Public Health Association of Australia submission on improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools

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Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia. The PHAA works to ensure that the public’s health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.

Preamble

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools. The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. The Australian Government, in collaboration with the States/Territories, should outline a comprehensive national cross-government framework on promoting a healthy ecosystem and reducing social and health inequities. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.
PHAA Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

The prevalence of sexualised content and the unsafe use of technology by students

Recent national survey data in Australia shows that digital technology is not only a fundamental part of young people’s lives, but engaging with this technology for sexual reasons is common. In the National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health, over 90% of Year 10, 11 and 12 students in 2014 reported regularly using Facebook and the majority of sexually active students reported using technology for sexual reasons. Of sexually active students, 84% had received and 72% had sent sexually explicit text messages, while 70% had received a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else, and 50% had sent one of themselves. For example, just under one-quarter (23%) of the Australian users of Snapchat, the social media platform designed for sharing images which disappear a few seconds after being viewed, are in the 13-17 year age group. These figures clearly show that this becoming a normalised part of young people’s sexual behaviours. It makes sense then, for education around these types of behaviours to be incorporated into education on healthy and respectful relationships.

Where the use of digital technology for sexual reasons introduces newer and more difficult issues is with the extent to which it is able to be used by a third party without consent. One-quarter (25%) of male students and one-in-ten (11%) female students surveyed had sent sexually explicit images of someone else. It is not clear from these data whether this was done with the consent of the person in the image or not. Research supports the view that young people are most often using technology in ways that are ethical, safe and enhance their relationships, and that using fear to ‘educate’ about young people, technology use and sex is not useful. Media campaigns and public education materials have been criticised by young people for failing to acknowledge the capacity of young women for consensual production and exchange of images. This issue requires consideration of many issues, including what is safe and unsafe, whether there are different definitions in different contexts and why.

How adequately the Health and Physical Education curriculum supports students to make safe and healthy choices and understand respectful relationships, particularly given students’ greater access to technology

There are a number of issues with the HPE curriculums ability to support students. Firstly, the curriculum is not compulsory so there is no guarantee that all students will get access to the content. Secondly, there is no standardised evaluation mechanism, which means that even for students who do get access, we have no way of measuring whether learning outcomes are being met. Research from 2015 indicates that young people did not feel that school relationships and sexuality education (RSE) supported them to understand respectful relationships (RR) and important issues such as consent. Young people also feel that current education around the sexual use of technology does not, for example, emphasise the responsibility not to share images without consent. These subjects should be approached from a primary prevention perspective rather than a reactionary approach – building on the capacity of young people for ethical decision making and consent rather than just focusing on risk. The management of respectful relationships has changed and the curriculum must acknowledge these changes and the new nuances and issues that arise with them.

There should be a consistent but not overly proscriptive approach taken. Technology and the ways in which it is used are constantly changing and evolving, and the education of young people around it will need to constantly evolve and change to keep up.
The potential benefits of students being better informed about the risks behind the use of technology in a sexual nature

The statistics presented above show that it is already a reality that young people are using technology in their sexual lives. Therefore, the need for them to be well informed about the risks is not so much ‘just in case it’s relevant’, but ‘how to make sure it’s safe’. Being informed about the risks will mean young people are better able to keep themselves safe through being ethical and responsible, and thinking critically. Understanding the implications (both positive and negative) of using location settings, meeting unknown people, and other risk factors. It also assists young people know what to do if they accidentally access unwanted content (such as on pornography sites) or are contacted by strangers online. Collectively, improved education and understanding on a community level will help to build responsible digital citizenship, including respecting boundaries and respecting others, and the etiquette of engaging with others in the online space.

Other potential benefits go beyond simply ‘avoiding the risks and dangers’, to identifying and embracing the good. There are positives to technology and the online environment when used effectively and to our advantage. Information sharing and open communication can flourish and be used to support the development of healthy relationships. Students can learn in a safe space when the parameters of that are identified and used effectively.

Conclusion

PHAA supports the broad directions of the inquiry. However, we are keen to ensure the education of young people takes into account both the challenges and opportunities presented by this, in line with this submission. We are particularly keen that the following points are highlighted:

- Technology has changed the sexual behaviours and relationships of young people – we need to keep up to avoid ‘us and them’
- There are many benefits to be gained from building young people’s capacity for respectful relationships and good digital citizenship
- Possibilities for using technology in a positive way should be identified and used effectively

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and the opportunity to contribute to improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland schools.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

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References