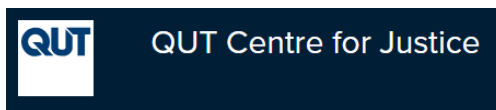


Changing the Conversation: Building Survivor Aware Sexual Health and Relationship Education

A report for the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse

August 2025



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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, and learn, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, culture, and community, and honour their resilience, knowledge, and leadership. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within whom culture lives and grows.

We also recognise the profound harm caused by abuse to individuals, families, and communities, and honour the courage and resilience of children and adults who have endured, and continue to endure, such experiences. We remember those whose lives were lost, and extend our respect to their loved ones and friends.

PROJECT TEAM

This project was conducted by Associate Professor Tim Moore (ICPS), Associate Professor Jodi Death (QUT), Dr Mary Ann Powell (ICPS), Dr Kelsey Adams (QUT) in partnership with staff from the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN). The project was assisted by Dr Sebastian Trew, Gina Steer, Dr Fatima Ghana, Jessica Dickson, Jacqui Stewart and Maria Battaglia (ICPS) and Marina Dickson (Marina Dickson Practice Connections).

Co-Designers

Central to our work was the engagement of young people with lived experience who helped shaped the project, provided their insights as research participants and engaged in co-design workshops. Our co-design team included: Alex, Amelia, Anna, Erin, Jess, Kailee, Meg, Priya, Rachael, Raffy and Sankara as well as adult allies, Carol, Gabrielle and Libby.

DISCLAIMER

The views and findings expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings and insights from the *Building Trauma-Informed (and Survivor Aware) Sexual Health and Relationship Education (BTISHRE)* project, undertaken in partnership with young survivors of maltreatment, practitioners, and sector stakeholders. The project set out to understand what young people with lived experience of trauma need from sexual health and relationship education (SHRE), and how such education can be delivered in ways that are safe, meaningful, and empowering.

Through literature reviews, interviews, co-design activities, and member checking workshops, we explored both the content and delivery approaches that best support survivors' learning, wellbeing, and agency. Central to the project was a commitment to survivor participation—not only as informants, but as partners in shaping the principles and practices of SHRE.

The resulting survivor-aware model draws on evidence, youth perspectives, and trauma-responsive principles. It aims to inform future research, policy, and practice, ensuring that SHRE both prevents sexual harm and actively supports recovery, resilience, and healthy relationships for all young people.

Background

International research shows that child maltreatment can have profound and long-lasting impacts on sexual health and relationships, including greater vulnerability to sexual violence, increased engagement in risky sexual behaviours, and difficulties in forming respectful, trusting partnerships (Cruz et al., 2021; Pulverman et al., 2018). Survivors can face challenges with intimacy, trust, and self-worth that shape their relationship expectations and sexual decision-making well into adulthood.

Despite these impacts, there are few programs designed specifically to meet the sexual health and relationship needs of young survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) or other forms of maltreatment. Most existing SHRE programs are developed for general audiences and rarely address the realities of trauma, its effects on learning and engagement, or the supports survivors may require (Panisch et al., 2020; Denning et al., 2022).

Recent Australian research has reinforced these concerns. Young survivors report limited access to SHRE and describe mainstream programs as failing to acknowledge or respond to their lived experiences (Moore & McArthur, 2022). Many feel unprepared for healthy relationships, noting that maltreatment can distort understandings of what is acceptable or possible in intimate partnerships. Survivors have called for SHRE that is accurate, relevant, and responsive — recognising their circumstances, addressing safety and trust, and building the confidence and skills needed for equitable, respectful relationships.

Co-design approaches, in which survivors collaborate with educators, researchers, and practitioners, are increasingly recognised as a way to address this gap. By embedding survivor expertise in the design process, co-design can redistribute power, foster safer learning environments, and produce resources that are both inclusive and practical (Goodyear-Smith et al., 2015; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018). When conducted with sensitivity to trauma histories, such approaches have the potential to create SHRE models that better serve both targeted and universal audiences.

The Building Trauma-Informed Sexual Health and Relationship Education Project

The Building Trauma-Informed Sexual Health and Relationship Education project was established to respond to these needs. Its aims were to:

- Identify what young survivors need from SHRE to feel safe, respected, and supported.
- Co-design practical tools and resources with survivors, educators, and practitioners.
- Strengthen sector capacity to deliver SHRE that assumes survivors are present in every classroom.

By combining the expertise of survivors, educators, and researchers, SAY-IT sought to produce resources that were usable in practice and capable of delivering lasting change.

Project Components

The Project was delivered in five interconnected stages, each building on the last and guided throughout by young people — including youth survivors, youth advisors, and members of NAPCAN Youth Speak Out (NYSO).

1. Establishing the project — Defining aims, embedding the Survivor-Aware Co-design Principles, and building partnerships with survivors and youth advocates. Clear protocols ensured ethical engagement, emotional safety, and accessibility.
2. Literature review — Mapping current programs and trauma-informed practices, identifying gaps, and highlighting promising approaches.
3. Interviews and focus groups — Gathering insights from survivors on what had worked, what had caused harm, and what would make SHRE safer and more relevant.
4. Co-design workshops — Bringing survivors, practitioners, and educators together to collaboratively develop practical tools, ensuring shared ownership of ideas and outputs.
5. Sector survey — Testing the usability of the resources with respectful relationships education providers and refining the toolkit based on their feedback.

