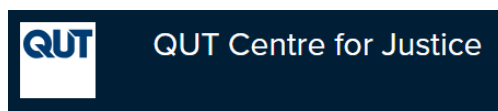


“We have to talk about it”: Building trauma-responsive sexual health and relationship education. Interviews with young people who have experienced harm

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

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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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Report Summary

- **Background & Purpose:** The report aims to improve Sexual Health and Relationship Education (SHRE) for young people, particularly those who have experienced harm. It highlights the gap in trauma-informed SHRE for young survivors of maltreatment and the need for their involvement in designing such programs.
- **Participant Demographics:** Eleven young people aged 14-26, from various Australian states, were interviewed. They had all experienced harm and had diverse backgrounds, though none identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- **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 covering 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.
- **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 were urged to 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.

Background

International literature demonstrates that child maltreatment is linked with increased engagement in risky sexual behaviour, further experiences of abuse and sexual violence, and problems in relationships and parenting (Cruz et al., 2021, Pulverman et al., 2018). A dearth of programs to meet the specific sexual health and relationship needs of young survivors of sexual abuse is also apparent (Panisch et al., 2020) as is there a lack of guidance on how sexual health educators might deliver programs in trauma-informed ways (Denning et al., 2022).

In recent Australian research, conducted for the Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry, young survivors of maltreatment argued that their access to sexual health and relationship education (SHRE) was limited and believed that existing programs did not appreciate nor were responsive to their trauma histories. Instead, they reported insecurities about sex and sexual relationships. Young survivors have advocated the need for SHRE that recognises their unique sexual health needs and equips them with an appreciation of how to safely engage in sexual relationships.

Young survivors have strongly argued the need for young people who have experienced harm or maltreatment to work with adults and organisations to inform the development of sexual health education that is informative, appropriate, safe and trauma-informed.

This Listening Report is part of a project, funded by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, which aims to identify the key elements of trauma-responsive programs to support young survivors and to co-design a set of principles and practice elements that might be utilised to inform and assess targeted and universal programs. The Listening Report provides an overview of the key themes emerging from interviews with young people who have experienced harm about their experiences of SHRE and views about how this can better meet the needs of young people.

Participants

Eleven young people with lived experience of harm participated in interviews, which ranged from 40 to 80 minutes in length. Eight young people were women, two were male and one identified as non-binary. Participants were aged 14 to 26 years and had all attended schools in Australia, in the ACT, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria. Three young people talked about attending a Catholic or other Christian schools, while the remainder talked about experiences at public schools. No young people identified themselves as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or from a culturally or linguistically diverse background.

Where do young people get sexual health and relationship education?

Young people participating in interviews learnt about sex and relationships from SHRE sessions at school, talking with friends, social services (domestic violence programme, sexual health provider), university halls, personal therapy, television programmes, social media and pornography. Some young people talked with their parents, describing being provided with the

basics around contraception or periods by them, although for most this was an uncomfortable or awkward conversation. Many participants indicated that they did not (or had not) talked with their parents about sex. They also talked about the difficulty in telling their parents about their experiences of sexual violence and harm, with some not being able to do so at all.

For most young people, SHRE was delivered at school by teachers as part of the curriculum. A few participants attended schools where external providers delivered programmes, ranging from two hours to two days, to senior students. Several young people also talked about their school bringing in police to talk about sex-related issues, in response to concerns about student behaviour, such as sexting.

School was considered a good location for delivering SHRE by many participants given that most young people attend school, which makes it accessible and almost compulsory. It is potentially a neutral space for sex education, particularly for young people who may not feel comfortable or safe talking about sex-related issues at home for family or cultural reasons. School was also seen by some as a safe space given safeguarding requirements (such as working with children clearance), the duty of care for young people and, in some schools, the provision of dedicated safe and quiet spaces for time out if needed.

Young people thought that SHRE should start in primary school, in an age-appropriate format, then continue in high school with more time allocated than the current couple of days. Ongoing education is important as participants note that young people need different information at different ages and that it can have a different impact.

Just make it like maths or something. Just like have it be regular. Have us talking about it. Because we need to de-stigmatize it. And that's a really big part of it. Make it normal, because it is normal.

SHRE provided an opportunity for some young people to share and learn from each other about experiences they had gone through. This was not a universally positive or realised experience for participants, but several talked about SHRE sessions prompting helpful and stimulating conversations with friends outside of the class sessions.

How can SHRE better meet the needs of young people, including those who have experienced harm?

The insights and advice provided by young people who have experienced harm and participated in SHRE, point to the need for SHRE to be **trauma-informed, comprehensive, nuanced and based in real world contexts**.

Comprehensive is what covers like all the different things we've talked about in terms of health, sex, trauma, assaults, responding, all of those things. That's what I mean by being comprehensive in terms of the content and obviously training in terms of facilitators and then the approach. It just has to be real world de-stigmatized.

Some participants used the term “trauma informed” when talking about how SHRE could be improved. Others did not explicitly use the term, but talked about how the content and delivery of SHRE impacted young people who have experienced harm and how this could be done better, with comments pointing to a trauma informed approach. Young people were clear that for SHRE to be trauma-informed, discussions about content such as consent and sexual violence need to be informed by young people who have experienced harm, as well as other young people. One young person suggested that SHRE be co-designed by young people who are receiving the education and then sent to survivors to hear their voices.

Is it designed by people who have lived experience? Is it literally informed by their trauma or not even their experiences? You don't have to have experienced harm to have an opinion on how it should be taught. If it's done through proper consultation and the ideas are coming from people who have lived experience ideally, then I think it's inherently trauma informed.

I think the first thing is that victim survivors and young people need to be co-designing these programmes in terms of, as you just said, not just in terms of the content, but in terms of the format.

In talking about their experiences of SHRE, what was provided and what was missing, and how they thought it could be done better, young people identified things that are critical for both the **content** and the **delivery** of SHRE.

