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From macho jocks to proud feminists: an all-boys school redefines itself

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Year 9 students at Geelong's St Joseph's College get to grips with gender issues.



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Back in the day, Geelong's St Joseph's College — St Joey's, as the locals know it — had what you might call a “reputation”. As a large, Catholic boys' school with a history of dominating local football, St Joey's boys were known to exhibit characteristics often associated with that kind of sporting prowess — hyper-masculinity, rowdiness and a single-mindedness when it came to what was important.

But in the past 15 years, leaders within the St Joseph's community have challenged that stereotype, building a new reputation for the school as a socially inclusive, arts-loving academic institution.

Now, they're adding to that list a category that marks even more starkly that transformation — leaders in feminist education.

“When you’ve got an all-boys school, you’ve certainly got to work hard at what the dominant culture is,” says deputy principal Paul Clohesy. “There was that ‘footy culture’ that exists in lots of all-boys’ environments and you’ve really got to challenge that.”

St Joseph’s is one of many schools in Victoria that is implementing a curriculum for Year Nine students known broadly as respectful relationships education.

The programs, developed mostly by the family violence sector, teach young people to analyse critically gender constructs of power and build skills to engage in respectful, gender-equitable relationships.

The skills are central to what’s known within the sector as “primary prevention”, proven as one of the most effective strategies in eliminating violence against women.

Respectful relationships education takes on many forms but the program St Joseph’s is rolling out was developed by the Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA), an organisation strongly rooted in the feminist movement and founded 26 years ago to eliminate sexual violence; it consists of six one-and-a-half-hour teaching sessions as well as a host of other adjustments made to school policy and curriculum more broadly.

After a successful trial last year involving two of their Year Nine classes, St Joseph’s have made the program a permanent part of its curriculum.

‘It got to the point where boys were frightened to be good at anything other than football.’ — Paul Clohesy, St Joseph’s deputy principal



At the start of the school year, St Joseph’s opened a separate Year Nine campus in a suburb neighboring its long-time home in Newtown, with the course to be a central feature of the year of study. All teachers will be trained to deliver the program to 270 students. All up, the secondary college has 1581 students.

The inclusion of the CASA program in the Year Nine curriculum is the latest development in the school’s two-decade effort to transform a

macho culture into one of inclusiveness and diversity and one embracing gender equity.

It is the kind of cultural change at schools level that the family violence sector sees as essential to turning the tide on a social problem responsible for the death on average of one Australian woman every week.

Deputy Principal Clohesy first found out about the CASA program at his regular meeting with other Catholic schools in the region. “I thought it would be really good for our boys,” he says.

Clare Brown, also a deputy principal and champion of the program, adds: “They’re exposed to so much in the media, in pornography and on television that runs counter to what we’re actually trying to teach about respectful relationships, so it’s an area where education is really important.”

Brown and Clohesy talk from within the huge St Joseph’s staff room in a separate administrative wing of the sprawling 1.5-hectare campus.

The sheer size of the school, which is situated on a hill and is set amid manicured sports grounds and paths lined by roses, makes the task of bringing about cultural change all the more daunting.

A catalyst, according to Clohesy, was recent history. About 20 years ago, two teachers at the school were prosecuted for child sex abuse.

“When that came out, St Joseph’s boys were called all sorts of names,” he says. “Part of the way [students] responded was to say: ‘We’ve got to be tougher than that. We’ve got to be what real men should be.’

“They took on a lot of the stereotypes that this program actually challenges. And it got to the point where boys were frightened to be good at anything other than football.”

The current principal, who arrived 18 years ago, inherited that culture and has worked hard to shift it, Clohesy adds.

“We’re still successful in sport, but we also celebrate other things. Now we have really good academic results, a great production and music program, and we do a lot of work around acceptance of diversity.”

Taking on the CASA program was an extension of that rejuvenation.

And staff started addressing other aspects of the boys’ behaviour. For example, when girls from St Joseph’s sister school would visit, the senior boys would all stop and clap as they walked past.



Paul Clohesy speaks about the cultural shift at St Joseph’s College, Geelong

“In their minds, it was really innocent, but obviously that has an impact on the girls, particularly if it’s one girl walking past a group of 40 or 50 boys,” says Clohesy, who has taught at the school for five years. “That just became a habit of the boys, so we addressed it.”

Clohesy says some female staff were also “a little disturbed” by topics of conversation overheard among male staff members and the routine acceptance of what students were talking about.

For example, says Clohesy, “the boys could be ranking teachers according to physical appearance and instead of a staff member challenging that, they might say, ‘Oh that’s just boys being boys’.

“Being an all-boys school, obviously our male staff really have to model appropriate behavior, so although it didn’t come to us as a major issue, this was part of us saying we have a responsibility to educate the boys but also educate our staff.”

It is exactly these kinds of subtle examples of sexism — as opposed to overt acts of violence — that respectful relationships programs target.

Primary prevention is about preventing violence against women before it starts, rather than just dealing with consequences once it has already happened.

Those working in the field recognise that in order to reduce levels of violence against women, they need to get to its root causes — proven to be gender inequitable and violence supportive attitudes. Evidence shows that one of the best ways to do that is through school-based respectful relationships programs.

GETTING THE MESSAGE ON CONSENT

Slogans offered by St Joseph’s boys

Be alcohol free, when you go to agree

She must say ‘yes’ before you progress

After you consume, don’t assume

Be smart if you’re 2 years apart

Don’t get frisky if you’ve had too much whiskey

CASA, which has a strong history of combining support for victims with an attempt to change structures in society that allow sexual assault to occur, has been a leader in primary prevention for more than a decade.

They developed their respectful relationships program in 2004 in response to schools requesting sessions on violence prevention and have since rolled it out in over 35 schools.

