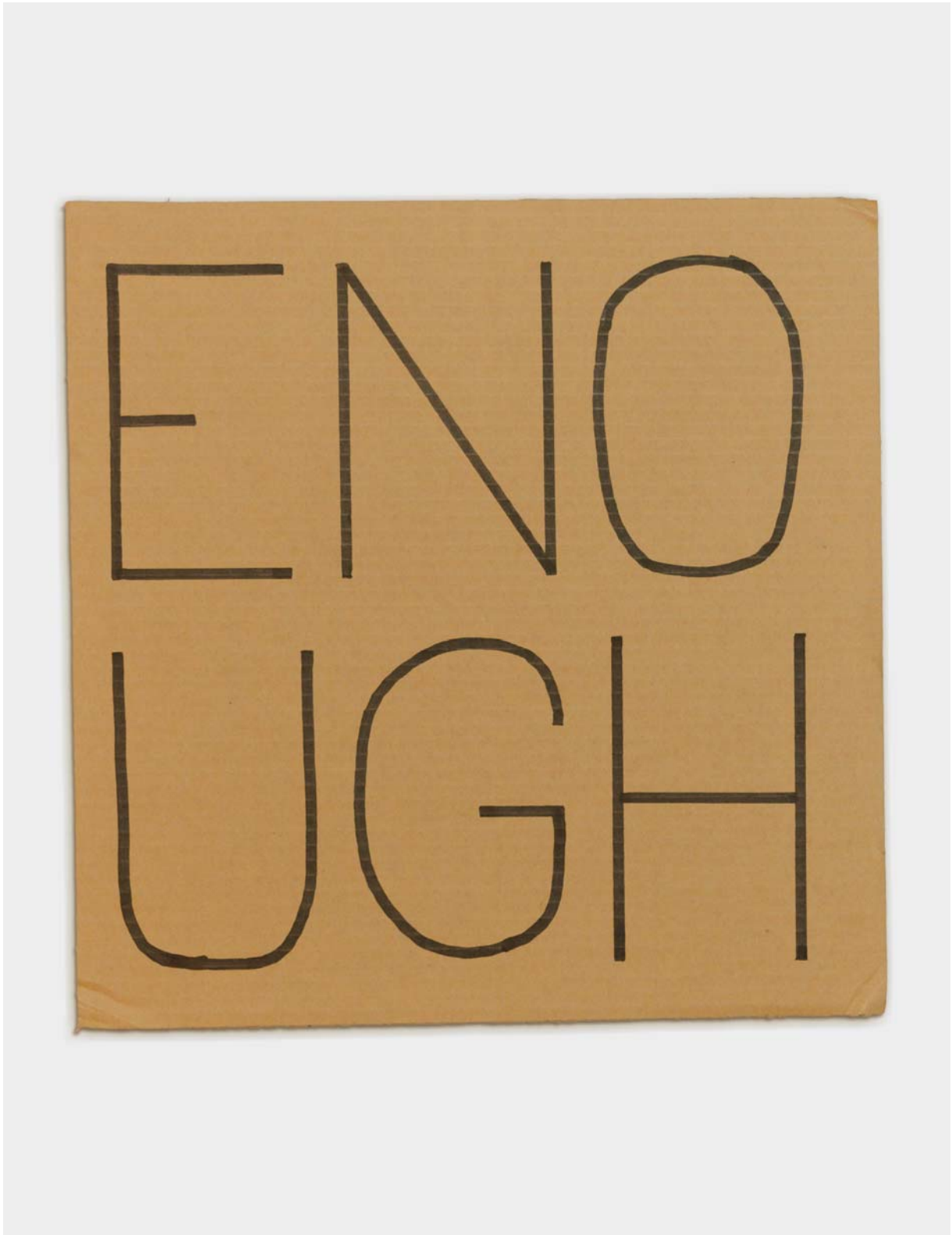


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Chanel Contos's campaign to expose the prevalence of sexual assault among schoolchildren has brought much-needed attention to the need for relationships and sexuality education in schools. The next step is a commitment from governments, which must get past the myths, follow the research and provide the means.