At every stage, the process was shaped by survivors' insights, creativity, and leadership — ensuring the final outputs were grounded in lived experience and responsive to survivors' needs.

Figure 1 Phases



What we did

Phase 1: Establishment

The BTISHRE project commenced with a series of activities to build a shared foundation and approach. The establishment phase involved securing ethics approval, forming the research team, and confirming partnerships with key stakeholders, including young people, service providers, and survivor advocacy organisations.

A central activity in this phase was a workshop with members of NYSO group in November 2023. This workshop brought together young advocates from across Australia who hold diverse lived experiences and a strong commitment to improving sexual health and relationship education.

The purpose of the workshop was twofold: to introduce the project and its aims, and to seek young people's early advice on what makes SHRE safe, relevant, and survivor-aware. Discussions explored the language we use to talk about sexual health and relationships, the strengths and limitations of existing SHRE, and opportunities to make programs more trauma-responsive for young people with experiences of maltreatment.

Importantly, the workshop also shaped *how* we would do co-design across the project. Young participants emphasised that co-design works best when relationships are built first, trust is actively cultivated, and the purpose of engagement is clear from the outset. They called for adults to be transparent about how and why young people might participate, provide multiple and flexible ways to contribute (including small groups, written prompts, and anonymous input), and embedded emotional support throughout the process. They noted that emotional safety is as much about pacing, permission to “pass,” and opportunities for breaks as it is about the content itself.

Participants also highlighted the value of peer connection, explaining that some of the most powerful ideas emerged when they could speak openly with others who shared similar experiences. They stressed the importance of seeing their language, priorities, and examples reflected back in project materials — a visible sign that their contributions were heard and valued.

These insights became foundational to the BTISHRE project's survivor-aware co-design approach, influencing how we engaged young people in all subsequent phases (See Section 4 of this report for more). The workshop not only provided early direction on the content of survivor-aware SHRE, but also ensured that the process itself was safe, inclusive, and genuinely collaborative.

OUTPUT:

Moore, T., Death, J., Webb, J & Waters, L (2023) Building trauma-responsive sexual health and relationship education (BTRSHE): NAPCAN Youth Speak Out Workshop. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University

Phase 2: Literature and Evidence Review

As the second phase of the BTISHRE project, we undertook two interconnected reviews of the literature to identify what young people want and need from SHRE in non-school settings. The

first review took a broad focus, drawing on the views of diverse groups of young people, while the second review explored the specific needs and preferences of those who had experienced maltreatment. Together, these reviews provide a foundation for developing both universal and targeted trauma-informed SHRE.

Phase One – Broad Focus on Young People’s Preferences for SHRE in Non-School Settings

Our first review synthesised findings from 98 empirical studies published between 2002 and 2023, conducted primarily in the USA, Australia, and the UK. These participatory studies involved young people from a wide range of backgrounds, including those engaged with health and youth services, LGBTQIA+ communities, culturally diverse groups, young people with disability, and those experiencing homelessness.

Young people described a preference for SHRE that:

- Moves beyond a narrow focus on risk to promote healthy, respectful relationships and broader sexual decision-making.
- Is holistic and integrated, addressing sexual health alongside relationship skills, consent, communication, and emotional wellbeing.
- Builds critical thinking skills to help them assess the credibility of diverse information sources, including online content.
- Is inclusive, affirming of diverse sexualities and genders, and culturally responsive.

In terms of delivery, young people wanted SHRE to be timely, relevant, and provided in safe, youth-friendly spaces by trusted, skilled, and non-judgmental adults. They valued interactive and engaging methods (e.g. group discussions, role plays, Q&A) and recognised the potential for peer-led education, particularly when facilitated well. They also highlighted the importance of linking SHRE to practical supports such as contraception and sexual health services.

Our review built on the work of Pound et al who synthesized the literature in terms of school-based settings.

SEE: Pound P, Langford R, Campbell R. What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people's views and experiences. BMJ Open 2016

In 2016, Pound et al. conducted a systematic review of 69 qualitative studies from around the world exploring young people's views on sex and relationship education (SRE). The review brought together findings from diverse contexts, including school and community settings, and reflected perspectives across a range of cultural backgrounds.

Young people described a preference for SRE that:

- Is relevant, practical, and directly connected to their everyday experiences and needs
- Moves beyond biological detail and abstinence/risk prevention to address relationships, emotions, consent, and pleasure
- Provides honest, non-judgemental, and trustworthy information that counters misinformation, especially from peers and online sources
- Is inclusive of different sexualities and identities, avoiding assumptions of heterosexuality.

In terms of delivery, young people wanted SRE to be taught by confident, well-trained educators who are approachable and non-judgemental. Many expressed discomfort when lessons were led by their regular teachers, citing embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality, and a lack of specialist knowledge.

They valued participatory methods such as group discussions and role play, and supported the involvement of external specialists or peers when carefully facilitated. Young people also emphasised the importance of safe, respectful learning environments where their privacy and dignity were protected.

