

Submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Response to Issues Paper 9 Addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in primary and secondary schools

Topic E: Education, Training, professional support and primary prevention

**By True Relationships and Reproductive Health
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About True Relationships and Reproductive Health

True Relationships and Reproductive Health (True), formally known as Family Planning Queensland (FPQ), is the leading provider of sexual and reproductive health services and respectful relationships education in Queensland. True offers a comprehensive range of clinical, counselling, education and training services from metropolitan and regional locations throughout Queensland.

This submission is based on research and our unique experience in working within the community and specifically within school settings for the sexual and reproductive health of children and young people. With regards to the scope of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, True has expertise in the following areas:

- Relationships and sexuality education (RSE),
- Sexual Assault service provision,
- Education to prevent childhood sexual abuse,
- Understanding and responding to sexual behaviours,
- Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) clinical services.

True has gained practice knowledge through service provision to a broad cross section of the community, including:

- Professionals such as teachers, doctors, nurses, police
- Families and carers
- Children and young people
- Schools and early childhood care
- Organisations working in disability services
- Organisations working in child protection
- Youth services
- Correctional facilities and detention centres
- Faith-based organisations
- Mental health organisations
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Summary of recommendations:

For children and young people to experience optimum sexual health and safe relationships, a comprehensive early intervention approach needs to be taken before tertiary child protection services are involved in a family's life. True recommends:

1. All teacher education, training and professional support (including university study, pre and in-service training, and mentoring/support), include specific training in the *Traffic Lights* framework. Teachers should receive specialised training in how to respond to sexual behaviours of children and young people within a school setting.
2. Sexual abuse prevention education should be taught alongside comprehensive relationships and sexuality education within a whole of school community approach framework. Training for teachers should include how to create a safe and supportive environment and how to teach relationships and sexuality education. True provide *Teaching Sexuality Education* professional development training. This training could also sit alongside training in the *Traffic Lights* framework.
3. To ensure a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel more confident to disclose abuse, and disclosures are responded to professionally, all programs are to be inclusive of diversity and be culturally relevant. True recommends that teachers have access to *Every body needs to know – A sexuality and relationships education resource for teaching people with a disability* and *Safe is... an indigenous sexual abuse prevention program*.

This submission will specifically respond to Issues Paper 9, Topic E: Education, training, professional support and primary prevention, Questions 2 and 3.

Response to Issues Paper 9 Topic E: Education, training, professional support and primary prevention

Question2.

What roles does teacher education, training and professional support (including university study, pre and in-service training, and mentoring/support), play in equipping individual teachers with skills and confidence to identify behaviours indicative of, and to appropriately respond to risks or incidents of, child sexual abuse, and to children displaying problem sexual behaviour?

Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people helps teachers and schools to support the development of healthy sexuality and protect young people from harm or abuse.

Sexuality is integral to a person's identity and develops throughout life. It is natural for children to express their sexuality through their behaviour. Healthy, age-appropriate sexual behaviour may be expressed in a variety of ways through play and relationships. When children display sexual behaviour that increases their vulnerability or causes harm to another, adults have a responsibility to take action to provide support and protection.

There is a clear rationale for supporting children and young people with sexual behaviour problems, as well as their families and other support professionals. Teachers who work with children and young people require a framework to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours. Such frameworks exist but uptake has not been uniform. This is a shortfall in the current system. Resources can only be used efficiently if teachers can differentiate between behaviour that is developmentally normal and behaviour that is not.

One of the most widely adopted tools to assist with this work is the Traffic Lights framework developed by FPQ in 2006. This is an evidence-based conceptual framework, which provides practical, specific intervention strategies. It has a proven track record in helping professionals and community carers to better respond to the needs of children and young people.

In 2014-2015 True worked with approximately 2500 education professionals in Queensland to deliver training to support them to identify and respond to sexual behaviours of children and young people in school settings. There is a clear demand from the education sector to have consistent evidence based responses to assist teachers and schools to support children and young people's healthy and safe sexual development.

A number of policy documents for various education departments and organisations have now incorporated the Traffic Lights framework as a way to equip teachers with skills and confidence to respond to sexual behaviours of concern.