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by Bri Lee

I start, as I always do, with a simple slide that says, "Here's what you need to know about me, and here's what I know about you." It's always a good icebreaker, but on this particular Wednesday in March I'm presenting to more than 200 students, so it's critical I establish the right mix of authority and relatability immediately. "I'm 29, cisgender and in a long-term heterosexual relationship, sexually active, admitted to the legal profession and a researcher, and a survivor of a sex crime." The survivor part usually delivers the intended "hush" effect before I make a few jokes: that it's important they know I'm sexually active because I got my "sex ed" from a nun who, if we believe her, had no firsthand experience. That gets a laugh, and we're off.

"Here's what I know about you," I say. Almost half of Year 10 to 12 students are sexually active. Of those, 28 per cent have experienced "unwanted" sexual activity. If they're girls over 15, at least 20 per cent have been sexually assaulted, and if they're boys over 15, it's one in 25.

Research suggests about a third of them are sexting or sending nudes, but I think it's probably higher. At least 20 per cent are LGBTIQ+.

"What all this means is that in a room of 200 Year 11 and 12 students, statistically, I'm speaking to some survivors, some perpetrators, and some of you who may go on to become one or the other. I'm going to presume you all want what's best for each other, and I'm going to respect you and presume you respect me."

It was a state school about 15 kilometres north of Sydney's centre, and I was there because I'd authored a book about sex crime and spent a few years advocating for consent law reform. For the first time, I was speaking about consent to a hall full of girls and boys together. Previously, I had only ever been invited to speak at girls-only schools, or to the girls only at co-educational schools. That's how it had been earlier that week, when I spoke to this school's senior girls, while at the same time the boys were hearing a talk from a male

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Contos's goal was to get 500 signatures. It's now at 40,000 and rising.

presenter about mental health and financial planning. The presentations were part of the school's personal development week, during which seniors learn about drugs and alcohol, for example.

"Why aren't the boys getting this talk?" one of the girls asked at the end of my earlier session with them.

"That's a great question," I replied. "Maybe your teachers can answer that." They could and they did. Apparently, the teachers didn't realise that the male presenter wouldn't be talking to the boys about sex, and the deputy principal was disappointed by the disparity in presentations. I believed her, she apologised, and we made plans for my return on Wednesday to speak again with the whole senior student cohort present.

Requests for these consent talks come to me directly from teachers or school leaders, or occasionally through my speaking agents. Every single time I've gone to a new school – a handful in Queensland and now a couple in New South Wales – it has been abundantly clear that one or two of the staff have taken it upon themselves to get me in, and convinced the school to find the money to pay me. I am, by definition, extra-curricular. I meet teachers who feel their hands are tied and are delighted to parachute me in, avoiding larger headaches around curriculum, cranky parents and professional obligations. I always say some variation of "I wish the boys heard my talk", and they always reply affirmatively, but never, until March 2021, had any person or school acted on it.

The systematic exclusion of boys from presentations about consent is the result of a powerful one-two punch: our society still tells girls they can and must prevent people from sexually assaulting them, and usually only private schools (overwhelmingly single-sex) can afford to bring in external speakers. I am keenly aware that delivering any kind of information (let alone sensitive material) to young people is a specialist skill – that highly trained experts should be doing it, and doing it multiple times a year, rather than it being a one-off by a writer and researcher like me. And it should be reinforced by teachers and parents, and there should be watertight mechanisms for students to report things they're worried about after hearing the presentation, and, and, and... I say "yes" because a bandaid is better than an open wound. I say "yes" because every single time I stand in front of kids, in their desperate, fascinated faces I see that they are starving for clear and accessible information about sex and consent.

SO, WHAT MADE MARCH 2021 different enough for me to finally get an audience with the boys? The confluence of factors now seems obvious: the allegations of rape and sexual assault in both federal and state governments, the March 4 Justice, and the campaign started by Chanel

Contos that led to thousands of young women publicly sharing personal accounts of sexual assault by their peers during their school years. Contos, 23, spoke to me from where she now lives in London, studying a masters in gender and education at University College London.