Overall, Pound et al. (2016) conclude that SRE must be engaging, inclusive, and responsive to young people's realities, with a clear focus on equipping them with both knowledge and skills to make informed, healthy, and respectful choices in their sexual lives.

Pound et al. conclude that effective SHRE requires more than risk-focused or biology-only approaches: it must be inclusive, participatory, and grounded in young people's lived realities, while building the skills and supports they need to navigate relationships safely and confidently.

Phase Two – Focus on Young People Who Have Experienced Maltreatment

The second review examined seven qualitative studies involving 132 young people aged 14–22 who had experienced maltreatment and were often engaged with child protection, homelessness, or therapeutic services. These young survivors identified needs that both overlapped with and extended beyond those expressed in the broader review.

They called for SHRE that:

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- Explicitly addresses abuse, unhealthy relationships, and the ongoing impact of trauma on sexuality, identity, and relationships.
- Includes comprehensive sexual health education that is relevant to their lived experiences, such as negotiating safety in transactional sex.
- Challenges harmful gender norms and provides inclusive discussions of diverse sexualities.
- Helps them develop practical strategies for navigating relationships, consent, and risk in the context of their trauma histories.

Young survivors preferred SHRE to be delivered in community-based or alternative settings, by trusted adults—such as youth workers, carers, or health professionals—who are trauma-informed, relatable, and proactive. They valued peer support and participatory approaches that gave them a voice in shaping content and delivery. Importantly, they emphasised that both universal and targeted programs must be trauma-informed:

- Universal programs should recognise the prevalence of trauma among young people, create safe learning environments, and provide pathways to specialist support.
- Targeted programs should be available at critical life stages (e.g. before puberty, after disclosure of abuse, during pregnancy) and explicitly support healing, recovery, and empowerment, alongside sexual health and relationship skills.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW #1: What Young People Want from Sex & Relationship Education (SRE) in Non-School Settings Moore, Trew, Steer & Dickinson (2024)

- **Overview**
Review of 98 studies (2002–2023) involving diverse young people (incl. LGBTQIA+, CALD, disabled, homeless) reveals what young people value in SRE delivered outside schools.
- **What Young People Want**
 - **Comprehensive Content:** Integrates sexual health (e.g. consent, STI prevention) with relationships, emotions, and decision-making
 - **Inclusive & Affirming:** Non-judgmental, culturally aware, and inclusive of gender, sexuality and relationship diversity
 - **Critical Thinking:** Builds media literacy and ability to assess misinformation
 - **Practical & Relational Skills:** Emphasises real-life skills like communication, managing relationships, and recognising abuse
 - **Timely & Ongoing:** Offered early and reinforced during key life stages (puberty, first sex, transitions)
 - **Engaging Delivery:** Interactive, youth-friendly, trauma-informed and flexible to meet individual needs
 - **Trusted Educators:** Facilitated by credible adults and peer educators who create safe, respectful spaces
 - **Multiple Platforms:** Includes digital tools, community programs, and parent engagement
 - **Service Integration:** Links SRE with access to contraception, healthcare, and support services

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW #2: What Young Survivors Want and Need from Sex & Relationship Education (SRE) Moore, Death, Powell, Adams (2025)

- **Study Overview**
Review of 7 qualitative studies (2002–2023) with 132 young people (14–22) with experiences of maltreatment, often facing overlapping challenges (e.g. homelessness, school disengagement, substance use). Participants described inadequate SRE and highlighted specific content, delivery, and support needs.
- **What Survivors Want:**
 - **Valued Content:** Abuse, consent, trauma impacts, gender roles, healthy and diverse relationships, and comprehensive sexual health
 - **Delivery Preferences:** Early, timely, non-judgmental, trauma-informed, and delivered by trusted adults in community settings
 - **Provider Characteristics:** Credible, caring, consistent, inclusive, and capable of building trust and safety
 - **Program Design:** Peer-informed, participatory models encouraged; youth engagement improves relevance and impact
- **Implications for Practice**
 - **Universal SRE** must be trauma-informed and inclusive, offering pathways to specialist support
 - **Targeted SRE** needed at critical life points (e.g. disclosure, pregnancy), enabling healing and safer relationships
 - Programs should address intersecting disadvantage (e.g. housing, substance use)
 - **Young survivors want to co-design** SRE content, delivery, and evaluation
 - Expand content to include **emerging digital harms** (e.g. sextortion, revenge porn)

OUTPUT:

Moore, T., Death, J., Trew, S., Dickinson, J (2025) What young people who have experienced maltreatment want from out-of-school sex and relationship education: A qualitative synthesis of participatory research with young people. Trauma, Violence and Abuse.

Implications for the SAY-IT model

The two-phase review confirms that young people—particularly those who have experienced maltreatment—want SHRE that is comprehensive, inclusive, practical, and connected to

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broader supports. Universal programs must adopt trauma-informed principles, while targeted programs need to go further, actively supporting young people on their paths to healing, reclaiming their sexuality, and building safe and respectful relationships. In both cases, genuine youth participation in the design, delivery, and evaluation of SHRE is essential to ensure relevance, trust, and impact.

