

Respect and Connect: Evidence and Evaluation Report

An overview of, evidence for and evaluation of our healthy relationships and mental wellbeing program for schools.

September 2025



Authors

This report was developed by and reflects the views of Relationships Australia Victoria.

© Relationships Australia Victoria

To request permission to reproduce any part of this material or communication of, please contact RAV.

Contact

Sandra Opoku
Senior Manager Evaluation and Social Impact
Relationships Australia Victoria

Email: respectconnect@rav.org.au

Phone: (03) 8573 2222

Visit: rav.org.au/schools/respect-connect

About Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV)

RAV is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation that has been providing family and relationship support services since 1948. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances. For more information, visit www.rav.org.au



We acknowledge First Nations peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways of Australia.

We support their right to self-determination and culturally safe services.



We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them

Executive Summary

'Respect and Connect' is a 4-session, school-based primary prevention program that Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) developed and delivers to promote healthy, respectful relationships, improve mental wellbeing and prevent future gender-based violence. Originally launched in 2014 under the name 'I like, like you' (ILLY), the program has reached over 13,000 students across Victoria and continues to evolve through youth-led evaluation and feedback.

The program uses interactive, evidence-informed activities to build emotional intelligence, foster healthy relationships, promote gender equality, and strengthen communication and conflict resolution skills. It is delivered by qualified mental health-trained facilitators who model respectful behaviours and support student wellbeing in real time.

Evaluations from 2019–2024 consistently show improvements in students' awareness of healthy relationships, empathy, emotional regulation, and help-seeking behaviours.

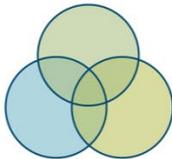
Respect and Connect is a brief, targeted and impactful program that plays a vital role in promoting wellbeing and preventing gender-based violence. We know that strengthening school communities and empowering young people with the skills to build respectful, safe, and inclusive relationships, contributes to lasting cultural change and a future where all individuals can thrive.

Contents

1. Program Overview	3
2. Program Logic	4
3. Evidence-Informed Principles	5
4. Evidence Base.....	6
a. Theoretical and Pedagogical Foundation	6
b. Evaluation and Program Data	6
5. Evaluation Findings	7
a. Quantitative Findings	7
b. Snapshot Survey (2024)	8
c. Qualitative Insights	8
6. Conclusion.....	8
References	9
Appendix A.....	11

1. Program Overview

'Respect and Connect' is a 4-session, school-based primary prevention program that RAV developed and delivers to promote healthy, respectful relationships, improve mental wellbeing and prevent future gender-based violence. Originally launched in 2014 under the name 'I like, like you' (ILLY) the program has evolved following more than a decade of delivery, with young people's voices leading evaluation and refinement. It remains a key component of RAV's broader prevention strategy and has been delivered to over 13,000 students across Victoria.



Unique focus on healthy relationships, gender equality & mental wellbeing



Aligns with Victorian Government & ACARA curriculum



Evidence-informed & continuously evaluated



Supports a whole-of-school approach



Delivered by our qualified, experienced facilitators



Over 13,000 Victorian students have participated

The program is designed to be interactive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate, using evidence-informed content and experiential activities to build social and emotional skills through a learn-by-doing approach.

Students participate in topic areas that focus on:

- understanding and fostering healthy relationships
- promoting gender equality and challenging harmful stereotypes
- improving emotional awareness and communication
- building online and in-person conflict resolution skills.

A unique feature of the program is the qualified mental health practitioners who are experienced in supporting young people, as they bring best-practice therapeutic skills into the classroom for students to practice in real time with their peers. Facilitators provide the invaluable action of role modelling the healthy behaviours that are reflected in the content, which also helps teachers to gain confidence in approaching these sensitive topics.

Facilitators are encouraged to involve teaching staff in sessions and share program information with parents along with invitations for further conversation. This helps to reinforce key messages and promote continuity of learning, which the research indicates enhances environmental and cultural change in school communities (Our Watch, 2022).

These elements, along with the program's capacity to align with existing school initiatives, aim to support a whole-school approach. Respect and Connect aligns with the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training's 'Respectful Relationships Curriculum' (Victorian Government, 2024), the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) frameworks for Personal and Social Capability and Mental Health and Wellbeing (ACARA, 2014)

and the Our Watch 'Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia' (Our Watch, 2021).

Together, these elements position Respect and Connect as a brief but impactful contribution to school-based efforts to support students' mental health and prevent gender-based violence.