"The first time I got told what consent was, I was 15," she says, "and the first thing I did was go straight to the office of the head of senior school and say 'that needs to be done earlier' – and obviously they didn't listen to me." Contos hadn't realised until hearing the presentation at school that she herself had been sexually assaulted. The catalyst for her starting the online campaign to get better consent education in schools was realising that she and her friends had strikingly similar experiences. At a sleepover last year, Contos named the boy who had assaulted her, and one of her friends revealed that she'd been assaulted by the same boy. "And then we realised that, like, he had done it to both of us, the exact same thing, and I was just so frustrated because he did it to my friend a year later ... If I had known what sexual assault was, if I had known that I was sexually assaulted then, to be honest I don't think I would have gone to the police, but I would have at least told him it wasn't okay, or told his parents, or told the school or told my parents, or something. And that would have stopped [it] happening to her, I think."

Contos collected survivor testimonies from young women she personally knew before moving to London, where another incident involving the sexual assault of a friend at a party reignited her determination to act. She and her friend were crying, discussing how the assaults continued to affect them and their ability to be intimate in future relationships, and Contos asked, "Do they even know that they've raped us? We're sitting here realising we had a delayed realisation that we've been raped, but do they know that they did this?"

Though now abroad, her plan was to collect Australian testimonies to give to the private schools themselves. "And the reason it was private schools was because that was my context. And because they're the ones who have the ability to work outside the curriculum, and I never thought I would have the influence to be able to change the actual curriculum." Within 24 hours the portal for people to submit stories and sign the petition had gone viral. Contos's goal was to get 500 signatures. It's now at 40,000 and rising. She soon had virtual meetings with all the private-school principals in Sydney's eastern suburbs and there was an immediate acknowledgement of the problem, but not necessarily a commitment to ongoing work.

"They were pretty shocked and didn't really know how to handle it. They were just kind of like, 'What can we do? What's next?' And then they all rushed and got in consent talks that missed the mark, because it's the same

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speaker that I had, and all the schools have: Brent Sanders. He's an ex-cop, and he's really good at teaching what sexual assault is and the criminal punishments for it, but... it's very victim-blaming. It's telling the girls to not get sexually assaulted. It was enough for me to realise that I'd been sexually assaulted, but it didn't address opportunistic rapists, because it didn't address toxic masculinity. It didn't address sexual coercion. It didn't address all the societal pressures that create that environment. And I'm sure there's still a lot of girls who had been sexually assaulted that probably couldn't pinpoint it from that [talk]."

Not everyone has been receptive to Contos's message. The principal of "one of the most prestigious boys' schools" told her they couldn't possibly teach any course or information that included the term "toxic masculinity" because that term was "a bit aggressive". At a meeting with 24 representatives of an alumni network for independent schools in Sydney, only 12 would sign a pledge to do better, and one who signed later withdrew their endorsement.

Principals and school leaders started sending letters out to parents and guardians, but many were lacklustre, still placing the burden of preventing assault on the shoulders of their daughters, rather than taking the opportunity to work on educating their sons as well. Kincoppal-Rose Bay School of the Sacred Heart told parents to support their daughters by "having conversations regarding consent, the impact of alcohol, risk-taking behaviours and self-respect". The head of Ascham School, Andrew Powell, wrote to their community: "We encourage our current parent body to continue to have regular conversations with their daughters about consent, about the effects of alcohol, about safe partying practices, and the importance of firm personal boundaries." The principal of Loreto Normanhurst, Marina Ugonotti, wrote: "The support of Parents in having regular conversations with your daughters regarding consent, the impact of alcohol, risk-taking behaviours, and self-respect is critical." Meanwhile at boys' school Trinity Grammar, headmaster Tim Bowden wrote to parents asking them to stop hosting parties with alcohol and no supervision, saying: "These parties cause heart-breaking and life-breaking damage ... In hosting a party of this sort, parents end up creating an environment that enables sexual assault. This is not a statement I make lightly, and I recognise that the statement will cause offence, but I believe the conclusion is inescapable." King's School headmaster Tony George asked in his missive to parents, "do we really think an intoxicated teenage boy is going to have the presence of mind to recall his sex education curriculum and restrain himself at a boozed-up party when given the opportunity to pursue his porn-filled imagination and desire? If footballers and parliamentary staffers can't do it, I think not. Our children need our support and supervision."

