Social Wellbeing in Primary Schools
Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Professor Helen Cahill, Keren Shlezinger, Dr Babak Dadvand, Anne Farrelly, Katherine Romei and Associate Professor Peggy Kern
This is an ARC linkage study conducted in partnership with the Department of Education, Victoria and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth).

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Youth Research Centre.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Victorian Department of Education, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, or the University of Melbourne.

At the Youth Research Centre we acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our centre is located and where we conduct our research and teaching. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and future.

# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: Research project overview</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About this report</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research objectives of the larger study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The participants</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection and analysis</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 2: Background literature</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing of young people: an intersectional lens</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting mental health via provision of school-based social and emotional learning programs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancing social health via provision of gender education</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of collaborative learning within wellbeing education</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 3: Wellbeing and relationships of upper primary school children</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness to teachers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness to peers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating complex peer landscapes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying and difference</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging social landscape of the middle primary years</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing gendered tensions in the middle primary years</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender as a factor in peer relationships</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered forms of play, coping, and conflict</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of sexism within peer relationships</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children value whole school approaches to enhancing to inclusion and connectedness</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Part 4: Impact of the Resilience Rights and Respectful Relationships program on student relationships | 19 |
| Part 5: Summary of the findings                                   | 22 |
| References                                                         | 23 |
Part 1: Research project overview

About this Report

The report presents qualitative and quantitative data relating to the social wellbeing of primary school students in Victoria, Australia. It provides an overview of issues relating to the mental, social and relational health of upper primary school students, and the impacts of a social and emotional learning program on their wellbeing and peer relationships.

The data sources include surveys completed by 877 Year 4-6 students across 18 Victorian primary schools in 2017, and focus group discussions conducted with 179 students in 22 schools in 2017, and 84 students from 12 schools in 2018.

The data was collected within a larger research project investigating how individual, system and school related factors influence the implementation and impact of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program in the state of Victoria. Entitled 'Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education', this Australian Research Council Linkage Project is led from the Youth Research Centre (YRC) at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), the University of Melbourne, in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the Centre for Positive Psychology (MGSE). The 3-year study (2016-2019) aims to provide evidence-informed recommendations for education systems seeking to support optimal implementation of social and emotional learning and gender education in schools.

Research objectives of the larger study

The objective of the Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education study is to identify the factors that contribute to the successful uptake and implementation of the RRRR program in schools. This aim is pursued by identifying the factors affecting program uptake and impact, and by seeking to better understand the perceived value and need for social and emotional learning and gender education on the part of students who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the school wellbeing initiative.

This project aims to contribute to more effective provision of wellbeing education by addressing the following questions:

- What system factors and school factors impact on the uptake and embedding of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships program?
- What are the relationships between the extent and quality of program implementation and student and teacher wellbeing?

These questions were investigated using a mixed-method research design that collected qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources. First, face-to-face training on the delivery of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships program was provided to teachers, school leaders and staff. To investigate the impact of the training, data were then collected from teachers, and school leaders in 40 participating schools in 2017 (20 primary schools and 20 secondary schools) and 21 schools in 2018 (12 primary schools and 9 P-12/secondary schools), using tools including school profiling measures, school audits, students/teachers online and paper surveys, interviews with teachers and school leaders, and student focus group discussions. More details about the research design used in this project can be found at Cahill et al. (2019).
Figure 1: An Integrative Framework for Evaluating Implementation in SEL and GBV Prevention Education (Cahill et al., 2019).
The Resilience, Rights, and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program

The Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships program is a research-informed social and emotional learning (SEL) and gender education (GE) program for students from Foundation to Years 11-12 (Cahill, Beadle, Higham, et al., 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2016f). It was developed by Professor Helen Cahill and YRC colleagues for use in Victorian primary and secondary schools. The comprehensive program includes over 200 learning activities mapped to the Victorian curriculum. It is provided at each level of the Victorian Curriculum from Years 11-12. The learning activities are grouped into eight thematic areas including: 1) Emotional Literacy, 2) Personal Strengths, 3) Positive Coping, 4) Problem Solving, 5) Stress Management, 6) Help-Seeking, 7) Gender and Identity, and 8) Positive Gender Relations. The program is supported by face-to-face training funded by DET, and by online professional learning developed for DET by the University of Melbourne, conjointly funded by VicHealth and MGSE.