2. Program Logic

The Respect and Connect program is underpinned by a strong theoretical and pedagogical evidence base. It draws on current best practice in social-emotional learning, gender-based violence prevention, and strengths-based, youth-engaged pedagogy (CASEL, 2020).

The program manual links theory, content, and facilitation practice, and the program is delivered by qualified facilitators with relevant expertise in mental health, education, or social science fields. Delivery is supported by school partnerships, policies and procedures, and an online portal with post-program content for students, teachers, and families.

The 4-session program covers healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships; gender equality and stereotypes; emotional awareness and communication; and how to handle online and in-person conflict. Content is multimodal, incorporating interactive activities, handouts, and class discussions to meet different learning needs of student cohorts.

Facilitators also liaise with school staff as needed around student wellbeing, and data is collected to support ongoing evaluation and curriculum development.

These inputs and activities are intended to achieve a range of outcomes across the short, medium, and long term.

- **Short-term outcomes** include increased social-emotional competence (across self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and decision-making), improved classroom climate, greater awareness of gender inequality, and increased knowledge of healthy/unhealthy relationships and support services.
- **Medium-term outcomes** aim to reduce antisocial behaviour and increase prosocial behaviour, resilience, academic performance, and help-seeking.
- **Long-term outcomes** relate to improved wellbeing, respectful and non-violent relationships, and a reduction in gender-based violence.

By addressing both individual skill development and broader social norms, Respect and Connect seeks to contribute to improved community cohesion and long-term violence prevention.

A full program logic model is provided at Appendix A (see page 11).

3. Evidence-Informed Principles

The program is grounded in 8 key evidence-based principles that guide its content, pedagogy, and delivery:



1. **Universal prevention** – delivering a primary prevention approach to support sustainable improvements in student wellbeing (Caldarella et al., 2009; Low et al., 2015; Frydenberg et al., 2017).



2. **Social and emotional learning** – building resilience, empathy, prosocial behaviour, and wellbeing through a structured social and emotional learning framework (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012).



3. **Belonging and cohesion** – centring student belonging, mutual respect, and positive peer relationships as a core protective factor (Allen et al., 2016; Tomova et al., 2021).



4. **Whole-school alignment** – supporting school-wide prevention efforts through clear communication with staff and families (Berger et al., 2020; Flood et al., 2009).



5. **Whole-child perspective** – acknowledging and addressing the interconnected nature of children’s learning, development, and wellbeing (Sahlberg et al., 2023).



6. **Student safety** – equipping students to recognise unhealthy dynamics, engage in respectful conflict resolution, and seek help when needed (Stanley et al., 2015; Flood, 2020).



7. **Student voice and adaptability** – valuing lived experience and tailoring content responsively (Pufall Jones et al., 2020).



8. **Gender equity** – embedding gender equity into both program content and facilitation approach (ANROWS, 2021; Evans, 2017).

4. Evidence Base

a. Theoretical and Pedagogical Foundation

Respect and Connect is grounded in well-established evidence supporting social and emotional learning, primary prevention approaches to gender-based violence, and gender equity education (Our Watch, 2021).

These domains are strongly associated with improved mental health, reduced antisocial behaviour, and the development of respectful relationships. Teaching social-emotional skills in childhood has been shown to have lasting benefits for mental wellbeing and academic success (Hawkins et al., 2005; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Programs that foster belonging, self-awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution are also linked to protective effects across emotional, behavioural, and relational domains (Allen et al., 2016; CASEL, 2020).

Respect and Connect provides a trauma-informed learning environment and seeks to remove feelings of shame that can accompany these challenging topics. Program facilitators foster a safe space for students to explore their ideas whilst also promoting accountability for behaviours that drive gendered violence.

Primary prevention initiatives that address the key drivers of gendered violence and seek to change and shift the underlying social conditions that enable violence against women, strengthening prosocial behaviours and respectful relationships, can reduce and prevent the violence occurring in the first place (Our Watch, 2021).

The program incorporates these elements through a structured and developmentally appropriate curriculum, delivered using interactive and strengths-based pedagogies. Its design is further detailed through a set of key evidence-based principles (see section 3).

b. Evaluation and Program Data

Since its inception, Respect and Connect has been subject to ongoing evaluation to assess its effectiveness and inform continuous improvement. Evaluation methods have included pre- and post-program student surveys, teacher feedback forms and, more recently, student focus groups. With a conscious focus on ensuring the student voice these have been used to assess outcomes related to social and emotional competence, comprehension of gender equity, help-seeking behaviour, and relationship and conflict skills.