In one co-educational public school's rush to be seen to be responding to the petition and testimonies, an assembly was held to speak about these issues. According to the Brauer College principal, Jane Boyle, "As part of this

discussion, boys were asked to stand as a symbolic gesture of apology for the behaviours of their gender that have hurt or offended girls and women." Parents were outraged that their innocent boys were being demonised. The internet exploded with shock and scorn. The school apologised.

The federal government launched its Respect Matters program in mid April, with resources for "respectful relationship education" made available to schools, including an online portal called The Good Society, which offers a range of videos tailored for different school years. The videos, with their inexplicable throwback to 1950s instructional style, have been much derided for being conceptually absurd, avoiding frank discussion of the issues, and seeming to be uncomfortable with directing too much attention on boys' behaviour. The program has been developed within the government's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022, yet one video explains consent by portraying a bullying girl rubbing a milkshake into a boy's face. At the time of writing, that video had received so much ridicule it was taken offline, but among the many remaining is one that purports to teach kids about how to get what they want while maintaining respect for others, by contrasting the inability of a taco to consent to being eaten.

Contos has meanwhile conducted virtual meetings with state and federal MPs; some good, some not so good. Responses have been "a little bit defensive". Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge admitted to her that she was "surprisingly more convincing" than he thought she'd be, telling Contos she had her "head screwed on right". But their meeting didn't result in any commitments apart from Tudge saying he would put her in contact with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and "stay in touch".

A meeting with Queensland's education minister, Grace Grace, proved more constructive, and in Victoria Contos has addressed a group of Liberal MPs and is scheduled to address representatives from Labor. She also has unconfirmed plans to brief federal and NSW MPs.

"It upsets me that we think they're protecting their innocence – this information doesn't corrupt them, it actually defends them."

KATRINA MARSON IS A CRIMINAL LAWYER and a researcher at Rape & Sexual Assault Research & Advocacy. She travelled to Europe and North America on a Churchill Fellowship in 2019 to see how other countries implement relationships and sexuality education (RSE). I met with Marson to ask her what, beyond the biological reproduction conversation, Australian students are being told about sex and consent right now.

"We don't know what everyone is getting," she says. "It is vastly inconsistent between jurisdictions and

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within jurisdictions. There's some guidance in the national curriculum, but schools are vested with a significant amount of autonomy in how they deliver it and what is in fact delivered ... We need an audit, basically."

At the end of February, ABC reporter Lauren Roberts put together an article attempting to outline the approaches of each state and territory, but the picture is far from clear. Spokespeople for governments and organisations conflate "stranger danger"-style awareness-raising with bodily autonomy and personal boundaries. There is also little inclination to distinguish between programs that are "available" and those actually being delivered. For example, as per one statement: "Many Tasmanian schools also engage with a range of support services, such as the Sexual Assault Support Service, which is currently working with a number of Tasmanian schools to deliver its Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention program." I have travelled to Hobart and met people from that organisation who said the lack of funding has prevented them from rolling out this program in any kind of comprehensive way.

Nationwide it is a patchwork. The federal government's new Good Society online resource is free but voluntary, and it is receiving damning criticism from RSE advocates, some principals and state government leaders. Marson describes its videos as "artificial and confusing". "Young people have a right to accurate information about sexuality, consent and relationships," she says. "There are legitimate questions about the extent of consultation with relevant experts that was undertaken in the development of these products ... Quite apart from the quality of the resources, where is the focus on infrastructure? How are teachers being trained and parents being engaged? Without fixing the strategy and the infrastructure, even the best sex-ed curriculum will fall drastically short."

