

Sex education: Start young and be frank

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If we are serious about tackling interpersonal and family violence, work to prevent it has to start young. But how young? The answer is: as young as kindergarten, age five.

That was the recommendation made this week by campaigner Rosie Batty in her appearance before Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence.

It sits well with the evidence local groups have been amassing here in Canberra, where three women were killed by violent partners in quick succession earlier this year.

One of them is YWCA Canberra which, in partnership with ACT Office of Women, has just launched a web-based resource called Relationships Things.

It deals with what many parents and even schools don't, or don't deal with well – sex, and questions of consent. Even though sex education is formally part of the curriculum, its delivery is patchy. Too many schools don't do it.

"We have the birds and the bees and 'just say no', that's it," says Michael Flood who researches gender and interpersonal violence at Wollongong University. "Comprehensive sex education is under attack in some parts of the education system." He means religious schools.

This is at a time when the internet and personal devices have massively increased the availability of violent computer games and toxic pornography, predominantly aimed at boys and men. It's where many first encounter sex.

The challenge for schools, with the support of carers and parents, is to commence early: to instil the tools and strategies needed to build respectful relationships. Violence is at the end of a spectrum. It can begin with angry words and actions, bullying.

Real sex education has to explore power dynamics and everyday sexism. It's real.

A teenage student enrolled at the ANU told me that sexism made getting her driver's licence tricky.

"I was in the car with my driving instructor and we were talking about a one-off driving test and he told me that I should wear something sexy because most of the driving instructors are blokes. But that I should be careful at the same time because some blokes don't know how to take no for an answer. He said he tells this to most of his female students."

Stuck with him in the car, she laughed nervously. "It was really bad, but I decided to ignore him because we were driving in rush hour traffic."

It was 2015. Was she surprised? "Yes. I think we just have to keep talking about it and keep telling men, no, I am not an object."

The return of federal parliament had its brush with sexism this week when government minister, Senator George Brandis referred to interjections by Senator Penny Wong as "hysterical" and "shrill".

Parents and carers are even more important than schools in talking about these things. While they might feel they need to protect their children from too much information or be reticent about sharing it (relying on David Attenborough documentaries to spark conversations or leaving them until late in the day when their children are less likely to listen) the fact is that young people have a right to know their bodies and about personal safety.

Children pick up all sorts of cues from the world around them; from the news and advertisements, from stereotypes in their favourite TV shows, from what they see Mum and Dad doing at home – and they make sense of it.

What are they learning? I must say I was delighted when my five-year-old said the other day, "dads usually know about cars but in this family it's the opposite".

How is power held and used at your place? If your experiences of adult power were unhealthy growing up, doing things differently – while harder to do intentionally – is all the more important.

We have a long way to go. Many of the gains we thought we made aren't really there. Working to prevent sexual and family violence requires social change on a number of levels as part of a broader conversation about rights and respect. Boys and men have to hold other boys and men to account.

Sex can be seen as a product, an outcome, or as part of the array of experiences that tell us what it means to be human, valued and understood. It's about relationships, connections, the exhilaration and celebration of varied and rich friendships.

Let's take the fear out of it and let's equip young people to make positive choices so they are less likely to be hurt.

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