In 2018, the program achieved '**Promising Program**' status with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, reflecting its documented theory and research base, strong program logic, qualified facilitators, and commitment to best-practice delivery.

Evaluations conducted between 2019 and 2024 consistently show improvements in students':

- understanding of healthy versus unhealthy relationships
- communication and conflict resolution skills
- emotional intelligence and empathy
- awareness of gender stereotypes and their impact
- knowledge of how and where to seek help.

Recent focus group findings also suggest that students apply their learnings in practical and reflective ways, such as identifying personal boundaries, de-escalating conflict, recognising toxic dynamics, and showing increased empathy.

'I learned that emotional intelligence is being aware of your feelings and emotions and knowing how to control them.'

– Focus group participant

'Communication is crucial in a relationship.'

– Focus group participant

Teachers have consistently rated the program highly, with average scores of over 8/10 for both satisfaction and relevance to school needs.

'The program affirms and supports other conversations and activities the students do in the curriculum... gives students an opportunity to have a voice, to consolidate learning about respectful relationships and communication.'

– Teacher

The cumulative evidence points to Respect and Connect as a brief, targeted intervention that contributes meaningfully to broader efforts in prevention, wellbeing, and respectful relationships education.

5. Evaluation Findings

Evaluation of Respect and Connect has spanned diverse groups and school settings, with a combination of pre- and post-program surveys, focus groups, and teacher feedback used to assess outcomes.

Across these methods, the program has demonstrated consistent and meaningful improvements in key areas of student learning and engagement.

a. Quantitative Findings

Evaluation data collected between 2019 and 2024 shows positive change across all core domains of the program. These include:

- **Healthy relationships and gender equality**
Students reported increased understanding of respectful and abusive relationship dynamics, as well as greater awareness of how gender stereotypes can negatively impact individuals and relationships.
- **Emotional intelligence and empathy**
Participants showed improved self-awareness, emotional regulation, and ability to understand others' perspectives.
- **Communication and conflict resolution**
Students expressed stronger confidence in communicating their feelings and managing conflict in relationships.

- **Help-seeking behaviour**

A large majority of students reported knowing where to go for help if they needed support after completing the program.

These outcomes were consistent across year levels and gender identities and were supported by teacher feedback noting observed changes in student behaviour and awareness.

b. Snapshot Survey (2024)

A redesigned post-program survey introduced in 2024 found high levels of agreement with program learning statements. Most students reported increased ability to recognise warning signs in relationships, manage conflict, and understand their own and others' emotions. Students also identified poor relationship skills, social media, and abusive relationships as major issues facing their peers, demonstrating critical reflection on program themes.

c. Qualitative Insights

A 2023 focus group with year 8 students highlighted the following key areas of perceived learning.

- Boundaries and communication were named as the most important skills developed.
- Students expressed new understanding of emotional intelligence, including self-regulation, body language, and empathy.
- The ability to recognise and disengage from toxic or unhealthy relationships was seen as a significant takeaway.
- Students appreciated structured disagreement activities that allowed for reflection and discussion in a safe way.

Teacher surveys reinforced these findings, with many reporting that program content prompted continued discussion and supported broader curriculum goals.

6. Conclusion

This report has drawn together key evidence and evaluation findings from Respect and Connect to provide an overview of the program's structure, intent, and outcomes. Across multiple years and delivery settings, the program has consistently supported improvements in student awareness, confidence, and interpersonal skills. This brief, targeted intervention contributes meaningfully to school-based prevention efforts and provides a strong foundation for further learning and engagement.

