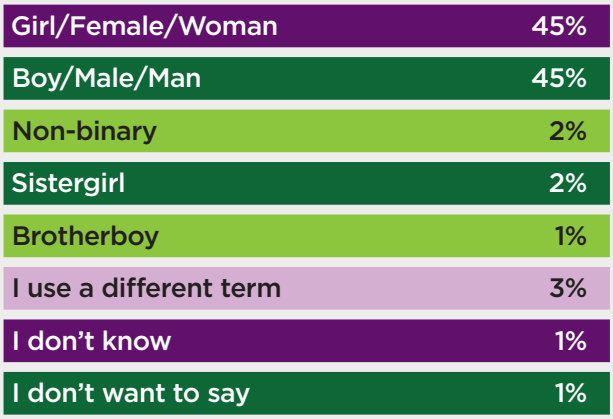
Figure 5: Age breakdown of participants



(b) Gender and sexuality

Gender was recorded for 291 children. When asked to describe their gender, 132 children identified as a boy, male or man; 131 identified as a girl, female or woman; 6 identified as sistergirl; 5 as non-binary; 4 did not want to say; 3 responded that they did not know; 2 identified as brotherboy and 8 had multiple responses or said they use another term (including bigender, genderqueer, apagender, masc and gender fluid).

Figure 6: Gender of participants



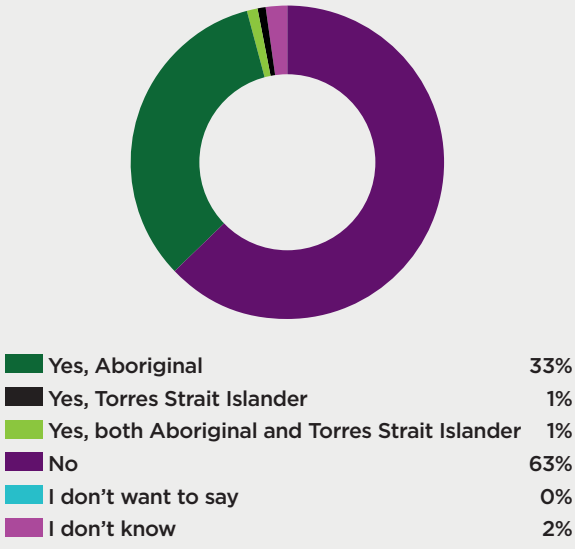
Children were also asked if they are transgender or gender diverse. Out of the 277 children who responded to this question 87% responded no; 9% responded yes; 3% responded that they did not know and 1% did not want to say.

Those that completed the survey for young people aged 14 years and above were also asked to describe their sexuality, and this was recorded for 222 children and young people. More than two-thirds of young people identified as straight. A further 9% identified as bisexual; 5% identified as queer; 5% responded that they did not know; 4% did not want to say; 3% identified as lesbian; 3% identified as asexual; 3% identified as gay and 4% said they use another term (including pansexual, omnisexual, abrosexual, demisexual and demiromantic).

(c) First Peoples children and young people

Out of the 289 children who responded to this question, 35% identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both. Specifically, 95 identified as Aboriginal, 3 identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and 2 identified as Torres Strait Islander. A further 6 did not know and one did not want to say.

Figure 7: Participants by First Peoples status

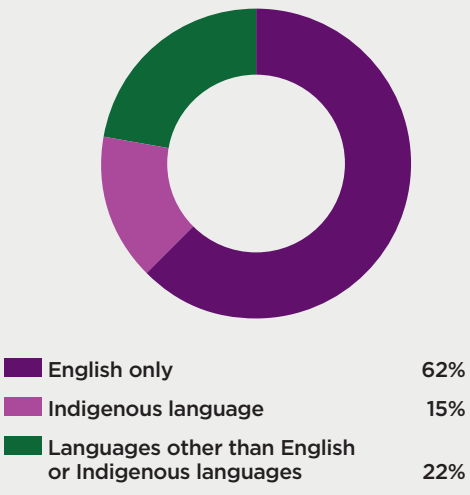


(d) Cultural background

Of the 296 children that completed the survey, 193 answered the question about cultural background. Of these respondents, 111 participants identified their family background as belonging to culturally and linguistically diverse and/or racially marginalised communities. This count does not include First Peoples children and young people, who were reported separately.

Information about languages other than English spoken at home was recorded for 285 children. Most participants spoke English only. 15% spoke an Indigenous language and 22% spoke a language other than English or an Indigenous language.