Phase 3: Engagement with Young People in Interviews

Phase 3 of the BTISHRE project centred on hearing directly from young people who had experienced maltreatment, including child sexual abuse, about their experiences with SHRE. This stage aimed to deepen our understanding of what makes SHRE safe, relevant, and supportive for survivors, and to ensure that their insights directly shaped the resources and principles emerging from the project. Our participants recognised that survivors' experiences of trauma, trust, and disclosure are often invisible in mainstream program design, yet they hold critical expertise on how SHRE can both protect and empower.

Our Approach

Recruitment

We worked with partner organisations — including youth advocacy bodies, community services, and specialist sexual assault support agencies — to identify and invite young survivors to participate. Recruitment emphasised voluntary involvement, informed choice, and control over the interview process. We prioritised diversity in lived experience, including gender, sexuality, cultural background, to ensure the findings reflected a broad range of perspectives.

Eligibility criteria were intentionally flexible: young people self-identified as having experienced maltreatment and were aged between early adolescence and young adulthood. This approach respected survivors' autonomy and did not require them to disclose or talk about experiences of maltreatment.

Ethical Safeguards

Engaging survivors in SHRE-related research required robust ethical protocols. We embedded the Survivor-Aware Co-design Principles developed earlier in the project, which foreground safety, trust, and empowerment.

Key safeguards included:

- Informed consent as an ongoing process, with multiple opportunities to ask questions or withdraw.
- Choice in mode of participation (online, face-to-face, or phone) to accommodate comfort and accessibility.
- Control over topics discussed, with participants encouraged to skip questions or redirect conversations.
- Immediate access to support, with participants offered the choice to have a dedicated support worker available during and after their interview.

Data Collection Approach

We used semi-structured interviews that balanced consistency with flexibility, allowing young people to share stories in their own way while ensuring key topics were covered. We explored:

- Their experiences of SHRE
- What content should be included in SHRE
- What they would do differently in SHRE

- What young people who have experienced harm need from SHRE
- How SHRE could be more trauma-informed and survivor aware

Our approach centred on creating safe and affirming spaces. Conversations were held in familiar, youth-friendly environments or, in many cases, online. We were explicit that no one was required to share personal details, but that if they chose to, they would be listened to, believed, and connected to support. One participant reflected:

“It’s the first time I’ve been able to say how I actually feel about this stuff without someone shutting it down or making it awkward.”

This survivor-aware approach allowed young people to speak openly about what was missing, what was helpful, and what needed to change.

What Young Survivors Told Us

- **Current Sources of SHRE:** Young people reported learning about sex and relationships through school, media, friends, and personal therapy. Schools were seen as a good location for SHRE but often lacked trauma-informed approaches.
- **Need for Trauma-Informed SHRE:** Participants stressed the importance of SHRE being trauma-informed, comprehensive, and tailored to real-world experiences. They suggested co-designing programs with survivors to ensure relevance and sensitivity.
- **Content Gaps in SHRE:** There was a clear call for more inclusive education that was responsive to young people with diverse sexualities and genders; healthy relationships; pornography, sexting, and consent. SHRE was criticised for being too heteronormative and focused on anatomy rather than emotional aspects of sex. They noted that SHRE did not cover healthy relationships, sex and pleasure and managing threats in existing relationships.
- **Comprehensive Consent Education:** Participants argued for more nuanced and affirmative consent education, going beyond simplistic approaches like the "cup of tea" analogy. They also called for discussions on the impact of alcohol and drugs on consent.
- **Sexual Violence Education:** SHRE should address all levels of sexual violence and provide tools for both victims and perpetrators to respond appropriately. Education on preventing and recognising sexual violence was deemed essential.
- **Support for Friends and Peers:** Many young people sought guidance on how to support peers who disclose harm. They emphasised the importance of empathy and understanding in peer-to-peer support, especially in trauma-sensitive contexts.
- **Delivery of SHRE:** The report highlighted the need for SHRE to be delivered in a safe, engaging, and inclusive environment, with skilled facilitators who are aware of the trauma histories in the room. Small group settings were preferred for more productive conversations.
- **Teacher Training & Support:** Teachers should receive specialised training on trauma and sexual harm. Participants suggested that external facilitators with expertise in sexual health and trauma be involved, but also advocated for teachers to be well-supported and knowledgeable to guide students effectively.
- **Pathways to Support:** Young survivors should be provided assistance (or at least information) to help them access additional tailored information, education and support to help them deal with their trauma, to reclaim their identities and sexuality, to respond to their needs and give them opportunities to recover, heal and grow.

SEE:

Powell, MA., Moore, T., Death, J & Adams, K (2024) "We have to talk about it": Building trauma-responsive sexual health and relationship education; Interviews with young people who have experienced harm. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University

Member checking workshop

In May we held a member check in. The member checking workshop was designed to ensure the key findings from earlier stages of the BTISHRE project reflected the realities and priorities of young people—particularly those with lived experience of maltreatment. Participants were shown draft summaries of the project's emerging messages, including where and how young people learn about sex and relationships, the content they want included in SHRE, and their

preferences for how it is delivered. After each summary, they were invited to share whether the findings resonated, what might be missing, and how the ideas could be strengthened.

[For a young person], like they could be sitting in a classroom and having the realisation that they've experienced that someone's hurt them [so it needs to be] trauma informed. Like it needs to be based on ... trauma practices and have people know how to respond. But also just, I do think it is very important to include that sexual violence as a topic [is still discussed] like in an age appropriate way.

