

## Govt's respectful relationships resource still littered with harmful and inaccurate content, bad for survivors

Safety advocates say the government's respectful relationships resource for schools is still littered with harmful and inaccurate content, and could even reinforce barriers survivors face to legal recourse - even after site revisions that saw the infamous milkshake video taken down.

Fair Agenda and End Rape on Campus Australia have identified additional concerning content that remains on the government's 'Our Society' website, including:

- [Materials](#) that list 'eye contact', 'smiling with the eyes' or 'laughing' as 'cues that can convey a yes'
- Conflicting [Materials](#) about non-verbal communication that state 'looking away' or 'going still' indicates a 'hard no' and mean 'don't ask again', and then later stating that 'stillness' or 'looking away' are body language that is 'unsure' (This is particularly concerning when freezing is a common response to rape),
- [Information](#) about the age of consent for anal sex in Queensland which is [incorrect](#)
- Materials that create a concerning lack of clarity around consent, with statements like: "[we need to avoid pressure and coercion, though respectful persuasion can be okay](#)" and "[If a yes is not enthusiastic then it's a maybe, even a no](#)"
- Yet another [bizarre and problematic video](#) metaphor about a boy not wanting to watch a movie because "I just really hate seeing little children get murdered by clowns" [Movie section of the playlist], and then [apologising for not speaking up about wanting to stop.](#)
- Concerning content about relationship [break ups](#), that introduce qualifiers around a person's ability to end a relationship, like: "strictly speaking, if one person wants to leave a relationship, the other person can't stop them" and "strictly speaking, as soon as Abby says no to the relationship, that's the end of it--she can walk away, and Euan has to respect her decision."

"Who is signing off on this website's content? In the past week they've removed the bizarre milkshake videos, but decided to leave up information about a "maybe zone", and concerning and confusing information suggesting eye-contact or laughing can convey consent. What's more, someone has even added incorrect information about the age of consent in Queensland. This website is a shambles. Experts do good work with young people every day. The government shouldn't be wasting time or resources asking anyone other than violence prevention experts to drive such vital work." said Renee Carr, Executive Director of Fair Agenda.

### **Making things harder for survivors**

"Already many survivors are denied justice by our legal system because perpetrators can claim they didn't realise consent wasn't provided. Now the government has released confusing resources that actively add to the problems it should be solving. Not only do these resources not prevent violence, they also make it harder for rape survivors to seek legal recourse, because they muddy the waters on what a perpetrator can say they believed amounted to consent." said

Karen Willis OAM, an independent expert with 40 years experience in rape and domestic violence response and prevention.

“It’s horrifying that the government has launched a resource for schools that promotes the notion that “stillness” could be an indication someone is ‘unsure’ -- when we know freezing is a really common first response to rape. I’ve spoken to too many survivors who blame themselves for freezing, despite it being a normal response to trauma. Worse still, some of those survivors fear coming forward because they believe that their freeze response won’t be seen as sufficient to prove the absence of consent. Now government resources are reinforcing that misinformation.” said Sharna Bremner, Founder of End Rape on Campus Australia.

“The suggestion that stillness and looking away should be seen as anything other than a no; or that smiling or laughing should be seen as a yes are horrifying. Let’s think about the survivors who will be in these classrooms. The suggestion that these actions could be seen or justified as amounting to consent is incredibly distressing and traumatising. Think of how many young women you know who laugh and smile to try and navigate unsafe situations or inappropriate behaviour.” added Ms Willis.

“It’s incredibly dangerous to try and deliver any program focused on preventing gender-based violence that doesn’t first make sure it won’t do harm to survivors in the room. The safety and trauma of survivors should be a central consideration at the centre of every program. Instead it seems like barely a consideration on the government’s website.” said Ms Willis.

“Parents should be up in arms. These government backed resources are not only ridiculous; they’re also doing so much damage. Any decent violence prevention education doesn’t centre consent - it looks at the whole relationship. Not committing a crime isn’t the bar we should be aiming for, and not being the victim of a crime isn’t the standard anyone is aspiring to. So they shouldn’t be how we teach. We need education that focuses on respectful relationships, on ethical decision-making that enables safety, fun and pleasure.” Ms Willis concluded.

### **\$2.8 million for implementation**

In 2019 the government committed \$7.8 million to it’s ‘Respect Matters’ initiative. [\\$3.8 million](#) was spent on external agency Liquid Interactive for ‘online learning solutions’ - including the ‘Good Society’ website and its ridiculous milkshake video. A further [\\$2.8 million is allocated in the National Action Plan budget to ‘implement Respect Matters’](#).

**Fair Agenda and End Rape on Campus Australia have warned that promoting the current Respect Matters website does more harm than good. They are calling for the federal government to invest in experts to lead evidence-based prevention work and capacity building with educators.**

“To really improve safety we need the federal government to invest in upskilling everyone they’re asking to act as an educator in this area. That means supporting teachers to respond to tough

questions, and appropriately support any survivors in the room. It also means investing in their capacity to challenge any toxic attitudes and behaviours that contribute to the disrespect, entitlement and inequality that enables gender-based violence.” added Ms Carr.

“Overseas, in countries where they implement relationships and sexuality education really well, there is a significant emphasis on this as a specialised field. The design is informed by evidence and expertise in child safety and safeguarding sexual wellbeing, and only those who have been trained deliver it effectively. The risk of getting this wrong is that we do more harm than good, potentially sending inaccurate and harmful messages that may even incorrectly explain the law. We must treat this as the specialist subject matter that it is,” Katrina Marson of Rape & Sexual Assault Research & Advocacy said.

Advocates have emphasised that even diversion of the remaining \$2.8 million of National Plan Funds would fall well below what’s needed to actually improve the safety of young people. They say the Victorian Government’s recent investment provides a guide on scale -- with \$37.5 million committed over 4 years to support respectful relationships work in schools and early childhood education in the state. Even without accounting for the additional costs of supporting dispersed school populations in other states, extrapolation suggests proper resourcing of evidence-based violence-prevention initiatives nationally would require more than \$150 million over four years.<sup>1</sup>

### **Current site does more harm than good**

“The government has taken down their bizarre milkshake and shark videos - but the 350 resources that make up the ‘Good Society’ website are still littered with harmful and incorrect content. Right now it does more harm than good.” Ms Carr added.

“Right now this website is actively harmful. Every single piece of content the government is putting in front of young people on this issue should be signed off by experts who actually understand the drivers of sexual violence, and therefore, violence prevention. It’s terrifying that we’re having to rely on community concern to ensure young people aren’t being directed towards harmful and incorrect information about such important issues.” said Ms Carr.

“That the milkshake consent video even made it to filming indicates just how far off track this entire resource is. The importance of resourcing experts to lead this work couldn’t be clearer.” she concluded.

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Available for comment:

- Renee Carr, Fair Agenda
- Karen Willis, independent expert in violence prevention and response

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the proportion of the nation’s schools in Victoria in 2020 (2,263 of 9,542), extrapolating from the \$37.5m for an equivalent national spend. (Noting this does not account for greater cost of reaching more dispersed schools, and is therefore an under-estimation).

- Sharna Bremner, End Rape on Campus Australia
- Katrina Marson, Rape & Sexual Assault Research & Advocacy, Churchill Fellow: implementation of relationships and sexuality education, Prosecutor (Sexual Offences Unit)

Note: Many pieces of concerning content previously flagged by advocates and media remains on the site:

- [‘sexual desire... can really distort our thinking’](#)
- A page that directs young people to [contact the police if they’re being stalked](#), but doesn’t provide that direction for any other criminal act described, including sexual assault.