



18 APR, 2021

AN EARLY START

Sunday Age, Melbourne



New mother Brea Kunstler with her 18 month old daughter Abby. Photo: Chris Hopkins

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Experts have criticised the federal government's sex education package, which does not discuss consent until year 10. Many say such lessons should begin with toddlers.

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Respect and consent 'should be taught in a child's first 1000 days'

Wendy Tuohy

Sex education experts have criticised the federal government's new Respectful Relationships teaching resource for not introducing consent until year 10, as early childhood educators say the concept should be taught as children learn to talk.

Playgroups Victoria chief executive Danny Schwarz is among those pushing for gender equality and respect to be taught in the formative first 1000 days of children's lives.

Mr Schwarz said he agreed with Liberal MP and former psychologist Fiona Martin, who said last month that universal compulsory education about consent, respectful relationships and protective behaviours should begin as soon as children start to talk, but said it should go further and be introduced even before children start speaking.

This comes as education academics say the federal government's Respectful Relationships resource package, the Good Society, which is part of the government's Respect Matters program, leaves the introduction of ideas around consent too late, introducing it in year 10.

Deakin University chair in education Amanda Keddie said while some videos in the Good Society were powerful, the material was ad hoc and some primary school content was simplistic and patronising "and doesn't have a critical focus on gender".

Problems with the package, released on Wednesday, included "the fact a critical analysis of gender doesn't really happen, certainly in the primary material, and sexual consent doesn't come out until years 11 and 12", Professor Keddie said.

She said a video called *Kiss*

reinforces gender stereotypes "with girls as moral gatekeepers and boys as sexual instigators - it reproduces dominant stereotypes about women".

Our Watch, the federally funded national agency for the prevention of violence against women, distanced itself from the the Good Society package on Friday, after a reference to the body having been consulted was made in a government media release. "Our Watch was consulted between late 2017 and early 2019 when the materials were being developed and provided advice. We have not been asked to use or endorse the materials subsequently," the Our Watch statement said.

"Our Watch advocates for a whole-of-school approach to violence prevention education that addresses the gendered drivers of violence."

Churchill fellow Katrina Marson, who researches the use of relationships and sex education to safeguard sexual wellbeing, said the consent education included in the Good Society was "10 years too late".

"If we're talking about things like bodily autonomy and boundaries [which are a basis for later sexual consent education], year 10 is far too late for that. That's the first thing you start with, at three or four years old," Ms Marson said.

University of Technology Sydney associate professor and president of the Australian Association for

Adolescent Health Melissa Kang said materials aimed at foundation (prep) to year 9 students were generic and "gender norms and stereotypes are dealt with superficially". "Bodily autonomy is a pillar of consent education and I did not see the expression or anything that approaches the concept

discussed anywhere."

Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge said yesterday the resources were developed in consultation with experts, including the eSafety Commissioner, Foundation for Young Australians, and parent, teacher and community groups. Content was aligned with the national curriculum, which was agreed with all states and territories.

"Ultimately states and territories and individual schools will decide what materials are best suited for their students," he said.

"Parents can also use the materials to help discuss these issues with their kids at any age, noting they are the most important people in teaching about respectful relationships."

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is consulting relationships experts and teachers as it prepares to release proposed content changes and has acknowledged the status quo "may not be sufficient".

Our Watch CEO Patty Kinnersly agreed with Mr Schwarz that respectful relationships themes and age-appropriate information about bodily autonomy should be introduced to children as young as possible.

"The push is definitely on [for the earlier introduction of respectful relationships material]."

Playgroups Victoria already runs one music playgroup program that includes positive messages about gender equality, inclusion and respect, which was piloted with funding from the Office for Women and is now supported by Gandel Philanthropy.

Brea Kunstler, who attended Playgroup Victoria's online groups with her 18-month-old daughter Abby during the pandemic, said



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introducing ideas about respectful relationships to very young children was important.

“It’s important that Abby comes across healthy relationships between adults and other kids and absorbs that exposure as a passive participant,” said Ms Kunstler, a physiotherapist and behavioural change scientist.

‘If we’re talking about bodily autonomy and boundaries, year 10 is far too late for that. That’s the first thing you start with, at three or four.’

Katrina Marson, Churchill fellow and relationships education researcher



Brea Kunstler with
18-month-old
daughter Abby.
Photo: Chris Hopkins