Content that needs to be included in SHRE

Some participants noted that SHRE included useful content, providing examples such as learning about bodies, some relationship issues (e.g. coercive control and domestic violence) and some social issues (e.g. homophobia and misogyny). Practical information was appreciated, such as learning that you can get a Medicare card when you are 16 years old, which means sexual health issues can be addressed without needing parental involvement.

While there were these examples, participants also talked about the need for more and better information and education about safe and healthy sex and relationships, and a range of specific issues such as pornography, contraception and sexting. Underpinning this was the importance of SHRE being talked about in real world contexts. A comprehensive approach including discussion of these issues is essential, because as one young person put it “sex is a big part of life for young people.”

SHRE needs to be sex-positive and inclusive, recognising diverse sexualities and genders.

A current limitation of SHRE identified by young people was the focus on heterosexuality, implying it is the societal norm, with an assumed alignment of biological sex, sexuality and gender identity and gender roles. There was a clearly articulated need to address issues of diverse sexualities and promote notions of sex and sexuality that reflect young people’s lives, particularly inclusion of gay relationships and sex in SHRE.

It's pretty obvious, but just it's all very heteronormative. Like everything I got was man, woman, that kind of thing. It doesn't have any gender diversity, it doesn't have any

sexuality diversity ... At the end of the day, harm can be caused, not necessarily out of like ill intention, but just out of like a lack of education ... We've been taught how to have straight relationships. But we haven't been taught how to approach gay relationships. And I think that's something that's like hugely missing.

You get to talk about sex, but it was like heterosexual sex, which I think was very lacking because of the reality of young people. I think there's a lot of maybe hesitancy about sexuality. And I think young people need to be taught a little bit younger instead of falling into the norm of heterosexuality, because if you only get taught about heterosexual sex, that's what you should be doing.

SHRE was experienced by young people as negatively gendered in several ways. For some, SHRE had been focused largely on anatomical and reproductive functions, particularly in earlier years, with little exploration of relationships beyond that. Some noted that the focus had been on male bodies, highlighting the need to be inclusive of young women and gender diverse identities. Boys and girls are often separated in school sex ed classes and participants talked about how this can be problematic, underscoring that it is important to understand what is happening to the opposite gender, to enable positive relationships. Participants also called for education to move beyond anatomy and to be more inclusive of understanding – and feeling comfortable with – your own body.

First of all, if you're going to be talking about pleasure-centric sex education, mention both sexes. Please talk more about the actual female anatomy. There's a lot around the male anatomy, all the little diagrams and stuff, but it's very male-centric, like the whole thing.

And if we're addressing the culture as it stands, it's around pleasure and intimacy and empathy. I think that in itself, well, I don't know, but I think that would reduce rates of harm because you're nipping it in the bud.

And I understand there would be concerns around telling people to explore their bodies and know what they feel comfortable with because in some cases they're going to be younger children and whatever. But I think that at a certain point you need to have that discussion because I know personally I didn't know really anything about myself until I was 17, 18. And even then it was kind of like sometimes you get into situations that are uncomfortable, but you don't know whether what's happening is normal at all because you're not taught about any of this stuff. And I know they're uncomfortable conversations, but I think it's important to have those conversations and encourage people to know what they're comfortable with and what they want and what makes them feel good so that they're safe, I think.

Gendered issues were raised in relation to sexual violence, with some participants pointing to too much focus on education for young women around responding to harassment and abuse, when most violence is perpetrated by men against women. One participant argued that feminism and basic human rights should be included as a part of relational education.

These issues are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, and yet the focus of the education is on women. And you can't educate women into stopping violence that they don't perpetrate. We could have entire curriculums based around educating women on sexual violence, but it still wouldn't reduce the levels. We can't stop it. And I think that when you talk about prevention, it's very much about preventing male behaviour, and it should be so much more in a way, aimed at men in that capacity.

Gendered limitations also meant that not much content is included on how men are affected by sexual violence too, or by social conditioning around sex and relationships. Young people thought that SHRE content should include male insecurities and fears around sex, and the way that men are societally pressured to present in terms of hyper-sexual, hyper-dominant, performative masculinity and peer approval.

I don't believe that all sexual violence occurs through ill intent. I think a lot of it occurs by just not knowing, through lack of knowledge. It's like you just make a mistake and someone gets hurt. And that doesn't at all negate the harm that's been caused, but it does kind of take us back to that education route of this is one way we can help fix it.

Consent education needs to be more comprehensive and real-world based

Consent education was discussed by most participants and described as being taught in overly simplistic and unrelatable ways, for example, the 'cup of tea' video ¹, in which offering someone a cup of tea was used as an analogy for seeking consent. There was an expressed need for comprehensive consent education to prevent sexual violence, taught in an affirmative way, whereby "no means no, but only a yes is consent."

I really don't think that that was anywhere near enough education on consent, especially. I think I have a lot of feelings around consent education, but foremost, I think that it should be taught in an affirmative way, which it wasn't, in terms of no means no, but we didn't discuss the rest.

So now you've basically got these young people who are now what, 18, 19 this year, that don't really understand the concept of consent going out and that's obviously going to cause other issues out in the real world.

Also talking more detail about what consent actually means is important. And then that for me, I think it would've helped to have those conversations with my family or friends or educators earlier, because then I probably would've avoided some of the situations that I ended up in.

Participants also talked about the need for education on how alcohol and drugs affect consent. A harm minimisation approach was advocated whereby educators acknowledge that young people use alcohol and drugs, and provide education that takes that into account when promoting safety.

¹ [Tea Consent \(Clean\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

Realistically people are going to have sex after they've been drinking. Let's find ways to educate them on how to do that safely and but also still establish a line.