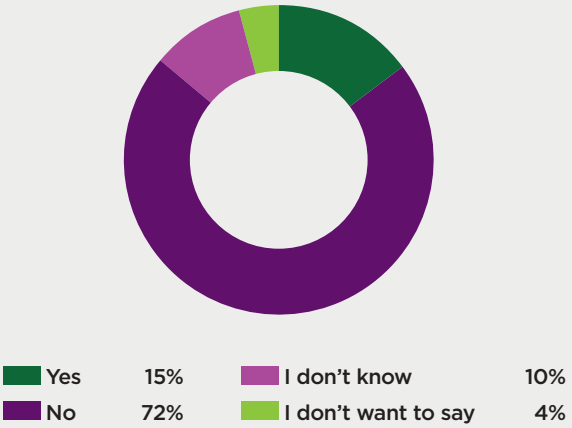
Figure 8: Languages spoken at home by participants



(e) Children and young people with disability and neurodivergence

Forty-three children reported living with disability in the survey. While some disabilities reported were consistent with previous years, this year we engaged a more diverse group of young people living with disability. Reported disabilities included Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, Smith-Magenis syndrome, epilepsy, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), global developmental delay, chronic pain, anorexia nervosa, and functional neurological disorder. 10% of respondents indicated that they did not know if they live with disability, and 4% did not want to say.

Figure 9: Percentage of participants with disability



Seventy-three children identified as neurodiverse. The specified types of neurodiversity included dyslexia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), and schizophrenia. 15% of respondents indicated that they did not know if they are neurodiverse, and 3% did not want to say.

Several children listed conditions such as depression, anxiety, ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in both categories. As this report is child-led, we have reflected their self-identification and categorisation as self-reported.

When combined, approximately 30% of all respondents reported either living with a disability, being neurodiverse or both. This reflects a broader reach this year compared to previous years.

7.2 Appendix B: Methodology

A human rights-based approach guided all aspects of this project. The most common description of a human rights-based approach is the PANEL framework:

Participation: everyone has the right to participate in decisions which affect their lives. Participation must be active, free, meaningful and give attention to issues of accessibility, including access to information in a form and a language that can be understood.

Accountability: accountability requires effective monitoring of compliance with human rights standards and achievement of human rights goals, as well as effective remedies for human rights breaches. For accountability to be effective there must be appropriate laws, policies, institutions, administrative procedures and mechanisms of redress in order to secure human rights. This also requires the development and use of appropriate human rights indicators.

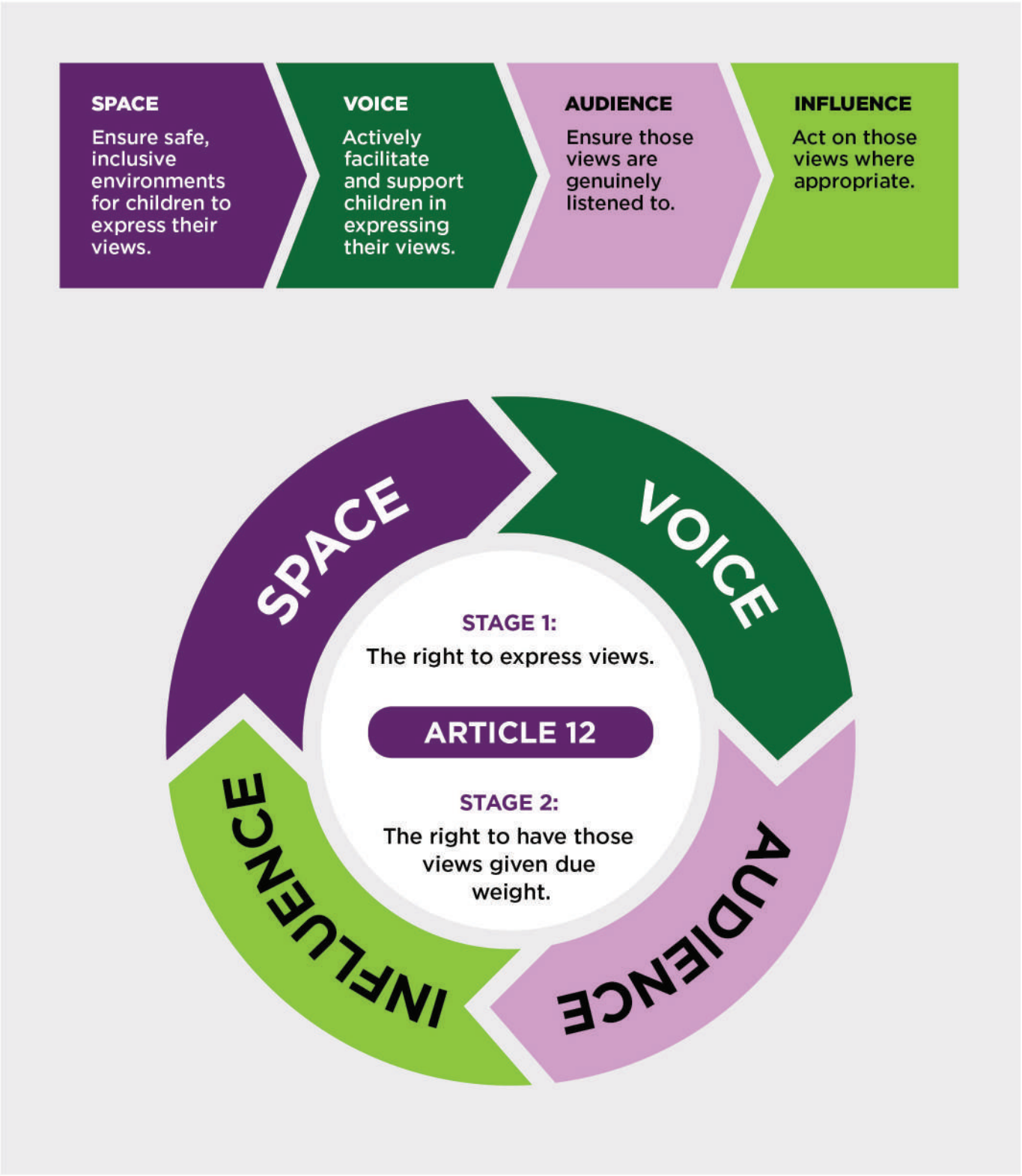
Non-discrimination and equality: a human rights-based approach means that all forms of discrimination in the realisation of rights must be prohibited, prevented and eliminated. It also means that priority should be given to people in the most marginalised or vulnerable situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights.