Young people strongly endorsed the core findings. They confirmed that schools remain the most common setting for SHRE, but that quality varies widely and often fails to think about or meet the needs of survivors. They stressed the importance of starting SHRE early, making it an ongoing part of education, and delivering it in ways that feel “normal” rather than awkward or stigmatised. Participants also reflected on the shortcomings of some “trauma-informed” practices in schools—such as letting students leave the room—which could inadvertently single them out or create more discomfort. They sometimes felt that these strategies were performative and ended up making them more excluded from discussions.

A trauma informed approach should be like the floor, not the ceiling. Like a trauma informed approach is not a gold standard and it stops there, [a survivor-aware approach] is about preventing secondary victimization. And that is so important if we want to prevent future harm.. I'm kind of the belief that Sex Ed is going to need a complete overhaul to achieve that

Trust in the facilitator emerged as a central theme. Participants favoured SHRE delivered by skilled, external educators rather than regular teachers, noting that this increased privacy, safety, and openness. They valued facilitators who were approachable, non-judgemental, and able to manage sensitive topics respectfully. Peer-to-peer learning was also seen as important, given that many young people turn to friends before adults when facing relationship or sexual health concerns. They noted, however that their peers weren't always well equipped to respond to their needs.

Content relevance and the use of real-life scenarios were key. Participants wanted SHRE that went beyond exploring anatomy and risk messages to address diverse identities, real-life relationship scenarios, and practical strategies for safety, consent, and communication. They also emphasised the importance of providing clear, accessible help pathways—such as service cards or helpline details—and having these in discreet, written formats for later use.

Overall, the workshop confirmed that survivor-aware SHRE must combine universal trauma-informed principles with targeted approaches that support healing, agency, and empowerment. This means starting early, embedding SHRE in safe and inclusive environments, ensuring content is realistic and relevant, and equipping both peers and adults to support young people effectively.

Implications for the SAY-IT model

Findings from both the interviews and the member checking workshop confirm that survivor-aware SHRE must move beyond simply adding trauma-related content to existing programs. Universal SHRE needs to be grounded in trauma-informed principles (See Adams et al, 2024 for more), recognising the prevalence and impacts of trauma, creating genuinely safe and inclusive spaces, and ensuring clear, discreet pathways to support—while targeted programs should actively foster healing, agency, and empowerment for young people with lived experience of maltreatment.

Across both settings, the way SHRE is delivered is as important as the content: skilled, trusted facilitators who are consistent, non-judgemental, and attuned to the relational and emotional dynamics of the group are essential to fostering safety, trust, and meaningful engagement.

Young people stressed that SHRE should be realistic, inclusive, and responsive to diverse lived experiences, addressing practical skills such as recognising coercion, negotiating consent, and identifying safe people and services. They emphasised the value of choice and control in participation, peer-to-peer approaches, and the opportunity to influence how sensitive topics are introduced and explored. Embedding survivors' voices throughout the design, delivery, and evaluation process—rather than consulting them at a single point—will ensure SHRE is relevant, trustworthy, and capable of both preventing harm and supporting recovery.

Phase 4: Co-design Workshop: Purpose, Process and Outcomes

Phase 4 included a co-design workshop, held in February 2025 at the Australian Catholic University's North Sydney campus, formed a pivotal activity in the project. This session aimed to bring together young people who had experienced maltreatment, with adult stakeholders (or allies) from research and practice to collaboratively shape the direction and content of survivor-aware SHRE resources.

The workshop was designed with three main objectives:

1. To test and refine the emerging survivor-aware principles, facilitator guidance, and content priorities identified in earlier project phases.
2. To ensure the practical relevance of these resources by grounding them in the lived experiences and expertise of young people.
3. To model genuine youth–adult partnerships in the co-design process, positioning young participants as equal contributors whose voices would shape the final project outputs.

Who Participated

A total of 10 young people attended the workshop. They had all participated in interviews and were also often engaged as youth educators and trainers in relationship, consent and other SHRE programs. They were joined by 7 adult stakeholders including youth workers, survivor advocates and therapists and members of the research team. This mix was intentional — creating space for dialogue between those who deliver SHRE and those who experience it, and ensuring that survivor perspectives were embedded alongside practical delivery insights.

What we did and how we did it

The workshop design followed survivor-aware facilitation principles developed earlier in the project. This meant starting with a focus on safety and trust, setting clear agreements for confidentiality, and giving participants control over how they engaged. We opened with an introduction to the project's purpose and a short presentation of insights from the literature reviews and interviews. This set the scene for a series of interactive, small-group and whole-group activities.

Activities were structured to encourage creative thinking and equal participation:

- Principles mapping allowed participants to critique and expand the draft survivor-aware principles, identifying which resonated, which needed refining, and what might be missing.
- Facilitator skills brainstorms focused on identifying the personal qualities, professional skills, and relational approaches that make an SHRE facilitator effective for young survivors.
- Exercises which considered what guidance trainers and facilitators needed before, during and after facilitating survivor-aware SHRE.