Young people spoke of the negative consequences of schools not acknowledging what is actually taking place in their lives, for example, denial of young people having sex, consuming alcohol and drugs, sexting and engaging with pornography. Further, some schools promoted abstinence, both implicitly and explicitly, particularly religious schools and those in regional and rural areas. There was an expectation that students were not having sex, which young people perceived as leading to a lack of investment in addressing sex and relationship education. If the school is promoting abstinence and denying that sex is happening, then it is isolating and invalidating for young people.

When a young person gets raped or assaulted in a space like that, who do you even talk to? You can't talk to your friends because why are you having sex? We're not taught that. It isolates you. When you're in a place that is in denial of sex itself, then it completely invalidates your experience, sexual harm or any kind of trauma in that space as well.

Because I don't think we really got outside of the law says if you're intoxicated, you can't consent. That's pretty much all we got in high school ... it's like, oh, young people don't drink.

And just in the same vein of teaching abstinence rather than consent, it was the same with image-based abuse. And just like this is child pornography, you'll be on a sex offender's register. People need to know that. They need to know the legal risk. But the thing is teenagers are going to sext anyway. So I think people need to know how to do it safely and respectfully, and that was the extent of it. Pretty disappointing in high school.

Obviously we all know that teaching abstinence is atrocious. It just closes the space for people to talk about things like that. But if it's like, you've been to a high school party and you got too drunk and someone had sex with you and you don't really know how to feel about that. But then the only information you get is, like you're intoxicated. You can't consent. And now you might be thinking, okay, but I don't feel the way that I think that feels.

SHRE needs to include education on how to respond to and prevent sexual violence

Participants were clear that SHRE should include understanding, recognising and preventing sexual violence. This included “lower level, not just extreme forms of violence.” Young people talked about how some harmful behaviours are deeply ingrained and normalised, and there is a need to deconstruct these and recognise when behaviour constitutes sexual violence. SHRE therefore also needs to incorporate how to respond when you are the perpetrator or “the one being the problem.”

Sex and relationship education go hand in hand with violence prevention education.

Just like that two-pronged approach of understanding the culture and having that consciousness, because we're going to be bombarded with that stuff, irrespective

of the education. It's better to have that consciousness and be able to recognise when it's destructive. And then also having that understanding of sexual violence as not being limited to the quote, rape in a park type.

Young people described instances in SHRE when inaccuracies, myths and assumptions about sexual violence were expressed and sometimes perpetuated, by students and teachers. These included teachers conveying understandings of sexual assault and harassment that were inaccurate and potentially harmful. Examples given by young people included that sexual assault is “inevitable” for young women, that it is likely to be perpetrated by a stranger in a public place, and that boys cannot be sexually harassed.

So the discussion really went around, this is what sexual assault is, and it's likely to happen to you, so here's some ways to support your friends.

And then my friend was like, oh, but boys can be harassed too. And there's a teacher who was like, no, they can't. And it was like, no, they totally can, not as prevalent potentially, but it's definitely a hundred percent a thing. And that was not particularly helpful I think, in creating a supportive environment.

Participants described ways in which SHRE inadvertently reinforced and perpetuated victim blaming, for example by suggesting young women should not “dress provocatively”, telling young people who have sexted that they could be on a sex offenders register, and emphasising fight as a response to trauma. For example, girls were taught self-defence, with the implication being that the appropriate response to being assaulted is to fight, with no recognition or discussion of other responses, such as flight, freeze or fawn.

And a lot of the info we got was like, don't dress provocatively and that sort of stereotypical thing.

I think that this notion of teaching women combat skills is sort of dismal. I don't remember the moves that we learned that day, and I'm not going to just whip them out if something happened to me. But also it sort of places a bit of an onus on girls in terms of how they should respond. If someone tries to assault, you should whip out and hit them or whatever. When in reality, first of all, sexual crime doesn't even happen like that ... There was some discussion that day about the idea that how you respond is not your fault, but showing women and girls how to then use violence to protect yourself. It doesn't reinforce that, because now that you have these tips, you shouldn't freeze or flight, you should fight.

Participants talked about the need to use clear language and talk frankly about sexual violence to broaden understanding and destigmatise abuse. This contributes to a context in which people can understand, be heard and seek support for their own experiences.

When somebody else is talking about what's happened and they're using the words this is what happened, this is the impacts of it, this was rape, it led to trauma and this led to re-traumatization. Using those words from real people actually from videos of real people. Then people hear that and they're like, oh wait, this exact same thing happened to me and it's impacted me the same way. That

probably means I was abused. If you don't hear other people explicitly say it, you won't make the links.

Sometime very often actually at school age especially, but really throughout their life, realise that something that happened to them was sexual assault when they didn't know, which is another flaw in the education system. And it's something that I've had to tell a lot of young people around me, wait a minute, that was actually rape or that was actually an offence.

SHRE can help guide young people to support friends and peers who have experienced sexual violence

Young people identified friends as key sources of information, learning, and support about sex and relationships. Friends often provide a safe space for discussions that might not occur in formal SHRE settings. However, to be helpful, this information and support needs to be accurate, empowering and help survivors seek out adults and services that can provide them.

A key issue for some young people was the need for SHRE to include education for young people about how to support friends and peers who disclose sexual harm. Young people were more likely to have turned to friends if they had experienced harm, than parents or teachers. However, not all responses were helpful; young people described negative reactions can were distressing, exacerbated the trauma and perpetuated misunderstanding and victim-blaming.

Young people emphasized the importance of SHRE including guidance on how to be a supportive friend, highlighting that knowing how to listen, believe, and provide appropriate resources can make a significant difference. SHRE can sometimes be a catalyst for young people identifying their own experiences as abusive or harmful, which increases the importance of educating young people on how to be supportive allies, as well as providing information and support for individuals who have experienced sexual harm.