Empowerment: everyone is entitled to claim and exercise their rights and freedoms. Individuals and communities need to be able to understand their rights, and to participate fully in the development of policy and practices which affect their lives.

Legality: a human rights-based approach requires that the law recognises human rights and freedoms as legally enforceable entitlements, and the law itself is consistent with human rights principles.[96]

Model for children's and young people's participation

Project methodology is guided by the Lundy Model of child participation,[97] which is used in Australia and internationally to engage with children and young people. It includes 4 stages to facilitate meaningful involvement of children.



Professor Lundy suggests that the following questions are asked at each stage of consultations with children and young people:

1. SPACE

- **Have children's views been sought actively?**
- **Is there a 'safe space' in which children can express themselves freely?**
- **Have steps been taken to ensure that all children affected by the decision can take part?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We actively sought children and young people's views by letting them know they were the experts, we were there to learn from them, and that there were no right or wrong answers.
- We worked with partner organisations to facilitate accessible, friendly and safe environments for children and young people to express their views freely. When children advised they would feel safer speaking to us individually, we moved from a small group session to individual interviews where possible.
- We engaged with children and young people in the target cohort and priority groups identified under the five Key National Strategies.

2. VOICE

- **Do children have the information they need in an appropriate format to enable them to form a view?**
- **Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express their opinion**?

How we addressed these questions:

- We provided children, young people and their parents/carers, and partner organisations with written information about the project prior to each consultation; we discussed the project and the issues to be addressed at the start of each consultation and told children and young people that their participation was voluntary.
- Children and young people were offered a variety of ways to express their views, including individual and group activities, and an anonymous survey. They were able to convey their views in writing, drawing or discussion, and, in some sessions, expressed their views through observed behaviours and use of communication tools such as AACs. discussion or individual interviews.

3. AUDIENCE

- **Who is the 'audience' for children's perspectives?**
- **Is there a process for communicating children's views?**
- **Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We, the NCC and her team, are the initial audience in the room, hearing the children's views directly. The Government Departments, as the policy makers responsible for the five Key National Strategies, are the primary audience for children and young people's perspectives. These are DSS, AGD and NIAA.
- Children and young people's views were communicated to the Departments in the form of this report and a presentation to the project Steering Committee. A child-friendly version will also be made to communicate the report in a more accessible format.
- The focus of Year 3 consultations was on the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. DSS has primary responsibility for the implementation of this plan and intends to use this report as an evidence base to inform the development and design of prevention and early intervention policies and programs for children and young people.

4. INFLUENCE

- **Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?**
- **What process is in place to ensure that children's views inform decisions that affect children?**
- **Have children been informed of the ways in which their opinion may impact decisions?**
- **Have the children been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We told children that we would present their views to those who could influence the implementation of the Key National Strategies. This was achieved by providing this report to the Australian Government through DSS.
- We invited representatives from DSS to observe a consultation so that children had the opportunity to present their views and ideas directly to the agency that will be making decisions that affect them.
- We provide feedback to children and young people on what we have heard from them. In Year 1 and Year 2, we developed a brief animated film, which we sent to participants and made available for public consumption.
- We seek updates from the Government Departments responsible for Key National Strategies on the impact children's views have had on policy development.

Engaging children in the consultations

Each Key National Strategy identifies priority groups, and some have priority groups in common. Further, the priority groups are not mutually exclusive, with organisations often providing services to children across the priority groups. Given this, we aimed to talk to a diverse range of children, adopting a proportional approach to age, gender and disadvantage. This included children with disability, First Peoples children, and LGBTIQA+ young people.

Contact with children in the target groups occurred through partner organisations, who were already providing services to them. Partner organisations were sent written information about the purpose of the consultations and guidelines for identifying suitable children to take part.[98] This included a series of questions asking partner organisations to consider when balancing children and young people's right to participate with their right to protection.