Adult participants were asked to contribute as equals rather than decision-makers, ensuring that young people's ideas and priorities were front and centre. Throughout, facilitators provided grounding exercises and check-ins to maintain emotional safety.

What We Heard

The workshop reinforced several key findings from earlier phases and generated new insights that will shape the final SAY-IT resources:

1. Safety is relational and contextual – Young people stressed that safety is not just about content warnings or rules; it is about the trustworthiness of facilitators, the relational culture of the group, and whether they feel believed and respected.
2. Trauma-informed practice must be embedded, not added on – Participants confirmed that simply adding “trauma content” is insufficient. Survivor-aware SHRE must weave trauma-informed approaches through all aspects of design and delivery, including universal programs. Strategies should be guided by survivors and not be performative.
3. Facilitators need both skill and authenticity – The most valued facilitators were described as “real,” consistent, non-judgemental, and willing to listen. Professional expertise must be matched with the ability to connect and respond flexibly.
4. Peer spaces and shared learning matter – Young people valued opportunities to learn from others with shared experiences, provided these spaces were well-facilitated and safe. They also called for visible representation of diverse sexualities, genders, and cultural identities within SHRE materials and facilitation teams.
5. Flexibility across life stages – Participants emphasised that SHRE needs to be available at key life points — before puberty, after disclosure of abuse, when starting a relationship, during pregnancy, or transitioning to adulthood.
6. Content priorities – Key topics included understanding healthy vs unhealthy relationships, recognising grooming and coercion, building safety and consent skills, navigating support services confidentially, and affirming diverse identities.

A Survivor-Aware Model for SHRE

Through the BTISHRE project, we set out to create a SHRE model for that is grounded in evidence, informed by young people’s lived experiences, responsive to trauma, and explicitly survivor-aware. This model moves beyond simply adding “trauma content” to existing curricula. It reframes the entire approach to SHRE — from content and delivery, to the learning environment and educator practices — so that it is safe, relevant, and empowering for all young people, particularly those who have experienced maltreatment, including sexual abuse.

Our approach builds on three interlocking foundations: youth-responsive practice, which recognises young people as active partners in shaping learning; trauma-informed practice, which designs environments and curricula that acknowledge the prevalence of trauma and strive to avoid re-traumatisation; and survivor-aware practice, which goes further by tailoring SHRE to the unique needs of survivors, preventing revictimisation, and supporting recovery, agency, and hope for the future.

Core Components of Survivor-Aware SHRE

By holding the existing evidence, and a commitment to youth responsiveness and trauma-informed practice at the centre, we arrived at a set of core components that define survivor-aware SHRE. These components apply across universal and targeted programs, ensuring that education not only informs but also protects, empowers, and provides young people with opportunities for pathways to healing and recovery.

Component	Rationale
Preventative & Responsive Intent	Survivor-aware SHRE must aim to prevent sexual harm while addressing the specific needs of young survivors of maltreatment. This includes recognising the heightened risk of re-victimisation and embedding protective strategies into both universal and targeted programs. Prevention is paired with readiness to respond when disclosures or distress arise, ensuring survivors are met with understanding and support.
Relationship-Based Practice	Trust, respect, and empathy are the foundations of safe learning. Facilitators adopt relational approaches that prioritise safety, foster belonging, and encourage open communication — creating the conditions for sensitive conversations to occur without fear of judgement or harm.
Safe Learning Environments	Safety in survivor-aware SHRE is multi-layered: physical safety in the space, emotional safety in the interactions, and cultural safety through inclusion and respect for diversity. Predictability, clear boundaries, and agreed group norms are essential, alongside proactive strategies to minimise and respond to triggers.
Appreciation of Intersectionality	Recognising that experiences of sexuality, relationships, and trauma are shaped by young people’s broad experiences, survivor-aware SHRE reflects diverse gender identities,

	sexualities, cultures, abilities, and life experiences. Representation and inclusivity are not add-ons, but woven into the heart of the curriculum and delivery.
Critical Reflection & Thinking	Survivor-aware SHRE equips young people to think critically about societal norms, gender roles, and the messages they receive about sex and relationships. It encourages them to challenge coercion and inequality, and to make informed, values-driven choices in their own lives.
Empowerment and Choice	Young people are given autonomy over how they engage with SHRE, including the option to opt out of activities or topics. This choice is respected without penalty, supporting a sense of control that is particularly important for those who have experienced powerlessness through abuse or trauma.
Peer Support	Facilitating safe, respectful peer connections – in and outside of the classroom - help survivors to be able to participate safely. It also recognises that many young people will turn to their peers if they have experienced harm, but that many survivors report that they have not always got the support that they need. Survivor-aware SHRE fosters a culture of mutual care and empathy, while maintaining boundaries to ensure no young person is placed in a position of undue responsibility for another’s wellbeing. It also recognises that in some classes there will be participants who have used violence and that they too need to be supported to get assistance.
Pathways to Support	Education must connect directly to action. Survivor-aware SHRE provides clear, accessible information on where to get help, offers facilitated connections to survivor support services and mental health resources, and ensures facilitators know how to make warm referrals.
Survivor-Inclusive Quality Improvement	Programs are not static. Survivor-aware SHRE includes regular evaluation and adaptation based on survivor feedback, ensuring content and delivery remain relevant, impactful, and sensitive to evolving needs. Survivors are treated as partners in program refinement, not just participants.
Self-Care for Facilitators	Delivering survivor-aware SHRE can be emotionally demanding. Facilitators are supported to maintain professional boundaries, monitor their own wellbeing, and engage in self-care. Organisations take responsibility for providing supervision, training, and reflective practice opportunities to sustain educator capacity.