And I will say the two responses that I got that were negative were, to an extent, they almost traumatised me more than the experience itself. And like, I fixated on those responses for like a year. And then only when I kind of got past that did I start processing the actual event itself.

In terms of content that should be included in the relationship education content for supporters ... So peer supporters. Because at the end of the day, before someone goes to a counsellor, they're probably gonna tell their friend.

Participants highlighted the need for empathy-building in SHRE to enhance peer support and strengthen personal relationships. They advocated for an inclusive approach, where empathy and respect are taught early and built upon as young people grow, fostering a culture of understanding and strong allyship. Participants talked about how SHRE can contribute to developing empathy in relationships, with sexual partners and in supporting others who have experienced harm.

I think the seeds could be sown quite early, primary [school years] five, six about empathy and respect, and then maybe [years] seven, eight, looking at empathy

and intimacy and respect, and then building on that and just fostering that culture of intimacy and empathy.

SHRE can provide relevant and useful pathways to support

SHRE was seen by participants as an opportunity for young people to be heard and to get information and resources about where to get support if needed. Some young people had experienced a lack of pathways to support, particularly in regional areas, with long lists of who to call for help just experienced as being overwhelming.

I think that long list of who to call for help ... it's just a page long list of things is kind of overwhelming and you won't look at it. So, one very highlighted thing, but then also kind of just encouraging communication with those around you in your immediate vicinity because helplines and stuff are not a very human way of doing things.

I think that's been the biggest thing for me, is that every time I've reported or disclosed, all of a sudden all of this shit comes up that I could have had before or known about or could have helped. So, I think the resourcing and stuff is there, but we don't often tell people that it's accessible from the beginning.

I think that the culture between the regions and metropolitan areas is so vast, so different. In terms of resources, I don't know ... But I think that we maybe don't have as much money, maybe the reason we didn't get so many talks is because we didn't have the funds to do it, or we didn't have the people, professionals to come in and talk to us. So I don't know. Maybe it wasn't the school system that failed us. Maybe it was the government that wasn't able to provide enough funds in that sector.

How SHRE can be provided to meet the needs of young people, including those who have experienced harm

Interviews traversed a range of issues connected with how SHRE is delivered, with the key concerns highlighted by young people that it be a safe, comfortable and open space, engaging for young people and discussion based, with skilled and knowledgeable facilitators.

An awareness that there will be young people who have experienced harm in the room

Young people were clear that teachers and facilitators should be aware that in any group there will be young people who have experienced harm and trauma, and that awareness should help guide the delivery of SHRE. They also noted that some may have experienced multiple forms of trauma or have additional factors that increase complexity. Teachers need to create a space where young people feel safe, and topics related to harm and maltreatment are not belittled. As well as being aware that there are likely young people who have experienced harm in the room, facilitators also need knowledge about signs of harm, how to support young people and manage disclosures. Participants highlighted that through SHRE some people will identify what happened to them as sexual violence for the first time.

There is very likely someone in this room who is currently going through this or has gone through this and if you are that person, you are not alone. Here are your options. What's happening? Kind of keeping it very vague, even if you very well know who it is, some of them might be like, it is very likely someone in this room has experienced this and you may not making it very clear that it is a statistically likely thing to happen and that there are options.

Stuff happens a lot earlier than most adults know. This isn't like a 'in the future' thing, it's almost certainly already happened to a couple kids or is happening currently. Yeah, 13 is not too early, because 13 is when stuff happens or younger, stuff happens in all ages. There's no such, there's honestly no such thing as preventative in a sense in this type of context, because you have no idea who's actually gone through that already. So just assume that people have very real, very serious lived experience when you're delivering it.

We can never assume that somebody that you're talking to doesn't already have experiences. I think that's the biggest thing that has been so obvious to me is that we know the high rates, we know the stats.

Young people talked about experiences they had of feeling blamed or unsupported and the need for strong messaging in SHRE that young people who have experienced harm are believed and supported. Several participants pointed out, this requires teachers to be consistent and not contradict themselves. They also need to reinforce that there are many ways an individual person might react to experiencing harm, and those reactions are okay.

The biggest thing I would say would be don't contradict yourself. But in my situation, that was already sort of too late. I don't really want to take advice from somebody who's sort of being like, oh, talk about consent. But then when I said, Hey, I didn't consent to this, they backtrack. So that's the biggest thing is you need to have people, you feel safe with them, make sure that the children or young people you're talking to feel safe.

I think then obviously don't dismiss experiences would be another big thing if they're shared or even if they're hypothetical situations.

Understanding the wider school context is important for teachers, when believing and responding to young people. One young person described the school community as becoming a “jury society” when a young person discloses harm perpetrated by another student and other people have to decide who to believe and who to continue being around. This also highlights the need for teachers to be aware that as well as there being young people who have experienced harm in the room, the perpetrator of that harm may also be present.

In a school setting where something's perpetrated by another young person, it becomes a lot more real because young people that are your friends either don't believe you or continue hanging out with a person that is not safe for you.

As a school student, you're told, oh, this boy sexually assaulted me, and then you are there. Okay, well, I'm about to spend the rest of high school with this boy in my

grade. I don't feel safe now, maybe around him, but do I choose to not hang out with him? Maybe not. When in reality, that's not what it should look like. Or I've had a friendship with this guy for ages, and then my friend, other friend tells me that she's been assaulted by him. What it looks like for me is not hanging out with those people again, and also feeling incredibly unsafe around them.

Consideration of who is in the room for SHRE

Many young people's experience of SHRE involved separation of genders, with boys and girls being in different spaces and sometimes having different content. For example, one young person talked about boys having a session on male mental health, while girls had a session on self-defence. Some participants thought separation by gender made it less awkward for some and was helpful for feeling more comfortable during SHRE. One young woman noted that in her school talking about it in a separate space helped boys realise that they had perpetrated those things – it also provided a place for boys and girls to talk about their feelings in a safe gendered space.