How the consultations were safe for children

The critical ethical consideration in working with children is how to balance the welfare rights of children to be protected from any possible exploitation, trauma and harm with their right to be consulted and heard about matters that affect them.[99]

The Commission's *Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy* guides all project activities involving children, young people, and families. It is based on the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*, developed by the inaugural National Children's Commissioner, and endorsed by all states and territories.

This Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy covers core processes and procedures that staff must comply with, including seeking consent, involving families and communities, respecting equity and diversity, ensuring staff are suitable and supported, child-focused complaints systems, disclosure and reporting, staff training and ensuring safe physical and online environments. All staff working on this project had NSW Working with Children Checks.

Given that many of the children participating in consultations were those with lived experience of vulnerability and disadvantage, consultations occurred in the presence of a trusted adult (for example, youth worker, counsellor, case worker, teacher). In some cases, where appropriate, a trusted family member was also present. This involved the person(s) being present during the consultation or the person(s) co-facilitating the consultation. Consulting in this way also allowed for support, if necessary, to be available after the consultation.

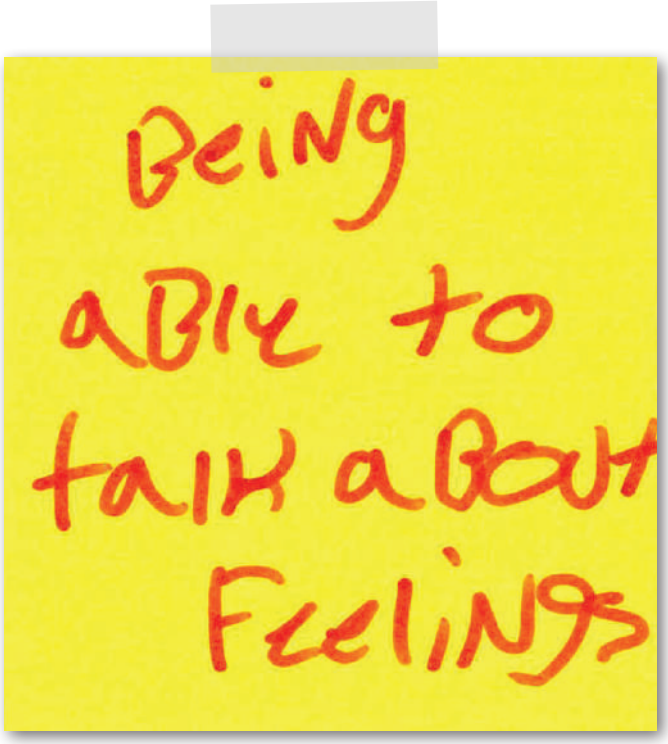
Empowering children in the consultation context is key to minimising their vulnerability and promoting their safe participation. We sought to achieve this by giving children choice in how they participated, providing multiple opportunities for them to express any concerns, and enabling them to cease their participation if they chose.[100] A variety of additional measures were incorporated to minimise the risk or alleviate the effects of participant distress. This included developing distress and disclosure protocols,[101] and working with partner organisations to create safe spaces in terms of room layout and interpersonal dynamics. All children were given a list of support services at the conclusion of the consultation as well as contact details for the project Director, should they have any questions or concerns arising from their participation.

A Child Safety and Wellbeing Risk Assessment was also conducted, consistent with the Commission's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy and *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*.

Culturally safe and trauma-informed principles and practices are particularly important when consulting with First Peoples children. Research undertaken by Doel-Mackaway with Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory found that Aboriginal children wanted their parents and Elders in their community to be approached before seeking to engage directly with them.[102]

These children and young people spoke about protocols to follow where governments wish to talk with Aboriginal children. These included written contact with parents, to an Elder in the community or to the school, indicating they want to talk with Aboriginal children and young people.[103] This project sought to follow these protocols in the way it worked through partner organisations already working with and supporting children. We also made prior contact with other community stakeholders where advised.

Additional considerations to address cultural safety included testing and piloting consultation materials with First Peoples children, inviting First Peoples partner organisations to co-facilitate consultations, and cultural training and supervision for staff engaged in the project.



Seeking appropriate permission and consent

Organisations were given information about the project, which also involved discussion of their capacity to provide support, if needed, to children during and after the consultation. Discussions were held seeking their views on the best way to engage with the children they work with, sharing advice based on our experiences with consultations to date.

Three versions of information sheets and consent forms were developed: a young person version, an easy read version, and one for parents, carers or guardians. In all cases the young person participating gave either written, verbal or behavioural consent. In some cases, parents/carers/guardians gave written consent for young people to participate, for example, for children aged younger than 15 years or children with significant disability.

We obtained verbal consent from children at the beginning of each of the consultations. We reiterated that their participation was voluntary, that how much they participated was entirely up to them and that they could withdraw their participation at any time without consequence.

Consultations

As in previous years, consultations were conducted with children through small group activity-based discussions and individual interviews. We sought to hear from children and young people aged 10–17 years from across all states and territories of Australia. This year we also conducted more consultations with children with disability, many of whom use a communication device. Consultations were supplemented by a survey open to all children who participated in the consultation process.