In sum, the survivor-aware model offers a comprehensive, integrated approach to SHRE that is protective, healing, and empowering. It recognises that for many young people, SHRE may be

the first time they understand their own experiences of harm, or realise they have the right to safety, respect, and healthy relationships. By embedding these principles and components, SHRE can be a place where survivors are not just included, but truly seen, heard, and supported.

Phase 5: Developing the SAY-IT Guides



In Phase 5 we aimed to translate our findings into practical resources for SHRE facilitators. The guides drew heavily from our work with young survivors while being informed by a complementary project supporting rural and remote SHRE educators to be more trauma-responsive.

The SAY-IT in SHRE Resource Kit (Survivor Aware, Youth Informed, Together/Tools) is organised into seven guides and a final self-assessment tool. Each guide combines content explanations with practical tools designed for facilitators working in schools, organisations, or as external practitioners.

Guide 1 introduces the SAY-IT model, background research, glossary of terms, and core values, and provides an overview of the full set of guides. Guide 2 focuses on preparing for facilitation, including reflection, planning, and organisational agreements, while Guide 3 addresses creating safe and inclusive learning environments, with checklists and agreements to support group dynamics. Guide 4 sets out ways of responding to concerns and disclosures, offering templates, supportive language guides, and response plans. Guide 5 provides tools for mapping services, making warm referrals, and supporting young people after sessions. Guide 6 highlights facilitator wellbeing, with tools for reflection, self-care, and debriefing. Guide 7 focuses on feedback and improvement, including youth feedback tools, reflective action plans, and peer support processes.

Guide Number	Core Content
Guide 1	Introduction to the SAY-IT model, background research, glossary of terms, and core values , and provides an overview of the full set of guides
Guide 2	Preparing for facilitation , including reflection, planning, and organisational agreements
Guide 3	Creating safe and inclusive learning environments , checklists and agreements to support group dynamics
Guide 4	Ways of responding to concerns and disclosures , offering templates, supportive language guides, and response plans
Guide 5	Tools for mapping services, making warm referrals , and supporting young people after sessions
Guide 6	Facilitator wellbeing , with tools for reflection , self-care , and debriefing
Guide 7	Feedback and improvement, including youth feedback tools , reflective action plans , and peer support processes

The kit concludes with a self-assessment tool that helps facilitators and teams review their practice across the seven guides and plan for future improvements.

Our Reflections: Engaging young survivors meaningfully and safely

Our project highlighted the fact that working with young survivors of maltreatment in co-design requires an approach that is both participatory and trauma-aware. Survivors bring deep insights, commitment and expertise grounded in lived experience, but they also can carry the impacts of previous harm, including disrupted trust, unequal power relations, and potential vulnerability to re-traumatisation.

Research highlights that co-design, when practised rigorously, differs from traditional methodologies by sharing decision-making power, recognising participants as co-creators with moral rights to intellectual property, and involving them in dissemination and knowledge translation (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018; Goodyear-Smith, Jackson & Greenhalgh, 2015).

However, without careful adaptation, previous research has highlighted the fact that co-design risks replicating the very power imbalances it seeks to address. Studies show that young survivors may be particularly sensitive to authority dynamics, with adult-led processes sometimes perpetuating feelings of coercion or tokenism (Kehoe et al., 2024; Loveridge et al., 2023; Lee, 2024). Survivor-aware co-design explicitly counters this by embedding practices that redistribute power and protect participant agency.

Ethical co-design with young survivors also requires equitable recognition and benefit-sharing. This includes shared ownership of ideas and outputs, opportunities for co-authorship and public presentation, and ensuring that resources can be used independently for participants' own purposes (Goodyear-Smith et al., 2015; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018). Such recognition is not symbolic—it affirms survivors' expertise and legitimises their role in shaping solutions.

Emotional safety is another cornerstone. Trauma-informed literature emphasises anticipating and mitigating potential triggers through safe environments, flexible participation options, and multiple modes of expression such as art or metaphor (Thorn et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Nolan et al., 2023). Survivor-aware co-design integrates these practices, along with protective measures such as ongoing risk assessment and adaptive facilitation to meet emerging needs (Kyegombe et al., 2019; McAra, 2019; Sabri et al., 2021).

Finally, reflexive practice is essential. Researchers must remain alert to their own biases, relational dynamics, and the unintended consequences of their methods (Malinverni & Parés, 2016; Dembele et al., 2024). Iterative processes, central to co-design, create space to adapt based on participant feedback and shifting contexts (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).

The table below outlines ten guiding principles for survivor-aware co-design, alongside examples of how our research team applied them in practice with young survivors. They draw from both discussions we had about survivor-aware practice and from the many conversations we had with young people about how we might work in ways that were empowering and responsive. These principles build on trauma-informed practice (safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment) while incorporating co-design ethics specific to survivor engagement.