But there was also concern expressed by some participants that boys were not engaging with SHRE so much and that they needed to be in the same room as girls to be educated about issues such as sexual assault and toxic relationships. Some young women expressed the need for a holistic approach with all young people together to create discussion and approach sexual health and relationship issues collectively.

But I think that issues around mental health stem a lot from patriarchy, and I think we need a more holistic approach to all of it because it all does. I know that, well, I definitely think that men and women should be taught about consent and about sexual violence and about relationship safety together.

Gender separation was also seen as problematic given the social breakdown of understandings of gender, asking where non-binary people go when genders are separated. One young person described an external provider of SHRE offering options of three groups – for those who identified as male, female, and those who don't feel comfortable identifying as either.

Aside from considerations of gender, participants pointed to the need for sensitivity regarding who is in the room for SHRE. Participants raised the multicultural nature of Australian society and the need for sensitive and respectful understanding of the different issues that SHRE might raise for young people from different cultural backgrounds.

Teachers and facilitators need to create a respectful and safe space for SHRE.

Young people spoke about the importance of the teacher or facilitator creating a space that was safe and comfortable for all the young people in the room. The facilitator has a key role in creating and maintaining this, for example, through treating the subject as important, shutting down inappropriate comments and negative or disrespectful comments, and not 'forcing' young people to talk. The facilitator needs to read social cues and support fostering empathy.

I think that going through stuff that you have experienced and then listening to it somewhere else, and if you're not ready to talk about it, it's hard. And hearing this stuff is hard.

And not kind of belittling the topic just because you don't believe in it or you haven't experienced it, or it doesn't apply to you personally, or you don't think it matters.

It opens those dialogues. That's the main thing is it makes it not seem like some weird alien thing. If you start those conversations in a very approachable way and very early, it kind of just opens that door for conversation because even if the video itself has nothing else, it's just kind of bringing that conversation to the forefront.

Making sure it's a safe environment and feels comfortable and that children and young people are aware of their autonomy and their rights.

The mood and behaviour in the room during SHRE sessions affected the experience for young people. Sometimes there was laughing and joking that was described as silly and had a good mood to it, whereas other times it felt awkward and inappropriate, and participants thought the teacher should have “reeled it in” to help students engage with the content. Young people talked about students making inappropriate and harmful comments and how teachers sometimes did not acknowledge or close those down, or even fed into the comments.

It was teacher talking at the front, and it was videos and activities as well, like worksheets and stuff. But most people took the piss out of it, I'm not going to lie.

I feel like there's a picture of a vulva and a penis on the screen and everyone's laughing and being like, haha, my God. And I get it, when you're young, those things are funny and weird and stuff, but I feel like it doesn't help it actually be taken seriously and amount to anything meaningful or anyone actually properly remembering the content ... I think there are ways to get them to tone it down and actually be like, okay, this is serious. And engage with the content more rather than just being like, oh my God, there's a picture on a screen.

Creating a safe space helps for having the hard conversations that young people felt need to be had. Participants recognised that SHRE content, including videos, could potentially be “triggering” for young people, but talked about needing to not shy away from these hard conversations and using strategies to support young people and minimise harm. Even for young people who had been upset by the session, the message was clearly conveyed that this was not a reason to not do SHRE, rather it should be an impetus to ensure that it needs to be delivered in a way that is safe and supportive.

I don't think that that should be an excuse to shy away from these hard conversations because I think that is used very much as a, and I know it comes from a place of care, and not wanting to trigger people is such an important consideration, but I think there are strategies you can use to minimise harm and have a space like that because if you don't have these hard conversations, nothing's going to change.

Fuck the trigger warning, we have to talk about it ... And if a child is triggered, then there needs to be infrastructure in place that is transparent and open that they

can access their value there. But also, we can't run the risk of not talking about this stuff because we know what it looks like if we don't.

Creating a safe space for SHRE includes ensuring that the content is not frightening and anxiety making. Some schools took a 'shock' approach to SHRE, using unnecessarily graphic or violent examples to get messages across. Young people gave examples of being shown videos that graphically depicted the lead up to a person being assaulted and of having guest speakers who had experienced sexual assault tell their stories as a prelude to advocating abstinence.

And even when they get old enough to understand some of the more graphic things, like not using extremely graphic stuff because that's not necessary, you can get the same message across with less graphic and less violent scenarios than some of the scenarios that exist in the world. That's not necessary. And I think I remember being told some fairly graphic stories about child exploitation and stuff like that, and I don't really feel like things like that were necessary to me grasping the concepts of that at that age. That was very, just frightening more than anything.

It felt like a trauma dump onto minors. In all honesty, of course, I empathise so deeply with the things that this woman experienced, but why are you telling that to 14 year olds? It could have been executed so much better.

And we had the classic one where they just show you a heap of really messed up pictures of STDs and STIs ... which everyone sort of just came out really grossed by, but still kind of uninformed.

Young people were critical of the 'shock' approach and lack of preparation or warning. Some schools had police come in to talk about particular issues and while some young people expressed appreciation for having the information, for others it was shocking and shaming. For example, one young person described the sense of shame that was engendered by police talking about sexting and the risk of being put on the sex offenders register if they engage in this. They were concerned that sexting was being aligned with child pornography, rather than acknowledging the reality is sexting is happening and young people need to learn how to do it safely and respectfully.

Also, scaring people like the police, what they did, and with the Catholic schools teaching abstinence and stuff like that is not a good strategy because people are going to engage in this stuff anyway, and you need to them with the skills and knowledge of how to navigate these situations safely and respectfully.

While most participants did not see SHRE as the place for young people to make personal disclosures or talk about their experiences of trauma, there was an awareness that this can happen. Sometimes this can happen because young people are recognising their experience as harm for the first time. For others it can be because it is perceived as a supportive space and young people find validation in talking about shared experiences.

