

# New approach towards building respectful relationships is hit hard by critics



By Alannah Simpson

**On average, one Australian woman is murdered a week by a current or former partner. Intimate partner violence is the largest contributor to ill-health in Australian women aged 18-44. With such alarming statistics, the question must be posed: “What is being done about gender-based violence?”**

The Government has just recently invested \$21.8 million, into an approach that intends to use education, to tackle gender based and family violence and create a positive change for a whole generation of young people.

The funding will roll out, over a two year-period. The program, Respectful Relationships will be delivered through the Victorian Curriculum in schools and early childhood facilities. SBS have explained that the program “was developed by a team of nationally and internationally recognised experts in education, gender, social and emotional learning.”

Respectful Relationships has been defined by the Government as “the building and promotion of gender equity in relationships and the challenging of gender stereotypes.”

However, the approach hasn’t been without criticism, with numerous disputers complaining that the approach portrays all men as “bad” and all women as “victims” and argues it will start a gender war.

It’s association with the even more controversial Safe Schools initiative has

irked many social-conservatives, who are strongly against the said program. This is despite Respectful Relationships, possibly aligning with their morals and views.

However, its connection to Safe Schools is not the only thing, the program is being criticized for. Respectful Relationships lacks a successful and transferable curriculum, to model off. This has raised questions about whether the program will be successful, as essentially the first of its kind.

The pilot program, that was run in 19 schools, has led to claims of the curriculum failing to educate about the issue of gender-based violence critically. The Telegraph has reported that critics have described it as “ideological” and have argued that it places “excessive emphasis on the notion that all men are bad.” Additionally, it has been said that the approach is in danger of framing all women as “victims” and ignoring males who are suffering from family violence.

On top of that, The Telegraph communicates that the program does not acknowledge the existence of “factors such

as drugs and family breakdowns” in such issues.

With such criticism flying around, many are following the new trend of mocking Respectful Relationships. But when 1 in 3 women have been physically assaulted, 1 in 4 women have experienced violence by an intimate partner and 1 in 5 women have been sexually assaulted; there is no denying that change is desperately needed. Evidence proves that when family violence takes place, it is crushingly the males as the perpetrators and women as the victims. Alison MacDonald, a manager at Domestic Violence Australia, said to the Citizen, “It is not an ideological stance that we take: it’s an uncomfortable reality.”

Respectful Relationships has the potential to reach 3.7 million students, as well as 250 000 teachers, if embedded properly. It promises a holistic approach to gender-based violence by using the education system, to initiate a generational and cultural change.

Experts have acknowledged that schools play a critical role in the attitudes, gender stereotypes and social norms that become our culture. Because of this, the education system can be hugely effective in changing attitudes and subsequently family violence.

With the approach focusing on the primary prevention of gender-based violence, it



goes to the underlying cultural attitudes driving such issues.

As our Prime Minister, Malcom Turnbull said, “We have begun to confront the truth; the fact that society's attitude towards women, the value we place on women, the regard we have for women is, in part, linked to the violence that is committed against them.”

**“The regard we have for women is, in part, linked to the violence that is committed against them.”  
– Malcolm Turnbull**

Through the awareness and education Respectful Relationships will provide, the opportunity for nation-wide change will arise. In fact, the hesitancy, controversy and criticism this program is receiving, could be opening up exactly what is needed: conversation. Through discussing Australia’s family violence issue, we give huge problems the time of day, to be solved.

It is important to note Respectful Relationships has received significant amounts of positive feedback. An uncountable number of teachers, students, parents and community members are overjoyed with the new program and are hopeful it will create a positive change.

With the main goal of building a culture where we respect one another; it is undoubtedly a step in the right direction.

James Merino put it perfectly, “It’s astounding anyone could think teaching our kids about respect for other people is a bad thing.”

**Sources:**

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