I've lost count of the number of teachers who've told me that the students just "switch off" when the police liaison officers arrive.

Elsewhere, there is a little in the curriculum (depending on where you live and if your school is government or non-government), and then, for senior students, some police officers or, if your school can afford it, an external presenter here and there. Generally, Victoria and New South Wales have better programs than elsewhere, but the crossover between "religious education" and "health education" is often still nebulous and subject to limited oversight.

Marson doesn't endorse any particular product, curriculum, module or company to deliver it. "I advocate for the structural reform necessary to make this happen at scale, and happen well. Because if we rush this - 'great, we fixed the curriculum, that's all we need to do' - it's not

going to work ... Teaching about consent cannot be an isolated module. Conversations around consent need to be part of a broader, more holistic relationships and sexuality education program.

"If you carve respectful relationships out from the topic of sexuality, you're not going to have the targeted response that you want."

Sexualised violence is a specialist issue, Marson says, and talking about respectful relationships and how to treat each other respectfully without talking about sexuality is artificial.

Marson has a valuable way of framing RSE: harm-prevention is a positive byproduct that flows from something that is actually a right. "How can we justify depriving young people of access to information that they need to lead healthy, fulfilling lives as they move into their sexual life? Sexual health, as we recognise it internationally, is a really important part of human well-being generally. It upsets me that we think they're protecting their innocence, and that's why I called my report 'Ignorance is not Innocence' - this information doesn't corrupt them, it actually defends them."

A recurring frustration for both Contos and Marson is the myth that talking to young people about sex and consent will encourage sexual behaviour, when all of the evidence shows the opposite is true. Marson's report cites numerous studies from Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, and a body of research by Australian experts Moira Carmody and Anastasia Powell. The more information we give young people about sex, the later age they are likely to engage in sexual behaviours.

In Germany, RSE programs sit within the national health department. That's a long way from Australian schools bringing in police officers. "Equating the issue of relationships and sex ed with law enforcement is a reflection of the fact that we don't understand, or don't recognise, that this is a specialist subject matter," says Marson. "This is not just about risk mitigation."

I've lost count of the number of teachers who've told me that the students just "switch off" when the police liaison officers arrive. Even worse is the contrast in the lessons boys and girls receive. On Brent Sanders' website, the talk for boys is called "Life Choices for Young Men", with a focus on delivering "a frank, open and down-to-earth presentation to the boys which examines critical issues such as peer pressure, decision making, self-discipline, respect, motivation and essential keys required for success". The talk for the girls is called "Back Off", and is described as "not a physical based martial arts type course", but one "centred around knowledge, assertiveness and basic conflict psychology, with a focus on prevention". The obvious disparity between the two courses is offensive - boys being taught about success and girls being taught how to keep themselves safe from predators - yet Sanders continues to be a popular guest in schools. He is the author of the self-published book *How Dangerous Men Think: And how to stay safe for life*, and

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“Why do you want to be having sex with someone who doesn’t want to be having sex with you?”

he sells this material as “a very practical guide that will change the way you think. No matter your age, this is a book no woman should be without.” The overall messaging is quite different to what students hear me say.

I DON’T SHOW schools my material to “check” beforehand, and if a school tried to control or censor my content I would refuse to attend. In this space it is possible to do more harm than good by allowing certain gaps or silences. The shape of my presentation is that we have to talk about “good sex” before we can talk about “bad sex”. What this means is asking why 25 to 30 per cent of women report sometimes feeling “pain or discomfort” during sex, but only 2 per cent of men. It means asking why 95 per cent of men having heterosexual sex have orgasms compared with 65 per cent of women. These problems arise in a world in which sex is considered something someone *does to* someone else, instead of something two people, as equals, do together. There are certain phrases and ideas I repeat throughout; for example, “Why do you want to be having sex with someone who doesn’t want to be having sex with you?”