Implement strategies that support young people who have experienced harm to feel safe and comfortable.

Young people talked about strategies that contribute to feeling safe and comfortable in SHRE. A key example was teachers and facilitators telling students that they could leave the room if they

wanted to. Some participants saw this in positive terms and thought that would have been possible in their SHRE classes. However, others thought that was difficult as young people were then in the position of either leaving the room and effectively “outing yourself” or staying and enduring an uncomfortable situation. Participants highlighted the need for practical strategies that would help make it easy to leave, such as regular mini bathroom breaks, water breaks, breaks to chat to friends and simply having the door open so it was easier to leave quietly.

But it's a really, I think, bad way to do it because it's first of all, then you're outing yourself or you are staying through an uncomfortable situation. So now they, if you don't want to be part of this, you can get up and leave dah, dah, dah. But I think it's still a bit, no one wants to, and it's awkward.

I think that it's important to try and have an alternate thing. So I think that even if they're like, Hey, we're doing sexual ed thing, we're talking about consent, this, that and the other, we're going to be talking about some difficult topics. If you have any concerns about this, please either reach out to us or have an online thing or something. So people can jump from a video if they don't want to watch things. But obviously that's also the risk of, then you have some people who are just like, I don't want to learn about it. So it becomes difficult, I think to navigate. You don't want people cutting corners, but then you also want to have accessible options.

It's always kind of like if you feel uncomfortable, you can leave the room. No kid's going to leave the room, nobody's ever going to do that as much as we would like them to.

In front of all your peers. Yeah. Are you gonna stand up and leave and, and feel okay about that? One thing, whenever I've done certain trainings, there's regular mini bathroom breaks, water breaks. I personally like them. So I'm like, if I do wanna leave, let's leave when it looks like I'm actually just going to the bathroom. And I'm not like panicking or being overwhelmed.

Another suggestion from several participants was to have support staff available or a contact person that students know they can go to if they need to.

I just remember there being three or four teachers in the room and it was like we could have had a counsellor there or a worker ... I feel like they could have had the foresight to organise that because I think that would be a useful thing to have, especially for people who might get nervous or scared, and also just an extra set of eyes who are aware of what signs of distress might look like that. Then even if there's some kind of covert signal, if at any point you feel like you need to go talk to them or you're too scared to go talk to them, but you have a stress ball or something, you can squeeze that or something like that that is communicated so that it's an accessible resource for them to use a difficult situation.

Young people thought it was important to know in advance what content will be covered and for it then not to be rushed through; slowing it down makes it easier to process. They also made suggestions for making the session more comfortable for young people. For example, having

things to look at, such as slides or videos, so that individuals did not feel that they were being 'stared at' while talking about sex. Although they also told us that videos can be over-used, with some believing that teachers sometimes used videos to avoid having direct conversations about sex and related topics. There was frequent mention of the 'cup of tea' video mentioned above in relation to consent. Some participants were disparaging of the avoidance of talking directly about consent, whereas others felt that it created a more relaxed and good mood for talking about it. Some talked about videos needing to be age appropriate and having dedicated time to discuss and break down the content.

They don't want to be stared at while they talk about sex. I want to put that down right there. No one wants to be stared at as they talk about sex.

When you're young, those things are funny and weird and stuff, but I feel like it doesn't help it actually be taken seriously and amount to anything meaningful or anyone actually properly remembering the content.

Young people described needing to strike the right balance between things being too silly, all jokes and laughing, and too serious, when it would be hard to process the topic. They were clear that they want to be treated like adults, and have respectful, thought-provoking and critical conversations, in which sex is talked about openly and without awkwardness.

If you treat young people like they are adults, and if you have a respectful and open honest conversation with them, then I think that would get across a lot better than just putting on a video and walking away for a few minutes.

I would have needed a more comprehensive discussion and a discussion, not just tick the boxes, but actually challenge me and cause me to think, develop a critical consciousness towards sex and the media that I'm consuming and the conversations I'm having and the thought processes that I'm having.

I think it is a holistic approach. I look back on my sex education, shit, it was so bad. All I remember is staring at our teacher just showing pictures of genital warts and that was kind of it. That's all that I remember, did not prepare me at all for anything ... I think sex ed can't really exist unless we have a respectful relationship kind of conversation around it.

Young people also advocated having activities, small group discussion, and break out time to chat with friends, rather than solely lecture style teaching. There needs to be time to talk, to make sure people are heard and a format that's conducive to safe, appropriate and productive conversation that supports peer-based learning.

Not a formal classroom setting. More like almost like a yarning circle type thing. That kind of more conversational sit down cushions, therapist cushions. Everyone loves therapist cushions. But don't do it in a lecture type way because it should be arguably more so the participants participating rather than the person delivering it.

The format needs to be conducive to productive conversation and not just a lecture, or it should be part of an ongoing thing where there's lectures and then group discussions ... as it stands, it's not conducive to these kind of conversations. But there are all these steps that could be taken that would not require more funding. It would just require a different strategy to have these more productive conversations.

Some participants advocated small groups for SHRE in general, to make it feel safer and more comfortable, in a less formal setting which invites greater participation and conversation from the young people.

Having small sexual education classes to make people feel safe and comfortable having people, even the option to kind of opt out and do it one-on-one with the teacher, if you've had trauma around sexual relationships, so you are not in a class that people are laughing and stuff, and then that triggers you, I suppose.

I guess it needs to be accessible without making it patronising. And that includes linguistic and cultural accessibility and homogenising students as, and this is the tricky part, how do you meet students where they're at based on their previous experiences with sexual violence? And we're all bringing a very diverse perspectives and experiences into that room, and it does become an issue of meeting people where they're at. So I think for starters, homogenising people and putting everyone in one room is not should a good strategy. Having a huge lecture where people are just sitting there is not a good strategy because people aren't engaged. We're not having discussions. We're not asking the questions that reflect our lived experiences and reflect our insecurities surrounding sex, not what we're told are our insecurities surrounding sex.