Recommendation 1:

All teacher education, training and professional support (including university study, pre and in-service training, and mentoring/support), include specific training in the *Traffic Lights* framework. Teachers should receive specialised training in how to respond to sexual behaviours of children and young people within a school setting

Question 3.

What should school systems do to ensure their schools consistently deliver effective sexual abuse prevention education? Do such programs address barriers to children disclosing abuse, including specific needs of children with a disability, with English as a second language or with other particular vulnerabilities?

What should school systems do to ensure their schools consistently deliver effective sexual abuse prevention education?

Research indicates that effective sexual abuse prevention education programs are enhanced when they are taught alongside a broader relationships and sexuality education (RSE) program. True's vision is 'Sexual and reproductive health and safe, respectful relationships for all.' Our relationship and sexuality resources and programs are inclusive of and promote sexual abuse prevention. Throughout this submission the term RSE will be used and is intended to be inclusive of sexual abuse prevention education.

Children who receive comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (inclusive of sexual abuse prevention education) from an early age are more likely to:

- feel good about themselves
- understand and accept changes
- appreciate and accept individual differences
- are more likely to make informed and responsible sexual decisions later in life
- are less vulnerable sexual abuse
- understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour
- talk about their feelings and experiences (Brick et al (1989); FPQ (1997); SIECUS (1996))

Research consistently shows that RSE and sexual abuse prevention education is most effective when teachers have the following support:

1. Access to professional development opportunities
2. Access to up to date resources and sufficient funding
3. Endorsement from management
4. Explicit curriculum and policy linkages
5. Engagement with parents and carers
6. Access to best practice sexual abuse prevention programs

1. Access to professional development opportunities

The majority of teachers see their professional skills as applicable to and relevant for teaching RSE (Milton, 2000; Woo, Soon, Thomas & Kaneshiro, 2011). Some teachers report that they would like additional professional development to increase their confidence to provide programs and to maintain currency (Gabhainn et al., 2010). Teachers who participate in professional development are significantly more likely to provide RSE than those teachers who do not (Woo et al., 2011).

When teachers access professional development to teach RSE, benefits follow for both teacher and student. Teachers report increases in their confidence, competence and their comfort levels after participating in RSE professional development (Gabhainn et al., 2010; Lokanc-Diluzio, Cobb, Harrison & Nelson, 2007). Teachers also report perceived increases in their knowledge and their ability to provide accurate information to students (Lokanc-Diluzio et al., 2007). Professional development can also help teachers to reflect on their own personal attitudes and positions around sexuality. This self-awareness is an essential component of providing a positive and inclusive environment for students learning about sexuality (Ollis, 2010; Woo et al., 2011).

2. Access to up to date resources and sufficient funding

Many teachers report that easy access to current and relevant resources supports their teaching practice in RSE and is a key factor influencing the success of RSE in schools (Aldred et al., 2003; Gabhainn et al., 2010). Access to a wide range of teaching resources can build teachers' confidence and increase the quality of the RSE program provided to students (Gabhainn, et al., 2010). Ensuring that a school's RSE program is sufficiently funded demonstrates its importance and value to the broader school community, and is a long term investment in its implementation and success (Aldred et al., 2003).

3. Endorsement from management

Research shows that some barriers to the implementation of RSE programs perceived by teachers relate to school and community culture (Milton, 2000).

When there is a lack of solid endorsement from management, teachers report concerns that they may not be adequately supported in relation to any potential queries or contention from parents and carers about the RSE program (Goldfarb, 2003; Milton, 2000; Woo et al., 2011).

When teachers perceive and receive support for RSE from school and departmental management, teacher confidence to provide RSE programs for students is enhanced (Gabhainn, et al., 2010). School administrators can show their support by prioritising RSE in time-tabling and resource planning and by committing to teacher professional development opportunities (Lokanc-Diluzio et al., 2007).

4. Explicit curriculum and policy linkages

Endorsed and explicit curriculum frameworks play a critical role in supporting RSE by normalising the subject area and making it visible and public.