The Participants

This research used focus group discussions and survey to provide a rich account of the socio-relational experiences of primary school students. A total of 877 students (Year 4-6) from 18 primary schools across Victoria took part in a wellbeing and resilience survey in Terms 3 and 4 of 2017 (see Table 1). Of these, 466 identified as girls and 408 identified as boys. One student identified their gender as ‘something else’ and two students did not indicate their gender. Data were also collected from focus group discussions with 179 students across 22 Victorian schools in 2017 and 82 students from 12 Victorian primary schools in 2018. Up to 8 students (Years 4 to 6) from each participating school took part in the focus group phase of this research. Focus groups, which ran for 20-60 minutes, had an average of seven students in each group. Participant ages ranged from 9 to 12.

Table 1: Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Something else</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Respondents (2017)</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Participants (2017)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Participants (2018)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*two survey participants did not indicate their gender

The participating schools were from a range of demographic backgrounds and geographic locations, including inner and outer metropolitan as well as regional Victorian schools. 12 schools were low, 9 were medium and 2 were high in terms of their Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. 14 schools were in metropolitan areas of Victoria while 8 were from regional areas.

Prior to conducting the focus group discussion, the research team formally invited the students and their parents/guardians to participate via a Plain Language Statement (PLSs) and Consent Forms distributed by their schools. The PLSs delineated in easily comprehensible language: a) the research procedures and possible risks associated with participation, b) a statement that participation was voluntary and that non-participation did not have any implications for the students or their school grades, c) explanation of the participants’ right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, and d) statements about confidentiality procedures and the use of the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The focus groups were led by a team of YRC researchers. The subsequent data analysis followed an iterative logic; it involved comparing one segment of the data with another to determine the underlying similarities and differences. These similarities and differences then became a basis for grouping the data on separate dimensions, with each dimension being given a tentative name and later becoming a tentative category or sub-category. These categories and sub-categories were then further dissected or combined to create generative themes and/or sub-themes. Once a tentative thematic pattern emerged from the analyses, the data were re-analysed considering the emergent patterns/themes.

---

1 Prior to conducting this research, an ethics application was lodged at the Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE). A separate ethics application to conduct research in Victorian government schools was submitted to the Department of Education and Training (DET). The participants were invited to take part in this study once the ethics approvals were obtained from the MGSE’s HEAG and the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC: 1647690.1) at the University of Melbourne, as well as DET (2016_003224).
This study adds to the broader body of research which provides insight into the mental and social-relational wellbeing issues affecting young people in Australia. The data presented here is best considered in relation to the broader research literature investigating the social and mental health of children and young people, and in relation to the evidence base available to inform schools about effective approaches to education for social and emotional wellbeing and respectful gender relations.

Wellbeing of Young People: An Intersectional Lens

Wellbeing is a multifaceted notion that addresses the intersection of material, social, relational, mental and physical health (Cahill, 2016). The major wellbeing issues affecting young people in Australia pertain to their mental and social health. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2018) reports that key areas of concern for young Australians include mental health, bullying (particularly among Grade 4 students), family conflict, pressure from school work, and discrimination, and as students age, their worries include their future employment prospects. The 2017 Young Minds Matter survey of over 6000 Australian families showed that mental disorders affect 1 in 7 school-aged children (Goodsell et al., 2017). Among students aged 12-17, 1 in 12 students reported having self-harmed in the 12 months prior to the survey, and 1 in 13 had experienced major depressive disorder. Girls in this age group were twice as likely as boys to report suicidal behaviours and self-harm.