Young people emphasised that SHRE should be engaging and age appropriate, tailored to the audience and entertaining. Part of this is using language that is applicable to their age group and talking to young people “like they are adults.” One participant also emphasised the importance of accurately using explicit language and words such as ‘rape’ and ‘trauma’, and including videos with real people (rather than animations), to enable young people to connect what they are hearing with their own experience.

You don't need to be talked to like you're very young children about this. You can in fact process this information and you should in fact process this information.

I guess it needs to be accessible without making it patronising. And that includes linguistic and cultural accessibility and homogenising students as, and this is the tricky part, how do you meet students where they're at based on their previous experiences with sexual violence?

Ensure that teachers/facilitators are knowledgeable, skilled and well supported

Young people see SHRE as a key opportunity for preventing sexual harm. This requires facilitators to be knowledgeable about sex and relationships, including sexual violence and other harm, and to treat it as important.

Teach it with importance, not a stern talking to, don't assume that everyone already knows about the topic and what you are talking about, because everyone has different experiences within their families. Don't dumb it down so it doesn't make sense.

Some participants thought that SHRE was better delivered by external facilitators who have been trained specifically to do this. The perception was that external providers would be more knowledgeable, skilled and able to answer questions, as well as more engaged than teachers who didn't "sign up" to teach SHRE and might be swayed by their personal opinions and bias.

I think the ability to have a strong facilitation skills and ability to acknowledge something is happening potentially with multiple people and being able to have the, well, not the confidence, but the knowledge and the skills to navigate that situation.

They [teachers] kind of just get the curriculum and then they make their own spin on that and teach children that. Whereas I think if they would outsource to people specifically trained in that area, then I think that there would be a lot more understanding and they would be able to express it to the children or young adults in a clearer and more meaningful way.

I think people who make the space kind of comfortable and safe and welcoming. I think people who know what they're trying to teach instead of just going off their own beliefs or something they've read on a slideshow made by someone 10 years ago, going off actual knowledge and information that's proven to be correct and isn't just a personal belief. I think if someone who's trained does it, what else? They also will be able to answer questions.

Two young people who had experienced provision of SHRE by external providers talked very positively about this.

I think [LB] was good. I think that kind of education should have been weaved into more than two days of my high school education.

They still treated it seriously, obviously, but they didn't treat it 'This is just a stern talking to, we're just talking straight to you. We're not looking for your input.' It was more of a 'This thing happens, what do you know about it?' ... They weren't accusing us of you're going to go and have sex and it's going to be horrible, it's like, it could be horrible or you could learn about it and it could not be horrible.

The experience of SHRE was markedly different for some young people who had it delivered by their schoolteachers, who they perceived as being unskilled, uninterested or uncomfortable. Young people discussed SHRE being provided by physical education (PE) teachers as part of the health curriculum, pastoral care staff or other teachers "who did not have a lot of work." Participants felt that a lot of teachers did not particularly want to be teaching SHRE, evident for example in the use of lots of videos without follow up discussion because they were uncomfortable and did not want to be talking about sex.

And the PE teachers don't care. They don't care. They've signed up to teach kids how to kick a soccer ball and throw a basketball. They haven't signed up to try and teach people consent and healthy relationships and what happens to their bodies when they go through puberty.

And even the teacher that I had, the female teacher was like, oh, I know this sucks [that we're doing SHRE] because we should be playing PE right now.

He [PE teacher] was confident. I don't know how comfortable he was. I don't think I helped with that. He had crying child in his class. Most teachers are uncomfortable with that.

One participant talked about how “weird” it felt having an English teacher talking about consent, when that teacher had disbelieved and not helped them when approached about receiving negative sexual comments and attention.

I'd had negative comments or attention and stuff towards me that I didn't appreciate, and I'd gone to these teachers for help and then having them talk to me about consent ... it didn't fit right and it felt wrong.

Teachers need to be able to recognise triggers and signs of distress in the moment, as well as being aware of signs and indicators of harm, and responsive to these and to direct disclosures. The teacher's approach to delivering SHRE amplified the negative experience for some young people who found the session difficult. Participants described feeling overwhelmed during SHRE classes but being unable to leave and the teacher not responding to cues, for example, crying. One young person described being upset during a class focused on relationships, including abusive relationships, for which there was no prior notice and no sensitive scaffolding of material.

There was no mention of if you are not comfortable with these subjects, then please leave the classroom. Please take some time. Just make sure you don't leave this area. There was none of that. It was a, 'we all have to learn about this, doesn't matter what you think' kind of thing going on. I was definitely thinking this is shit. Can I leave? This is fucked up. You are just wrong ... And I just sat there and I just started crying. We were halfway through this lesson and I was just silently crying.

Young people pointed out that even when external providers do programmes, it is important for teachers who have an ongoing relationship with students to be informed and knowledgeable, to be able to help young people find the resources and access the support they need.

I think there's the sort of primary, where the information should be coming from about this is people who have the expertise and knowledge to provide accurate and helpful information. And then there's also I think the people who see the children every day. So the teachers, the educators, in other cases I guess support workers and things like that need to be informed and be able to be there to offer support or refer them on or find resources to help because they're going to be the ones who are consistently around, so they also need to be informed.

Teachers need training and systemic support to support young people who have experienced harm. One participant talked about the importance of teachers being supported to form relationships that are supportive of young people and manage those appropriately. This is particularly so in the context of fears about inappropriate teacher student relationships, which sees teachers sometimes reluctant to engage and have that misinterpreted.