In Queensland, The Department of Education and Training (DET) provides curriculum and policy documents that provide linkages which validate inclusion of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) to students. The QCAA provides support for RSE through the Scope and Sequence Charts to assist with the interpretation of curriculum documents. These curriculum links provide teachers and schools with support to deliver RSE to Queensland students.

Although these curriculum and support resources exist, uptake has not been uniform. Each schools approach to RSE is individual and while some offer comprehensive education to their students, other offer minimal or no RSE or sexual abuse prevention education.

5. Engagement with parents and carers

The majority of parents and carers support school RSE programs and perceive that school RSE programs make it easier for them to talk about sexuality within the home environment (Berne et al., 2000; Footprints, 2011).

When children and young people can talk to trusted, familiar adults about sexuality and these adults work in partnership to support each other, children and young people receive information to support their healthy and safe development (Eisenberg, Bernat, Bearinger & Resnick, 2008; Milton, 2000). Parents and carers are also supportive of addressing topics that are sometimes perceived to be controversial in RSE (Eisenberg et al., 2008).

A small proportion of the parent and carer community may express opposition to RSE and attempt to influence its implementation (Eisenberg et al., 2008).

School administrators can build and maintain parent and carer support for RSE by communicating about the RSE program with the parent/carer community and by providing clear research, supporting the majority consensus, validating its importance and the health and wellbeing benefits of RSE (Alldred et al., 2003; Berne et al., 2000).

6. Access to best practice sexual abuse prevention programs

The following elements are indicative of the processes and key elements of a whole of school community response to supporting healthy and safe sexual development of children and young people and positive and protective responses to children and young people sexual behaviours. To be comprehensive, accountable and proactive, best practice sexual abuse prevention programs need to meet the following:

Sexual abuse prevention program fundamentals:

- consultation with key partners to assess needs and communicate program goals
- parental and community involvement
- evidence based framework and materials
- linkages to curriculum (school based)
- ongoing developmental program
- strengths based program acknowledging child, family and community potential
- contextualised curriculum corresponds with specific community needs
- linkages to relationships and sexuality education program

- taught by trained facilitators and support staff
- all facilitators and support staff are vetted and screened (including a background check)
- evaluation

Facilitators and supporting adults need to be familiar with:

- child sexual abuse prevention strategies
- strategies for creating a safe learning environment
- healthy childhood sexual development theory
- strategies to strengthen child self-confidence and self-esteem
- discussing sexual material
- relevant legal and policy frameworks
- physical and behavioural indicators of possible abuse
- process of disclosure
- reporting procedures for suspected sexual abuse
- resources available to support children and families
- self-care strategies

Sexual abuse prevention education which is:

- conducted with groups of children
- age and developmentally appropriate
- clear and explicit
- interactive and include skill practice development
- inclusive of a variety of learning styles including strategies that engage both male and female learners
- ongoing, not just a once off lesson
- protective of participants' emotional safety and include group rules, limit of confidentiality discussions and use of one step removed strategies

Sexual abuse prevention lessons to identify:

- the private parts of the body and use anatomical terms
- that abusers can be someone a child knows (adult, child, relative, professional, acquaintance) and is very rarely a stranger
- that victims can be any child
- appropriate sexual behaviours
- inappropriate sexual behaviours including electronic victimisation
- rules about touch
- body warning signs
- that not all sexual abuse may feel 'bad'
- the laws about sexual activity and sexual abuse
- adults who children can ask for help
- that it is never a child's fault if they are abused
- that adults do not always behave appropriately
- that secrets about abuse need to be told
- grooming processes

Personal safety lessons include skill practice development on:

- saying 'no' to unwanted or abusive touch
- identifying safe places and how to get there when unsafe
- asking for help, including need for persistence
- developing communication skills including knowing key phone numbers, how to contact emergency services, telling adults where they are going
- problem solving
- strategies for the bystander in abuse prevention (Family Planning Queensland (2012))

Recommendation 2:

Sexual abuse prevention education should be taught alongside comprehensive relationships and sexuality education. This needs to be done within a whole of school community approach for it to be effective. Training for teachers should include how to create a safe and supportive environment and how to teach relationships and sexuality education. True provide *Teaching Sexuality Education* professional development training. This training could also sit alongside training in the Traffic Lights framework that supports an early intervention model of identifying, understanding and responding to sexual behaviours.