The use of multiple methods, as opposed to discussion only, is a strength of participatory approaches as it considers the different communication preferences and needs of children.[104] This also aligns with the guiding principles in Australia's Disability Strategy, respecting difference and the evolving capacity of the child, and allowing for full and effective participation

in consultations.[105] Activity-based methods were also employed in light of a review of adolescents' experiences of participating in sensitive research which showed that young people would like their participation to be fun, creative and enjoyable.[106] We provided options for those children whose stated preference was for privacy and confidentiality. This included online and individual interviews to allow for higher levels of privacy than group settings afford, in line with research guidelines that highlight the importance of privacy and confidentiality considerations when topics are potentially stigmatising.[107]

The approach to the consultations was tested with 2 groups of young people as part of the development process: one with the national Prevention of Gender Based Violence Youth Advisory Group, and the other with Frontyard Youth Action Group. These groups included individuals with a diverse range of backgrounds and lived experiences. This process was instrumental in producing accessible and engaging materials that are youth-informed.

The resulting questions and activities were piloted with 2 additional groups of children, including a First Peoples group and a group of children from LGBTIQA+ families. These pilots were a full-dress rehearsal of the consultation design prior to roll-out of the consultations.

(a) Content of the consultations

Consultations revolved around 2 group-based activities designed to answer broad questions about what is needed to prevent gender-based violence and how the government can better support children to develop and maintain safe and positive relationships. These focused on:

- how children understand and define positive and safe relationships, including what language they use to describe these
- how and where children get information and support around safety in relationships
- what further information and supports children need to establish and maintain positive and safe relationships
- how information/support should be made available.

The first activity was a group brainstorming exercise. Children were presented with blank brown paper and asked to write or draw ideas about what safe and positive relationships look and feel like. The concept of safe was framed as being free from both physical and emotional harm, including acts of violence. Children were challenged to cover this group vision board with their ideas about the key elements of safe and positive relationships. Prompt questions explored ideas about how hard or easy it was to define relationships, whether it was different for different relationships and what factors contributed to this.

The second activity involved asking children to map out where they go for information and support with relationships. Prompt questions scaffolded the activity and subsequent discussion, including:

- What might lead young people to look for information about a relationship?
- How can these places and spaces help children to know the signs of a safe and positive relationship and reach out for support?
- How reliable or trustworthy are these places?
- Are these different for different young people? For example, what role does gender/culture/age play?

Group discussion across activities focused on what is needed for all children to have safe and positive relationships. This included ideas about how different experiences influence how children recognise safe and positive relationships and what might lead them to look for information and support. Questioning led the discussion onto the different domains of support and information and how they could be improved.

We concluded with a big open-ended question about 'one thing the government could do to end gender-based violence'.

Our approach to consultations this year was informed by 2 advisory groups (see information below about our Expert Reference Group and our Youth Reference Group). Feedback from these groups contributed to the development of the consultation activities, with the suggestion of a vision board for the first activity coming from the YRG discussions. The second group activity evolved from an approach featuring a complex ecosystem to a streamlined mapping exercise. This was more accessible for young people, particularly those who were neurodivergent. In practice, consultation discussions often moved organically between the two activities, following the lead of the children and young people in the room.

Children were given different options to participate across activities, from creating their own individual vision boards on separate sheets of coloured paper through to collaboratively creating a group vision board. Children could express their ideas verbally, through drawings, in written form and/or by indicating options on their ACC.

Some children indicated they would prefer to have individual interviews rather than participate in a group discussion. Activities were adapted to facilitate this where possible. Individual discussions followed the same content as the group discussions.

While we conducted most consultations in small group or individual settings, we held one larger-scale event. This involved hosting a group of over 20 children (known to one another) across 4 team-facilitated consultation tables. The consultation plan informed the content of this session, however we modified the process slightly to accommodate a larger group. For example, children completed written activities at the separate consultation tables, which we then consolidated into one giant vision board through a live Mentimeter. At the end of the session, one child from each table was invited to feed back on the discussion from their table to the larger group.

(b) Survey

Surveys were distributed to children who participated in the consultation and were available online and in paper form. They were anonymous.

Two surveys were developed to appropriately collect information from children aged 10–12 years and children aged 13–17 years. Demographic information was obtained through the survey, as well as questions about their experience of the consultation.

In addition to the demographic and evaluative questions, the survey also sought to consolidate information provided during the consultations. We asked the participants to select the top 3 places they would go for **information** about relationships; and the top 3 places they would go for **help** with relationships. There was also space in the survey for children to share any additional information that they were not comfortable sharing, or did not have the opportunity to share, during the consultation.

(c) Acknowledgement of participation

All children who attended consultations received a certificate of appreciation for their participation and a gift voucher in recognition of their contribution.

