Conversations on consent a shared priority for schools

Health and sex education is a hot topic in schools, and there's plenty to talk about, writes Fran Molloy.

Sexual consent education has been under the microscope in schools in recent months after hundreds of young women shared distressing stories via an online petition about their experiences of being sexually assaulted during their school years by male students.

"We were already tackling issues around consent at Tara before this all blew up, with a sequential program that covered safety and then consent across all school years," says Susan Middlebrook, principal of Tara Anglican School for Girls.

She says that Tara has now changed its approach, consulting senior students about what material should be introduced, and when it should happen.

"I've learned a lot from the girls about what they understood to be consent, and what they wish they'd been told earlier," she says.

Middlebrook is frank about the challenges. "I'm still struggling a little bit with the year 7 to year 9 space, because there is such a broad range of maturity in this age group," she says.

"Some girls really need to hear this stuff about consent, while others are not ready, and neither are their parents."

Tara hosts parent seminars, too, as many admitted feeling ill-equipped to talk to their daughters about sexual consent.

"It's too important a topic for me to say, 'We've got this,' when this whole area has shifted very quickly, and I don't think anyone has really got a good handle on it yet," Middlebrook adds.

STUDENT VOICES ON VIDEO

Video education materials on consent and boundaries produced by the Australian government's $3.9 million Respect Matters campaign were widely criticised as being confusing and cringeworthy. Many schools are seeking alternatives, such as the video series Talk Revolution, which is aimed at students aged nine to 14 and produced by Australian filmmaker Tasha Lawson.



Students at St Andrews Cathedral School (above) hear each other out on issues such as consent.

Lawson's short videos feature teenagers discussing sexual consent, gender-based violence, contraception and other sex and health education topics listed in the school curriculum.

"We need to empower kids to make better, more informed decisions as they grow up, by getting rid of the shame and taboo around these sensitive topics," Lawson says, adding that a number of independent schools have signed up to share the videos with their students, with individual parents also subscribing to the Vimeo channel.

A 'COMMUNITY ISSUE'

"Consent is not just a schools' issue, it's a community issue, and it's a global issue," says Dr Kate Hadwen, the principal of Pymble Ladies' College.

Mental health and wellbeing INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS ADVERTISING FEATURE





Principal Susan Middlebrook with Tara Anglican School students (top); Dr John Collier, the principal of St Andrews Cathedral School.

She says that while Pymble's wellbeing program had addressed consent, it was clear that the students wanted more information, earlier.

"We surveyed our girls from years 8 to 12, asking when should we start the conversation about sexual consent? They felt year 5 or year 7 was the right time," she says, noting that the NSW curriculum doesn't introduce this until year 9.

Pymble hosted a public forum in April on sex education and consent which featured various experts, including Angie Wan, co-founder of the youth speaker collective Consent Labs.

"Teaching young people about relationships, sex and consent does not make them more likely to engage in risky behaviour," Wan told the forum. She said education plays a harm-minimisation role and can help young people understand their rights, and know their options if something goes wrong.

JOINING FORCES

Hadwen says that working with boys' schools is an important part of the school's response. Pymble is working with several boys' schools to arrange different opportunities to bring girls and boys together for academic, sporting and community activities.

> **"Consent is not just a schools' issue, it's a community issue, and it's a global issue."**
> Dr Kate Hadwen

"We want them to get to know each other from a young age, not just socially, but doing academic or sporting things together to grow together as a cohort."

Susan Middlebrook says that Tara Anglican is also starting to work with boys' schools, in particular with The King's School, which shares a boundary with Tara.

"The girls need to hear from the boys, and the boys need to hear from the girls, in a working forum where they can help each other through this," she says.

STUDENT ADVISERS

Dr John Collier, the principal of St Andrews Cathedral School, says that the school has included consent education as part of a broader pastoral care module for many years.

"We see it as part of our child protection procedures and education, and as part of developing a sense of identity in young people," he says.

"The issue of consent is a larger issue than the Saturday night party scene; it relates to young people and consent, over their bodies and their persons."

In response to recent discussions about the need to improve consent education, St Andrews has revised its material about sexual consent to make it more unequivocal.

Collier asked older students for advice, inviting guest speakers they recommended.

"We found it worthwhile to put the boys and girls together in these presentations and to open up discussions, so the girls can hear answers to boys' questions and boys can hear answers to girls' questions."

Collier says that the equality of access to education at St Andrews helps students appreciate one another as people – "rather than objectifying the other gender when you only see them in a party scene".

He is forthright about the responsibility of parents, too.

"Because we care deeply about our students, and young people are our expertise, we give parents gratuitous advice like: 'Please don't send young people to unsupervised parties'," he says.

"This is not just a school responsibility. Parents have a responsibility to give their children wise advice, and to keep them from harm and from doing harm."