References

- Allen, K.-A., Vella-Brodick, D., & Waters, L. (2016). Fostering School Belonging in Secondary Schools Using a Socio-Ecological Framework. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2016.5>
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]. (2014). Australian Curriculum personal and social capability (Version 8.4). <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability>
- Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2021). Re: Australian Curriculum Review [Submission]. ANROWS.
- Berger E., Reupert A., Allen, K. (2020) School-based prevention and early intervention for student mental health and wellbeing: an evidence check rapid review. The Sax Institute. <https://doi.org/10.57022/qnen3481>
- Caldarella, P., Christensen, L., Kramer, T.J. & Kronwiller, K. (2009). Promoting social and emotional learning in second grade students: A study of the strong start curriculum. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 37, 51–56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-009-0321-4>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted? <https://casel.org/casel-sel-framework-11-2020/>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Evans, R. (2015). Emotional pedagogy and the gendering of social and emotional learning. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(2), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.107310>
- Flood, M., Fergus, L. and Heenan, M. (2009). Respectful relationships education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools. Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne.
- Flood, M. (2020). Literature review on the prevention of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Unpublished, Queensland University of Technology.
- Frydenberg, E., Martin, A.J., & Collie, R.J., (2017). *Social and Emotional Learning in Australia and the Asia-Pacific*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3394-0_1
- Hawkins, J. D., Kosterman, R., Catalano, R. F., Hill, K. G., Abbott, R. D. (2005). Promoting Positive Adult Functioning Through Social Development Intervention in Childhood: Long-term Effects From the Seattle Social Development Project. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 159(1):25–31. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.159.1.25>
- Low, S., Cook, C. R., Smolkowski, K. & Buntain-Ricklefs, J. (2015). Promoting social–emotional competence: An evaluation of the elementary version of Second Step®. *Journal of School Psychology*, (53)6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2015.09.002>.
- Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* (2nd ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch.
- Our Watch. (2022). *Respectful relationships education toolkit: Overview*. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch.

Pufall Jones, E., Margolius, M., Skubel, A., Flanagan, S., & Hynes, M. (2020). *All of Who I Am: Perspectives from young people about how learning happens*. America's Promise Alliance. Washington, DC

Sahlberg, P., Goldfeld, S., Quach, J., Senior, C., & Sinclair, C. (2023). *Reinventing Australian schools for the better wellbeing, health and learning of every child*. Centre for Community Child Health. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Australia.

Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., Ritter, M.D., Ben, J. & Gravesteyn, C. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 892-909. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21641>

Stanley, N., Ellis, J., Farrelly, N., Hollinghurst, S., & Downe, S. (2015). Preventing domestic abuse for children and young people: A review of school-based interventions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 59, 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.10.018>

Tomova, L., Andrews, J. L., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2021). The importance of belonging and the avoidance of social risk taking in adolescence. *Developmental Review*, 61, Article 100981. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100981>

Victorian Government. (2024). *Respectful relationships*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/respectful-relationships>

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong theoretical evidence base of expected program effectiveness in building social emotional competence (SEC) and preventing violence against women (VAW) Strong pedagogical evidence base of program suitability and expected effectiveness Program manual linking theory, pedagogy, and praxis Qualified and experienced facilitators with background in strengths-based pedagogical approaches, mental health and/or social sciences, and skills in building rapport with young people Classroom teachers who are informed about, and invested in, program success Established networks with school and community groups Policies, procedures, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship education run in schools over a 4-week period for upper primary and secondary schools Teacher and parent sessions to form part of wider Respectful Relationships whole-school approach Handouts, video content, interactive activities Evaluation surveys Content: <u>Relationship competence</u> – building self- and social awareness and relationship skills to promote and support healthy classroom climate, respectful relationships, and positive mental health <u>Gender equality</u> – building understanding of impact social norms and stereotypes can have on individuals and relationships, and how to critically reflect on these to inform an 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of schools/groups Number of students Development of evidence-based content on healthy relationships and gender-based violence (GBV) Implementation of evaluation forms Data management Develop and maintain relationships with schools Facilitator liaison with school staff regarding any student risk or concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased SEC in 5 key domains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-awareness Social awareness Self-management Relationship skills Responsible decision-making Improved classroom climate Increased awareness of resources and access to support Increased awareness of gender stereotypes and inequalities Increased confidence in identifying healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviours Increased knowledge in positive coping skills to support mental wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased pro-social behaviours Increased resilience Decreased antisocial behaviours Increased academic performance (outcome of improved classroom climate) Increased interaction with support networks – teachers, welfare workers, community services, etc Improved inter- and intra- gender relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved mental and emotional wellbeing Prevention of gender-based violence Healthy, respectful relationships Reduction in VAW Improved community cohesion Improved educational and vocational outcomes

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<p>practice guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervision and training • Evaluation support • Video conferencing technology and equipment • Online portal with additional content, media, guides, and information for teachers, students and families to access post-program 	<p>understanding of self-in-society (socio-ecological model of mental health)</p> <p><u>Emotional intelligence and self-care</u> – building self- and social management skills and empathy to improve self-regulation, pro-social behaviour, and social cohesion</p> <p><u>Effective communication</u> – building relationship and conflict resolution skills to reduce anti-social behaviour, prevent violence, and promote resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coordinator fields school enquiries and provides Respect and Connect program information ○ Coordinator carries out admin for bookings ○ Continuously develop curriculum content and incorporate evidence-base and best practice 				