(d) Providing feedback to children

Following each group consultation, children received a written summary of what they had shared with us during the session. This aimed to show children that they had been heard and how their views would be presented to policymakers, alongside the views of their peers. We invited feedback from children about the accuracy of our summaries but rarely received any.

(e) Innovations in 2025

In this third year of the project, some continuous improvements evolved based on children's feedback. These included adjusting the length of consultations, and working more closely with partner organisations to ensure the groups who came together already knew each other so discussions were more comfortable.

Several other innovations were embedded in the methodology to further expand the evidence base about the variety of practices in consulting with children.

Topic-relevant icebreaker activity: Early feedback suggested that it would be useful to provide young people with examples of relationships to set the context for consultation discussions. To open up avenues of discussion, we began the activities with an icebreaker relevant to the theme of relationships. All participants, starting with the project team, were invited to introduce themselves and give an example of a relationship they admired and, importantly, why. These could include close relationships with family members, friends or romantic relationships as well as examples from movies, television and popular culture. This approach provided familiar examples for us to draw on if children needed prompts to engage with in the subsequent activities.

Youth Reference Group: Members from the NAPCAN Youth Advisory Council, convened by the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (known as NAPCAN), were engaged as a Youth Reference Group (YRG) to work with the team across the year. NAPCAN's Youth Advisory Council, Youth Speak Out, consists of approximately 18 young people (aged 13–25 years) with diverse backgrounds and lived experience, with specific interest in respectful relationship education and consent. The team had previously worked with the NAPCAN Youth Advisory Council at the concept testing phase of the 2023 Report.[108] Building this ongoing relationship with the group meant that they were already familiar with our work and our approach to working with young people, so they felt comfortable more readily.

We met with the YRG 3 times across the planning and concept development, analysis and recommendation, and report drafting phases of the 2025 Report. At the first meeting, we provided an introduction to the 2025 project focus and workshopped ideas about how we should design the consultations and refine the questions and activities. In the second meeting, we discussed the themes emerging from consultation data and how to interpret these and shape them into the report. This included seeking their input about the use of language, visually representing ideas in the report, and any identifiable gaps in the information. At the final meeting, we shared an overview of the draft 2025 report and sought their feedback on how to shape the recommendations to best represent the views of children.

The feedback from the YRG directly informed the development of the approach to consultations that we took into the field. This included advice about language, format of the activities, and the use of pop culture references in the ice breaker. Following each session with the YRG we prepared a feedback summary for the group to advise them of how their views had influenced our approach.

We also developed a survey for the YRG to provide feedback on their experience collaborating with our team. Their insights highlighted opportunities to make activities clearer and more engaging, ensure questions are focused, and strengthen communication about project goals and the impact of their contributions.

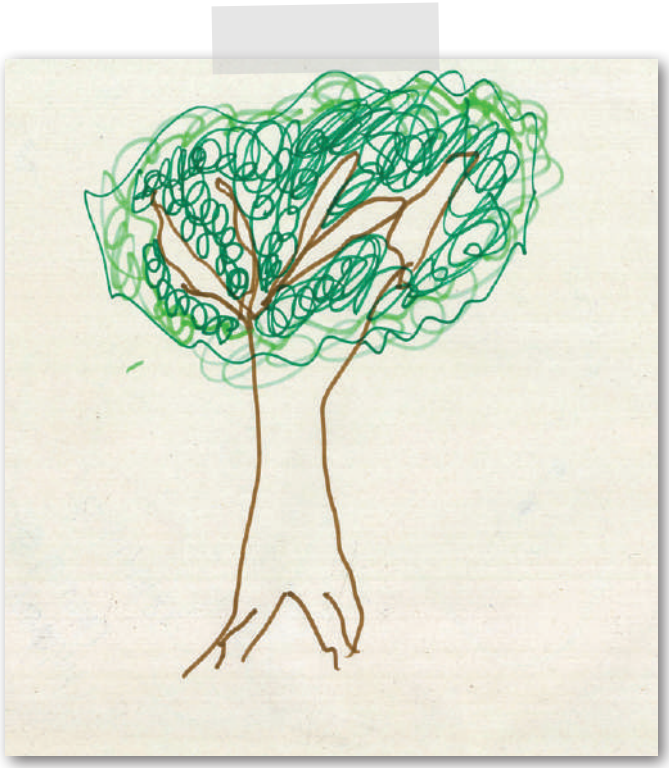
Expert Reference Group: As in 2023, we convened an Expert Reference Group (ERG) to provide advice and guidance on our consultation planning and materials prior to undertaking consultations. The ERG consisted of 5 individuals with expertise in safe and ethical engagement with children across a diverse range of lived experience. This included expertise in working with First Peoples children, children from CARM backgrounds, children with disability and children who have experienced FDSV. The ERG members were Karen Block, Associate Professor, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne; Lauren French, Head of Education, Body Safety Australia; Remi Mangion, FDSV Counsellor and Care Coordinator, Twenty10; Tim Moore,

Associate Professor and Deputy Director, Australian Catholic University Institute of Child Protection Studies; and Sally Robinson, Professor of Disability and Community Inclusion, Flinders University.