The next phase of my presentation is about the legal definition of consent: when it does and doesn’t exist. Then we move quite quickly on to the ethical definition of consent. I tell them what I truly feel in my gut: that it sucks that these two things don’t always overlap. But because I’m there to give them information that might help them be happy and healthy, rather than legal advice, we focus on ethical, not legal, consent. I give examples of power imbalances that are obvious (the assistant manager at your work in the coolroom) and less obvious (the rich school captain who’s picked you up from the party in his dad’s Merc). The bottom line is, unless it’s an enthusiastic “yes”, it’s a “no”. I ask them again, because feedback from my previous session tells me it’s important: “Why would you want to be having sex with someone who doesn’t want to be having sex with you?” There are a few slides where we talk about examples where there’s no consent: drunk people, people swapping out (where sexual partners are switched without the other party’s knowledge), stealthing (the non-consensual removal of a condom during sex), and submission after relentless pressure. And then I give examples of easy ways to “check in” with a partner.

One of my favourite parts is talking to kids about “safe sexting”. We hear the term “safe sex” all the time, but what about sending safe nudes? If I can even help a dozen young people understand they can send nudes without showing their faces or identifying features, imagine how much future stress and anxiety might be prevented. Minds are blown when I point out that the rules of interpersonal

consent extend to the sharing of digital media: you can withdraw consent (and ask for images to be deleted) at any time, you can slow down or speed up an exchange, and consenting to one person seeing your image never means consenting to others seeing it also.

The myth-busting part comes next and usually leads to some uncomfortable shifting in seats. I hit some key points here: parties don’t “cause” rape; short skirts and flirting don’t “cause” rape; sexual assault and abuse are most frequently perpetrated by someone known to the survivor, in a domestic setting and without the use of a weapon. The terrible truth is that if someone has decided to sexually assault you, there may be very little you can do about it. If you “freeze”, that’s normal. Do whatever you need to do to survive, and never blame yourself.

I know I still need to hit these basic, fundamental facts because of the questions students ask at the end of my sessions. I see the comments they leave on each other’s social media posts. I read research around best-practice in this area to make sure I’m up to date. Teachers and other young people tell me about conversations they overhear. Make no mistake: young people aren’t automatically more progressive about this stuff. Some of their mistakes and errors exhibit just how heartbreakingly, infuriatingly and comprehensively we are letting them down.

Contos says the two most common revelations among the thousands of sexual assault testimonies she has received are: oral sex can be rape; and a person who you know can rape you, it’s not just strangers. Some real questions I have received from students include: “If you say ‘I don’t know’, is that consent?”; “He can share around her nudes if she just sent them to him without him even asking for them, right? It’s different if she’s just volunteered them?”; and “What happens if the consent is influenced but is still given by a person? Like if someone is drunk or threatened?”

I am taking these questions from students who are, mostly, already sexually active. Contos’s epiphany probably happens all the time to students who are listening to me: they’re sitting there, coming to realise they’ve been sexually assaulted. Parents and teachers, in their eternally absurd desire to keep their heads in the sand, are preventing their children from living happy, healthy lives.

IN MARCH, the ABC’s Q&A did a show all about consent. One of the panellists was presenter and author Yumi Stynes, who had just co-authored a book called *Welcome to Consent!* with former “Dolly Doctor” advice columnist Dr Melissa Kang. Stynes raised a useful example of teaching very young children a safe word. Her children yell out “pineapple” or “eggplant” if they’re playing or being tickled and it gets too much. “It’s a muscle that

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you need to exercise,” Stynes said, about being able to say “no” or “stop”. Most adults would recognise the term “safe word” as something from bondage and sadomasochism communities, and it might make them feel awkward or uncomfortable, but it’s a useful tool for young people to lay foundations about how to withdraw consent long before sex even gets discussed. In Marson’s final Churchill report she writes: “At Coleham Primary School in Shropshire UK, I observed in a class of nine-year-olds that there was a bookshelf at the back of the room, with different shelves assigned to different genres. The top shelf was labelled ‘RSE’ and included books about bodies and reproduction; the teacher told me it was common for students to choose books from this shelf during silent reading time and nobody was ever teased for doing so.”