Jess Boccia, who co-ordinates the programs in the Geelong region, says the six key sessions in its program teach students the statistics of violence against women and its root causes while offering students the skills to act differently in common

If you're off your head,
don't go to bed

Watch your condition
before you ask for
permission

Responses from other students

It's a date not an
invitation to rape

Consent – free agreement
= sexual assault

Don't make a move
unless they approve

Don't take off her dress
unless she says 'yes'

If agreement is free, the
benefits you will see

Just because you're
pressuring me, doesn't
mean I agree!

If you're in doubt, don't
whip it out!

Just because I'm wearing
a dress, doesn't mean I
want to be caressed

situations. Students are asked to think about societal myths around gender-based violence and encouraged to challenge them.

But Clohesy insists that “rather than as a teacher up front challenging their ideas, it's best to say ‘OK, that's your idea, does anyone see a problem with that?’ So you invite peers to challenge each other over some of their attitudes around stereotypes of women.” He says, right from the start, some of the most insightful comments come from the boys themselves.

On a recent morning in class, Clohesy and Brown stand before a room of 28 restless boys and tell them to move their chairs into a circle.

“Today we're going to talk about what it means to be a bystander in regards to sexual assault,” says Clohesy, carefully making eye contact with each boy, and seemingly watched over by a caricature of famous St Joseph's alumnus and former Geelong AFL star Cameron Ling.

The students are divided into groups.

Each is given a scenario about a situation they could find themselves in where gender-based violence could occur.

“It's up to you to come up with the best possible outcome of the story,” instructs Clohesy.

At this stage in the course, they've gone through the material about what sexual assault is and what the law says about it. They've built up skills, which allow them to identify and intervene in possible violent situations they may encounter.

Clohesy says part of what students enjoy about this curriculum is they're unlike any of their regular classes.

“We're a fairly traditional school so as soon as you get into a class and move desks aside and take away some rules about what they can say and ask, the boys really engage.”

After 10 minutes, the students regroup. Three boys — Matt, Patrick, and Rhys — reflect on their story line about two boys in the library who are invited by a third to view a secret video of his girlfriend undressing.

Rhys shares their response: “[The boys] both object and strongly encourage [him] to delete it. [He] deletes the video and explains everything that happened to his girlfriend so

she can make the decision to either stay with him or end the relationship.”

Most of the scenarios involve sexually explicit language but the ability to talk about this material openly with their peers is one of the skills the course offers.

One of the main things he says he has learnt from the course is “how the law covers almost every aspect that can occur during sexual activity”.

Patrick says he’s found the discussions helpful. He says that although he knew that sexual harassment existed, he hadn’t given it much thought. Nor had he talked about the issue with his friends.



“When everyone’s sharing their own stories and giving feedback like ‘You did this but should have done something else’, that’s really useful. People are taking it seriously and everybody puts their heads together and actually put out helpful advice.”

His classmate, Matt, agrees. “A lot of people didn’t know sexual assault also included unwanted touching, sexual harassment and other things and not just rape.”

As a result of the course, he believed more of his peers would be likely to step in to possible violence situation, not just because they would have the courage and skills to do so, but also because they would better understand when something was wrong.

Although curriculum is key, evidence shows that what is also needed to shift attitudes is an entire overhaul of school culture, what is known as a ‘whole-of-school approach’, and CASA will only work with a school willing to take this on.

For CASA, this means including an element of the program called “peer educator”, in which Year 10 students, who have completed the program, make themselves available to students who want extra support. It also includes a rewriting of school policy around sexual assault and sexual harassment.

A participating school must also make a three-year commitment: in the first two years CASA co-delivers the program, while the school continues on its own in the third.

In preparation, the school’s entire staff learn about the CASA program and how to manage a disclosure of sexual assault.

“They’re exposed to so much in the media, in pornography and on television that runs counter to what we’re actually trying to teach about respectful relationships, so it’s an area where education is really important.” — Clare Brown, St Joseph’s deputy principal

Additionally, teachers responsible for delivering the program undertake a three-day training course.

CASA's Boccia says the program emphasises evaluation, with all students required to complete surveys before and after the course that are then used to measure knowledge gained and behavioral change.

Clohesy and Brown think the course is excellent not just because it gives the students "life-long skills", but because it engages them educationally.

Clohesy says he can tell by students' comments in the final class that their knowledge and understanding has grown. "It's something the boys are interested in; they can ask questions and explore issues they're possibly going to face at some stage. I think it'd be great if it was mandatory in all schools."

TAKING THE ST JOSEPH'S QUIZ *

Sex & Relationships Survey

1. Someone who has experienced sexual assault can easily talk about it with a friend

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

2. When someone is forced to have sex in a relationship, it counts as sexual assault

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

3. When guys get really excited they cannot be expected to control themselves

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

4. In a healthy relationship, you won't be forced to do something you don't want to do

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

5. A guy should only touch his girlfriend when she wants to be touched

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

6. It is alright to playfully slap someone on the bum

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

7. A girl who goes into a guy's bedroom is agreeing to sex

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

8. If someone tells you they have been sexually assaulted it is important to show you believe them

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

9. It is alright to pressure someone to have sex if they have had sex in the past

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

10. Both people in a sexual situation have a responsibility to make sure there is free agreement

I agree – can't decide – I disagree

TRUE or FALSE?

1. You have to be over 18 to have sex

2. Most sexual violence happens in the streets

3. If someone is drunk or stoned they can still freely agree to sex

4. A person who has experienced abuse has to report to police

5. Sexual assault happens to both boys and girls

6. Making jokes about someone's sexuality is against the law

7. You can tell if someone is consenting to sex just by their body language

8. A woman must say "no" for it to be counted as sexual assault

* Drawn from a quiz that was designed by CASA House for its *Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools*.

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