The ERG was another mechanism for ensuring our processes and approaches were safe and ethical for children. Following workshopping with the YRG, we further strengthened our safeguarding and consent processes and improved activities to ensure they were more accessible and engaging for a diverse range of children based on ERG feedback. This included clearly framing discussions around safe and positive relationships, scaffolding prompts to help children understand what safe relationships both look and feel like and refining questions to more clearly seek perspectives on the impact of gender. It also included reassuring children that they would not be asked to share personal or traumatic experiences, conducting regular check-ins and normalising a child's ability to leave the session at any time.

Adapting methodology to alternative ways of having a say: Often people with disability are excluded from opportunities to have input into the development of policies and programs that affect them.[109] This year, we aimed to extend the opportunity for young people with disability to participate in consultations, particularly those who might otherwise be excluded, such as children who use alternative methods of communication.

Through one partner organisation, we collaborated with speech pathologists to design consultations for children and young people with higher support needs. This included developing social scripts that partner organisation staff shared with the children ahead of the consultation visit, streamlining the sessions so they were a more appropriate duration, and offering repeat opportunities for children to participate on the day. We worked together to adapt consultation questions so children could respond using chat boards created for the consultations, and/or their AAC devices. We also incorporated behavioural cues into our approach, for example, progressing with the consultation interview when children smiled and made eye contact, and pausing when children pushed away the chat boards.



Culturally safe practice: Acknowledging that cultural competency and cultural safety is a learning journey informed by continuous development of knowledge and ongoing reflection on practice,[110] we sought guidance from organisations led by First Peoples with expertise working with children to inform our practice in culturally sensitive consultations.

Our plan was to undertake cultural training before embarking on consultations this year, complemented by cultural supervision across the consultation season. Training centred around integrating team cultural competencies into practice across contextualised settings, with ongoing supervision sessions focused on providing debriefs and feedback on our consultation experiences. The final session was designed to be a reflection on our experience and cultural development across the year.

Due to various circumstances, this cultural training and supervision was delayed and occurred at the end of the consultation season. This meant there was limited opportunity for learnings to shape our practice in consultations and demonstrates the need for flexibility to be built into project timelines and structures to allow for cultural learning, reflection and responsiveness. Creating the right settings for this work to be undertaken is intrinsically relational, working

best where trust and shared understanding is built together over time.

We did also have the support of several ACCOs, who worked with us as partner organisations in place. They supported us to approach consultations in culturally safe ways, including meeting with local cultural authorities ahead of consultations, and engaging sensitively with young people where they are.

Analysis of the content of the consultations and surveys

The content from the vision board and mapping activities, the notes taken in the consultations, the audio tapes of the consultations (where consent to record was provided), and survey responses were analysed to identify themes in the data. All information was then coded under these themes and when possible, by specific priority groups. As noted above, these emerging themes were presented to the YRG for further discussion and workshopping.

Reflections on practice

The purpose of these consultations was to hear from children about the issues that are important to them, to inform the 5 Key National Strategies. It was not designed to be representative of the population of Australian children. Given the qualitative nature of the consultation, generalisation to a wider population is not possible. However, these consultations provide important insights and an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the priority groups.

Challenges and limitations

Responsive delivery: We designed consultation materials for 10–17-year-olds. To enable discussion to take place in developmentally appropriate ways, we planned to hold consultations with children of similar ages and developmental stages, where possible. Backed by advice from our ERG, we made the decision to limit the lower age to safeguard children who may be unduly distressed by our consultations.

Holding consultations with children with a wide range of ages/developmental stages can be challenging, as there are varying levels

of understanding within the group. It can also be challenging in the rare circumstance that children significantly younger or older than the identified age range turn up on the day to take part. We always chose to listen to children who wanted to speak to us, and sometimes this means adapting our approach appropriately for the audience on the spot.

We also encountered situations where it was appropriate to offer separate gender-specific sessions, with an appropriate team member facilitating. This was particularly taken up in consultations with First Peoples children and sometimes required adapting on the day. The planning for such sessions was guided by local cultural advice received, including the importance of respecting protocols around Men's Business and Women's Business.

Children were invited to share what they liked most about the session, what they liked least, and how it could be improved in the survey. Many children gave positive feedback and shared that open discussion and feeling heard were the best parts of their experience. They valued having a voice in a safe, non-judgemental space where they could choose what they were comfortable sharing. Responses included appreciation for

drawing, talking and having fun, learning new things through discussion, and being able to communicate in multiple ways. Some children said they enjoyed talking about topics they do not usually discuss, such as violence and where to seek help. Others highlighted the importance of seeing peers with similar views, feeling that their opinions were genuinely valued, and knowing that efforts were being made to create change.