The problem with expecting RSE to improve via grassroots efforts is that it relies on the will and budgets of individual schools and individuals at schools. “You’ll never succeed without national government support,” Marson was told in Germany. That could come from national or state governments in Australia, but Marson says it is clear from everywhere she went overseas that “the role of government setting up the framework for this to actually flourish was integral to its success” because it’s such a huge task.

Grace describes “a group of very conservative elements in our education system that almost believe that you shouldn’t be doing any sex education”.

“You need government policy to provide the mandate and the means for this to happen. And so, when I say the mandate, I’m talking about things like legislation, putting it in the national curriculum to a greater extent, with more than just guidance. And then when I say the means, I mean actually assisting in the development of programs, contributing to the research around how you deliver such education, creating a broader sexual violence prevention strategy that this would form part of. And then actually funding the development of it as well as the training of teachers, for example, or experts to go into schools to deliver it.”

Marson’s report includes a diagram of six progressive stages consistent across all the countries that had been able to achieve laudable, comprehensive RSE. The first is “Advocate”. You need to advocate before you can move on to “Commit”, “Recognise”, “Equip”, “Engage” and “Evaluate”. Marson says Australia has only just reached stage one. “The [Contos] petition has been compelling because of the numbers and because of the fact that it’s coming from current and former students, and they are drawing the connection between the deficiency in their education and the sexual violence and harassment they’ve

experienced. And gradually the community consciousness has grown and grown.” She says the momentum is promising. “In all of these countries I went to, the implementation was predicated by a kind of increase in community awareness and advocacy around the topic. The next thing is the government needs to take this on as a matter of public policy.”

In Queensland, the education minister, Grace Grace, made announcements in early March about plans to overhaul and improve the state’s consent education plan. When I ask her what the catalyst for this was, she says that the testimony from students on Contos’s site made for “very disturbing reading”.

“A lot of [those reports] came from the non-government sector in the first instance,” Grace says, “and I wasn’t naive enough to think that this wasn’t happening in the government sector as well.” She wrote to Alan Tudge requesting that the issue of consent education be put on the agenda for the April 30 meeting in Melbourne of all the state and territory education ministers. “Politics is all numbers and timing. We’ve got the numbers to prove there’s an issue here, the voices are loud, the stories are numerous and the timing is right. This is an opportunity... [Can we get] ACARA to work across all the states to get a national consistent approach? Is that something we can do, or not?”

Grace’s commitment in Queensland is, essentially, to start with an audit. “The plan is to really get the department working across all of the school sector ... At the moment, we can control the government sector, but not the non-government sector. So, what we’ve been able to do is reach out to Independent Schools Queensland and the Catholic education system. And they will be working with us on ... how adequate is the current curriculum and education – respectful relations, all of that kind of stuff – that we provide in schools? Is it age appropriate? And how do we improve it?” Grace also said her department intended to “marry up” their findings and goals with the new taskforce announced by the state’s attorney-general and minister for justice, women and the prevention of domestic and family violence, Shannon Fentiman.

When I speak with Grace she has just finished dealing with what I’d describe as a “manufactured controversy”. One school in Queensland decided to make pins that students could wear, displaying their preferred pronouns. “You should have seen the media,” she says, describing polls on Facebook encouraging people to vote on whether or not all students at all schools should have to wear pronoun badges. “Will they just leave these kids alone, you know? They’ve come up with a really good idea. They seem to want to trial it. They think that this is going to work in their school – no one is saying that it’s got to be everywhere.” Grace describes “a group of very conservative elements in our education system that almost believe that you shouldn’t be doing any sex education, or any kind of training”. She is prepared for some pushback, acknowledging that the most common concern is age-appropriateness.

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“Talking about female pleasure was seen as a matter of values and not of information.”