Participants suggested having dedicated school staff members who are trained and available to provide support and for students to talk to about sex and relationship concerns. Counsellors were seen by some young people as not having the tailored knowledge for dealing with sexual harm and sexual relationship issues. Some young people appreciated having external facilitators or service providers to talk to about relationships, feeling not okay or unsafe, and what to do about it. A one-off conversation with “some random person” was seen by some as being safer than talking with someone they would continue to see.

But to me, sometimes in those spaces, it would be helpful to have a person there to talk to related to sexual relational violence, which it probably is, especially for young women. I think that's probably one of the biggest things troubling us at a young age, certainly was for me. And it is, even just when something happens to you, especially when you're at school age, it's pretty scary to then go to school. You are around a lot of young men that might resemble a perpetrator or even your perpetrator themselves because they probably go to your school, which is really, really scary. And there's also a lot of issues around everyone's just behaving normal. Everyone's still friends with that person.

There was a perception amongst some participants that teachers did not go into teaching to teach teenagers about sex and that this was a compulsory but unenjoyable part of their work. Young people thought that teachers who are providing SHRE need to have professional training, but more importantly an interest in SHRE and understanding of the importance of it. Some young people appreciated external providers of SHRE, but also felt that schools need some “in house stuff” and upskilling of teachers, given that they have a pre-existing relationship with students.

We just get, you know, someone who did a teaching degree and is now teaching in middle school, like it's not really, they didn't really get into it to teach sex education and they don't really know how to teach sex education so they're just following what's in the curriculum, but they don't know how to actually deliver the content in a trauma informed and safe way, and even just a beneficial way

A designated person that provided all of this type of education could also be there to facilitate those discussions that I was talking about earlier that might be beneficial to young girls or boys in more gendered groups, or also looking a bit more intersectionally, like queer young people and things like that.

SHRE needs to be embedded in the broader school, family and community context.

Young people felt that there need to be support systems in school beyond the SHRE session. This could include designated school support staff, provision of sexual health and relationship

clinics with trained people available for young people to talk to at school, and safe, quiet spaces for young people to go.

Parents are not currently involved in school-delivered SHRE, but young people felt that there should be SHRE education for parents and suggested that schools could provide resources for parents. Some participants talked about learning about sex from their parents, but for many this was awkward (for both them and their parent), sparing and not done soon enough. Similarly, some young people were able to talk to their parents about experiences of sexual harm, but some hadn't and were adamant that they never would for fear that their parents would victim-blame or take over and try to fix the problem, pursue criminal avenues or get retribution.

Young people talked critically about SHRE in the wider social context. This bigger picture discussed by some participants includes an understanding of patriarchal influence and the impact of this on young people's experience, including for example, media objectification of women, women's experiences of encountering misogyny, and issues of bodily autonomy. Teachers need to understand and communicate this bigger picture to contextualise contemporary issues impacting young people at school. More importantly, this highlights the need for critical conversation with young people to understand, respond to and prevent sexual harm.

I guess moving towards a safe conversation or appropriate conversation. I think that there are young girls knowing body autonomy in knowing boundaries and respectful relationships and how that operates within not only personal safety but also existing within patriarchy and all those kind of things.

I think kids should be conscious of what they're consuming and how it contributes to a certain idea about sex. I think a really positive portrayal of sex and relationships is sex education, like the Netflix show. But that's one show that's really consciously going against the narratives and the culture, the harmful culture around sex. And then you just weigh that up against peer influence, pornography, pop culture. It makes sense to me that the prevalence of sexual violence in our Australian society, given that kids are the people who are bombarded from such a young age with these very destructive ideas about sex.

Sexual violence is symptomatic of a harmful culture. If you take a two-pronged approach and address the harmful culture and the sexual violence and make it clear that those two things are interlinked, then I think that that's what I would've liked to have seen.

How did young people experience participating in the interviews?

The feedback from young people who participated in the study reiterates the critical importance of involving young people who have experienced harm in shaping Sexual Health and Relationship Education (SHRE). All participants rated the involvement of young people in research as 'highly important', emphasising that young people's voices should inform policy and programs that affect them, particularly in improving SHRE, which they feel is currently lacking.

They also highlighted the value of lived experience in program development, advocating for young people's input as essential for effective prevention education.

Most participants felt extremely comfortable during the interviews, with positive feedback about the interviewers and the open, non-triggering nature of the questions. Some experienced minor discomfort, mostly related to personal reflections or a lack of preparation for discussing their own experiences. All participants expressed willingness to participate again, indicating the value they placed on their involvement despite any distress.

Regarding distress levels, the majority found the interviews not distressing or only slightly so, appreciating the respectful and flexible approach taken by researchers. A few noted that the discussion brought up personal feelings about their experiences of harm, but they felt these were relevant and managed well. Importantly, all participants affirmed they would participate again, highlighting their commitment to contributing to meaningful improvements in SHRE.

Conclusion

The interviews with young people highlight the complexities in providing SHRE. Participants emphasised the need for SHRE that is comprehensive, nuanced, flexible and inclusive. SHRE needs to be de-stigmatised and trauma-informed, designed with input from young people, especially those who have experienced harm, and facilitated by knowledgeable, supportive educators.

Participants underscored the importance of SHRE teaching young people how to recognise, prevent, and respond to sexual violence. It needs to have content that is relevant, including topics such as consent, sexual violence, safe sex, pornography and sexting, in real-world, relatable contexts. The way in which SHRE is provided is also critically important, with participants advocating for it to be delivered in a safe, comfortable environment by educators who are well-trained, supportive, and knowledgeable in trauma and sexual harm. They also emphasised strengthening and supporting peer-based learning and support, noting that friends are often the first line of support for survivors.

This Listening Report has sought to capture the ideas and opinions of young people who have experienced harm about SHRE and how it can be improved. The young people who took part in interviews shared their very clear opinions and, in doing so, highlighted the central role that young people must play in shaping SHRE that is relevant, comprehensive and meaningful.