Do such programs address barriers to children disclosing abuse, including specific needs of children with a disability, with English as a second language or with other particular vulnerabilities?

Students with specific needs and particular vulnerabilities include children: with a disability, those with an experience of statutory care, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, with English as a second language, who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with problem sexual behaviours, who have experienced sexual abuse, and with mental health issues. These students often miss out on education and support that assists in the development of personal safety skills, healthy sexual development, safe and healthy decision making and a safe learning environment.

Due to their vulnerabilities and specific needs, some children and young people have fewer opportunities to engage in 'learning moments' and formal education about healthy sexuality and relationships and being safe. Some examples of this include:

- Less opportunity to engage spontaneously with peers and limited social opportunities
- Challenges in accessing and processing information independently
- Negative attitudes from the community about sexuality and sexual identity
- Low self-esteem, impacting on learning or willingness to learn
- Learned compliance resulting in reduced assertiveness and decision making opportunities

Comprehensive relationships and sexuality education and sexual abuse prevention education helps to reduce barriers to disclosing abuse by providing:

- awareness raising of rights and responsibilities in relation to bodies and relationships
- communication tools such as terminology for private body parts, symbols, images and signs relating to bodies and relationships so that communication is clear and understood
- modelling of communication around these topics
- skills practice
- an awareness that it is OK to talk to identified safe adults about bodies and relationships
- culturally inclusive resources and responses
- improved skills and confidence of teachers and staff to identify and respond indicators of harm and respond to disclosures appropriately.

True's programs and resources are designed to be inclusive and to meet the needs of particular groups or individuals. Resources such as *Every body needs to know – A sexuality and relationships education resource for teaching people with a disability* (FPQ, 2001), is an example of how information can be modified to assist with individual learning needs by using symbols and pictures. *Safe is...* (FPQ, 2012) is another example of a sexual abuse program that was developed with a school community whose students and staff were predominantly Aboriginal and Islander peoples. True are also a partner organisation of the Safe Schools Coalition Australia who is dedicated to helping schools be safer and more inclusive for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, school staff and families.

Our programs and resources are designed to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, staff and families. Evidence shows that children and young people who have received ongoing and effective personal safety, relationships and sexuality education are less vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse and are less likely to feel guilty or shameful about their bodies and feelings. Children are more likely to disclose instances of abuse when they have participated in a program which provides guidance for them on how to do so.

While many different strategies are required to increase children's safety, sexual abuse prevention programs play an important role in teaching children foundation skills that are protective against sexual abuse. Sexual abuse prevention lessons and professional development training around this issue also builds the capacity of adults to help prevent and respond to disclosures and indicators child sexual abuse. Ultimately it is adult's responsibility to keep children safe and school systems have legislative requirements and duty of care to provide this.

Recommendation 3:

To ensure a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel more confident to disclose abuse, all programs are to be inclusive of diversity and be culturally relevant. True recommends that teachers have access to *Every body needs to know – A sexuality and relationships education resource for teaching people with a disability* (FPQ, 2001) and *Safe is... an indigenous sexual abuse prevention program* (FPQ, 2012).

Conclusion

To meet relationships and sexuality education and sexual abuse prevention education needs, there must be specific initiatives in the areas of:

- policy and guidelines
- training and supervision
- best practice sexuality and personal safety education programs
- resource development and dissemination
- research and evaluation.

All key stakeholders need to contribute to the processes and programs that are undertaken. All children and young people have the right to sexual and reproductive health. This outcome can be achieved through clinical services, education, research and policy development that is targeted. Children and young people have a right to dedicated leadership, collaboration and commitment to address their sexuality and relationships needs.

It is recommended that The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse make requirements assisting education providers in Australia to implement strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all in regards to their sexuality and sexual health. There is a substantial evidence base that underpins effective strategies for children's sexuality education and prevention of sexual abuse needs. An effective response requires leadership and calls for a commitment to the development and implementation of policy, training and supervision and education programs for school systems.

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