Others shared feeling 'anxious' or 'overstimulated' or that they struggled to be heard in loud groups. Some indicated that a one-on-one meeting would have been preferable, or that it was hard to contribute due to things like time pressure, too many people, fear of public speaking, or needing more accessible ways to communicate, like writing instead of talking. For one person, being in a gender-specific group might have made participation easier. This highlights the importance of offering multiple, flexible ways for people to engage and share their views.

Engagement: The sensitive nature of the topic this year was an important consideration in the recruitment process. Engaging children and young people in conversations about safe relationships and valuing their lived experiences is critical. It also requires careful consideration about how to ensure appropriate safeguarding for the children who participate.

Children were recruited for consultations through partner organisations that were already providing services to them. Partner organisations this year included services who work with children with diverse experiences including homelessness, disability, child protection and family services. This meant that children participating had a trusted adult supporting them pre, during and post consultations.

This approach allowed us to reach a diverse range of children and young people, however, it does mean that certain groups of children were excluded. Children and young people who are not already engaged with services, and children who partner organisations deemed to be at too vulnerable a point in their journey were not invited to participate. These decisions were made with their best interests as a priority but raise the question of how we balance a child's right to protection with their right to participation.

Reach: We found it challenging to reach some demographics of children and young people. While over 17% of children and young people who participated were from remote or very remote areas, most consultations took place in metropolitan and regional areas this year. This year's consultations operated within more compressed timeframes, and we were mindful to allow adequate time when visiting remote locations. As much as possible we prioritised relationship building. For example, in planning our consultations in one remote location we took several months preparing and liaising with partner organisations to ensure cultural safety and trust. In one instance this involved meeting with cultural governance groups and Elders to talk through the consultations and seek their consent to conduct a session. Travel to remote areas also required contingency planning in preparing for logistical difficulties. Investing in relationships and planning meant that when we were in remote communities, we were able to meaningfully meet with high numbers of children. Consultations were experienced positively with partner organisations providing positive feedback about the experience.

A significant number of First Peoples children took part in consultations. We partnered with more ACCOs/community-led organisations in 2025, with a small number of organisations hosting us for a direct consultation with children. These arrangements worked best when time was invested in the relationship, and they came from a warm referral. Several ACCOs told us that they would have liked to support the project but were unable to take part due to capacity and resourcing constraints.

Building on understanding and relationships with partner organisations with specialist knowledge and skillsets, we were also able to reach a greater range of children with disability, including those who use alternative methods of communication.

A high number of boys and young men participated this year. The team received feedback from some partner organisations suggesting that young men lack

opportunities to discuss safe and positive relationships, and that this was a critical gap. Some partners actively advocated for the inclusion of the young males they work with, encouraging their participation in sessions to ensure their voices were represented.

Opportunities

Cultural collaboration: Allowing significant time to build relationships with partner organisations was important. This was especially the case when partnering with ACCOs or CARM organisations. Understanding the context, experiences and needs of the children and community was critical in ensuring that consultations were meaningful. Allowing greater preparation time and workshopping approaches together improved the model for the local context, ensuring that consultation materials, questions and design were culturally appropriate for the audience. In some cases, partner organisations provided language support for the consultations. This facilitated the participation of children and young people who spoke languages other than English.

Collaboration with disability organisations: Planning and preparing for consultations with children with disability in collaboration with disability service providers allowed us to reach a broader range of children with disability (see above). To do this effectively takes time in developing appropriate resources, preparing children to be ready for a consultation, and responding sensitively on the day. Future consultations should incorporate time and space for the specific skillset required to conduct meaningful consultation with children with disability.

What children thought about the consultations

As above, participants shared their thoughts about how we conducted the consultations in an anonymous written survey. Overwhelmingly children said the best part of the session was getting to 'express my views and opinions and hear the opinions of others. We seemed to all have a lot in common, and everyone was respectful'.

When asked what the worst part of the session was and how it could be improved, most children reported that 'nothing' was negative, commenting that it 'went well', was 'pretty fun' and 'enjoyable'. For children who did suggest improvement, the group dynamic or format of the session were common issues raised. Some indicated that a one-on-one meeting would have been preferable to a group, or the use of a 'talking stick' would have helped create space for them to speak in a group. Some said they wanted more time to share the rest of their ideas. Other children gave feedback that the 'sensitive topic' was 'heavy' or 'confronting at times but necessary'.

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Harmony
Mother's
Friendship
Bravery
Family
Father's
LOVE
KIND
Culture
MOB
Kinship
Connections

“Being reached out to by the Human Rights Commission through my Story about my life, it was a moment that felt deeply meaningful to me. It was more than recognition – it felt like being given a voice through something that had always lived quietly inside me.

My artwork became a way to share my journey, carrying pieces of my homeland in Hidden Valley in Alice Springs and the kinship and support I found in Perth. Between those places, I have carried both memory and belonging with me, shaped by the love of family, friends, and community who stood beside me.

Their support gave me the strength to tell my story through art, and through that story, I was able to show that identity, connection, and human rights are not just ideas, but something deeply lived. In that moment, my artwork was not only seen – it was understood”.

– Sharelitha (Kida), artist

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