Another common misconception is that by starting RSE in kindergarten, toddlers will be spoken to about sex, yet what early-years programs focus on is simply communication and bodily autonomy. It helps set a foundation and standard for respect that is built upon in later lessons that are explicitly about sex and sexuality. Early lessons for kids include teaching them ideas such as: “From my head to my toes, I say what goes.” These programs are also effective in encouraging children to report abuse and violence in the home, and establishing that conversations about bodies and wellbeing aren’t taboo. Grace is committed to hearing what young people themselves have to say about age-appropriate education. “I’ve got a student advisory council. We’re meeting in May, and I have written to them and asked them to think about these questions ... When do they think they’re old enough to hear about this?”

Marson’s insights on the inevitable pushback are particularly illuminating. Every country that has comprehensive RSE has had to push past the vocal minority of conservative voices. This can, and must, be planned for and dealt with early. “We need to recognise that there is a public response,” she says, as well as a political risk. “[But] both of those things are overestimated. The extent to which the public will be concerned about that is overestimated. And as a result, the political risk is overestimated.”

The vocal minority in Germany used a specific word, *frühsexualisierung* – that translates to “early sexualisation” – to attempt to derail the government’s plans. “You see the same response in the Netherlands, the UK, Canada,” Marson says. “It’s to be expected everywhere: this concern that talking to young people about sex and sexuality will encourage them to behave in that way, when we know the opposite is true.” Marson is defiant, arguing that pushback doesn’t make progress impossible so long as government and enough of the public are sufficiently committed to young people’s wellbeing.

My lingering scepticism has been around Australia’s unusual divide between government and non-government schools, and how the vast majority of non-government schools in Australia are Catholic. “I would point to Ireland as a really good example,” Marson says to my concerns, “because they are a very Catholic country. Ninety per cent of their schools – even though they are state schools – are Catholic-run. And yet just before I got there on my Churchill fellowship in 2019, they had completed a national review of the relationships and sexuality education in Ireland. If Ireland can do it, we can do it.”

Contos says that in her experience the more conservative, religious schools – especially Catholic schools – were the ones that pushed back against her message or simply refused to engage with her at all, with some

notable exceptions. Moriah College is an independent Modern Orthodox Jewish co-educational school in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, where Contos says she spoke to a rabbi and a group of teachers and leaders who were ready to commit to running multiple RSE sessions through the year. “It was the perfect example of religion not being an excuse, because I literally spoke to this rabbi about queer sex education and slut shaming and female pleasure.”

Marson reports that it was proven consistently important overseas to give parents and carers the right to withdraw young people from the classes. It proved critical for the process of legislating RSE and making the curriculum nationwide, so that people in opposition couldn’t argue their children were being forced into lessons of which they didn’t approve. “But what was observed in these places was that where you have this public policy, where you have the school leadership in support of it, and where you have most kids in the class going to these lessons, it becomes a little less attractive to have your child be the only one who’s not taking it.”

In terms of “how you sell it”, a key distinction is also an almost philosophical and moral one: is RSE “information” or is it “values”? The two are often conflated, and sometimes they must be. Parents and carers often voice concerns that RSE is the type of thing that should be taught in the home, because it’s about values. Academics and researchers insist that they are fighting for the rights of young people to access information. In England, Marson witnessed a conflation, for example “that talking to young people about homosexuality, as something that exists, was seen as taboo”, and similarly, “talking about the clitoris, and what that means about female pleasure, was seen as a matter of values and not of information”. But there’s the added requirement that for RSE to promote wellbeing and health, it also must include the core value of respect. “We have no issue with schools teaching children that violence is not acceptable. But to teach children that sexual harassment and sexual violence is not acceptable, you need to have conversations about gender power dynamics, about pleasure, about different sexualities ... and you need to talk about sex as something that exists and that people do, to be able to have that conversation.” If adults do not want young people – half of whom are already sexually active – to know what a clitoris is, we have a long uphill battle ahead of us.

I ask Grace what her ideal outcome would be. “That we develop educational material,” she says, “and then we provide information, support, and mental and health wellbeing over the next four years in our term ... so that if someone does what Chanel Contos does in four years’ time, there are no new stories.”

In turn, Grace asks me what my hope for the future is. My honest answer is that I’d love to be out of a job. **M**