

EXPECT RESPECT: CHANGING THE SCRIPT ON RELATIONSHIPS

TAMEAKA LAKEY¹; ALEXANDRA BELL¹

¹*Ballarat Community Health, Ballarat, Australia*

Background:

To prevent gender-based violence, it's essential to address the societal attitudes and conditions that enable it. This includes challenging harmful views about women and children, promoting gender equality and encouraging respectful relationships. Although respectful relationships, sexuality and consent education are part of the Victorian and Australian curriculum; implementation varies widely, and many teachers feel unprepared to teach it effectively.

Approach:

Ballarat Community Health (BCH) led the development of the *Expect Respect* program to enhance and further complement the curriculum using performing arts to engage year 10 students in practical and creative ways to learn about respectful, safe and equitable relationships. The program delivers a live-theatre performance accompanied by a question-and-answer session with a panel of local experts to unpack the key issues and give students the opportunity to ask questions. Help-seeking information is provided, and students are encouraged to access support from existing services.

Outcome:

The *Expect Respect* program piloted in 2024/25, reaching 671 students across six Ballarat schools. Staff praised its age-appropriate, engaging content that balanced serious topics with a light tone. Evaluation showed most students felt their understanding of respectful relationships improved, with many intending to speak up, respect boundaries, and seek help—demonstrating the program's positive impact. Many students appreciated the opportunity to engage with panel members to discuss the issues raised in the performance.

Innovation and Significance:

Theatre-based education is a creative and innovative way to teach young people about respect and healthy relationships. Through live performance, students engage emotionally with real-life scenarios, making concepts like consent, boundaries, and gender equality more relatable and memorable—especially when traditional methods fall short.

Embedding *Expect Respect* within BCH's Health Promoting Schools Framework ensures a whole-of-school approach. The program is then supported by policies, procedures, staff training, and referral pathways, helping schools foster safe, inclusive environments where respectful relationships are actively promoted and supported.