Principle	How We Applied This in Our Work with Young Survivors
1. Honour Story Ownership and Personal Boundaries — Recognise that survivors’ lived experience is only one part of their identity; participation should not require disclosure, and stories remain their own to tell (Thorn et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019).	Clarified from the outset that disclosure was not required; focused activities on ideas and solutions; provided support if stories were shared; acknowledged skills and perspectives beyond lived experience of trauma.
2. Recognise Intersectionality — Appreciate that survivors may have other lived experiences (e.g., disability, cultural identity, LGBTQIA+, socio-economic disadvantage) that shape their participation in co-design. Create safe workshop environments that are inclusive, empowering, and responsive to these intersecting identities.	Acknowledged and valued participants’ multiple identities and experiences; acknowledged and celebrated difference; worked together to ensure facilitation, language, and activities were inclusive; adapted processes to respond to cultural, social, and access needs while promoting empowerment and safety.
3. Redistribute Power — Share decision-making to avoid tokenism (Kehoe et al., 2024; Loveridge et al., 2023; Lee, 2024) and foster ‘allyship’, recognizing the expertise of survivors and the role of adults in supporting (rather than leading) engagement	Young people were respected as knowledge holders and the drivers of survivor aware practice, while adults role was to promote and support their campaign. Invited young people to engage as youth advisors; after interviews were conducted young survivors were invited to engage as survivor advisors and engaged in further co-design activities where all participants were treated equally; young survivors’ views were preferenced in all academic and practice-oriented resources.
4. Ensure Emotional Safety — Anticipate triggers; offer multiple ways to participate (Thorn et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Nolan et al., 2023).	Provide detailed information about what would do during interviews and co-design workshops; co-created safety agreements; used creative; built in check-ins, opt-outs and quiet spaces; provided on-the-day support and post-session debriefs.

5. Maintain Transparency — Be clear about aims, processes and limits, including what can/can't change (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).	Issued plain-language briefs; revisited expectations as the project evolved; clarified which ideas could be implemented now vs. which required future advocacy or approvals.
6. Create Tangible Benefits for Participants — Ensure outputs can be used independently by survivors (Goodyear-Smith et al., 2015; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).	Producing accessible resources survivors could use in advocacy or peer contexts; connected interested participants to advocacy/training opportunities.
7. Make Pathways to Support Visible and Accessible — Ensure participants know where, how, and from whom they can access support during and after co-design activities, with multiple options beyond generic helplines.	Provided clear, accessible information about support services; identified trusted adults participants could approach; ensured support was available during sessions and through follow-up.
8. Foster Safe Peer Support — Build group processes that enable participants to support one another safely, including guidance on how to respond if peers share experiences of harm.	Encouraged respectful listening and empathy within groups; provided guidance on safe, non-judgmental peer responses; created activities that promoted connection without pressuring disclosure.
9. Recognise and Share Intellectual Property — Co-create and share ownership of ideas and outputs, including benefits and recognition (Goodyear-Smith, Jackson & Greenhalgh, 2015; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).	Agreed early how ideas/outputs could be used; offered survivors to be credited (where they wished) as co-authors; had ongoing discussion as about IP.
10. Build in Reflexive Practice — Adapt based on feedback; interrogate power and facilitation (Malinverni & Parés, 2016; Dembele et al., 2024).	Held group debriefs after each session; adjusted activities, pacing and modes in response to youth feedback.

Key Learnings and Opportunities for the Future

Working in partnership with young people—particularly those who have experienced maltreatment—taught us as much about how to do co-design as it did about what survivor-aware SHRE should contain. Across interviews, member-checking sessions, and the co-design workshop, young people consistently reinforced that safety, trust, and choice are not “add-ons” but the foundations of any engagement.

We learned that creating safe conditions for participation means giving young people control over how they engage, what they share, and when they step back. Safety was fostered through clear information about the process, consent as an ongoing conversation, and options for support before, during, and after participation. This not only minimised harm but also encouraged honest and courageous contributions.

The co-design process worked best when it was relational, not transactional. Young people valued facilitators who were genuine, consistent, and non-judgemental, and who took time to build rapport before asking for input. This relational approach also extended to peer dynamics—participants wanted to work alongside others with shared experiences, while having the option to speak privately if needed.

We also learned that meaningful co-design goes beyond consultation. Young people wanted their insights to shape decisions and to see their contributions reflected in tangible outputs. This required transparency about what could and could not change, regular updates on progress, and visible acknowledgment of their role in shaping the survivor-aware model.

Finally, young people reminded us that survivor-aware SHRE must be grounded in their lived realities—not only addressing the content gaps they identified, but also reflecting the emotional, cultural, and practical contexts in which learning takes place. Co-design that honours these perspectives produces programs that are more relevant, inclusive, and trusted.

Implications:

- Future co-design processes must embed trauma-responsive practices from the outset, including flexible participation, clear boundaries, and integrated support.
- Relationships—not just research tools—are critical to eliciting authentic insights from young survivors.
- Survivor involvement should extend into implementation and evaluation, ensuring their voices remain central as programs evolve.
- Co-design is both a methodology and a capacity-building opportunity: when done well, it strengthens young people’s confidence, agency, and connection, as well as improving the quality and relevance of SHRE.