It is important to adopt an intersectional lens when understanding wellbeing, as poverty, socio-material disadvantage and marginalisation can lead to poorer health outcomes. The prevalence of mental health disorders is higher in families affected by unemployment, low education levels and low income. For example, the Young Minds Matter Survey shows that about one in ten children aged 4-17 in families with household income of over $2,000 per week had a mental health disorder, whereas the rate was double at one in five young people living in families with household income less than $1,000 per week, and also for those living in two-carer families where both carers were unemployed (Goodsell et al., 2017).

Children’s experiences of distress can also be considered in relation to their help-seeking. In 2017, around one in ten children aged 5-12 who contacted Kids Helpline sought counsel for mental health problems (Yourtown, 2018). The top five issues children aged 5-12 called for help about included family relationships, emotional wellbeing, bullying and suicide-related concerns.

Concerns with mental health become more prevalent as young people move to the late teens and early twenties. The 2017 Mission Australia survey found that coping with anxiety, depression and social-emotional distress ranked as the top issues of personal concern for young people aged 15-19, almost half of whom were either extremely concerned or very concerned about coping with stress (Bullot, Cave, Fildes, Hall, & Plummer, 2017). In Victoria, there was a 46% increase in the number of children presenting to the emergency department for self-harm, stress and anxiety, mood, behavioural and emotional disorders between 2008 and 2015 (Baltag & Sawyer, 2017).

When gender is considered in relation to this data, it becomes apparent that gender norms, expectations and attitudes play a significant part in relation to wellbeing and mental health outcomes of children and young people. Research shows that girls are at much higher risk of distress and self-harm. School-age girls are almost three times more likely to self-harm than boys (Goodsell et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2016).

Promoting mental health via provision of school-based social and emotional learning programs

Schools that provide evidence-informed social and emotional learning (SEL) programs for students can make a major contribution to their wellbeing, engagement and learning. Research shows that participation in well-designed and implemented SEL programs can enhance young people’s social and emotional competence (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

Other benefits of school-based SEL programs relate to improved mental health and pro-social behaviours. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs which involved over 270,000 students across the US and the UK showed that the students who participated in well-designed and theoretically informed SEL programs improved their social and emotional competencies and peer relationships (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). There was also evidence
of a reduction in depression among the students. SEL programs have also been shown to improve students' social skills and self-image (Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012), and improve their self-esteem and conflict resolution capacities (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017). Students who participate in SEL programs are also less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2016), particularly amongst primary and middle years students (Corrieri et al., 2013; Werner-Seidler, Perry, Calear, Newby, & Christensen, 2017). Other outcomes of SEL programs include improved sense of school belonging and connectedness (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), positive teacher-student relationships (Poulou, 2016), improved peer connection (Midford et al., 2016), and reduction in instances of bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

The relationship between SEL programs and pro-social behaviours is also well-documented, and there is evidence that the benefits of improved social and emotional competencies is maintained over time. A meta-analysis of 82 school-based SEL and wellbeing programs with 97,406 students from across the US, Europe and the Asia-Pacific showed that at an 18 month follow-up, students who participated in SEL and wellbeing programs still demonstrated higher rates of social and emotional competencies, prosocial behaviours and indicators of positive wellbeing compared to their peers who did not participate in such programs (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

Recognition of the important role schools can play in promoting social health is reflected in the General Capabilities priority of the Victorian and Australian Curriculum which aims to equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century (The Australian Curriculum, 2018). Within the General Capabilities, the Personal and Social Capability involves a range of wellbeing-related practices including: recognising personal qualities and achievement, recognising and expressing emotions, communicating effectively, building resilience and confidence, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, negotiating conflict, and making decisions (The Australian Curriculum, 2018).

Advancing social health via provision of gender education

A growing body of research investigating the impact of gender norms on young people’s wellbeing highlights the need for social and emotional learning programs that incorporate a focus on gender and identity and prevention of gender-based violence. While individual perceptions about gender begin in early childhood, during early adolescence young people experience increasing awareness of, and pressure relating to, dominant gender norms and expectations in their social and cultural settings (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Yu et al., 2017).

Gender education aims to help students to understand how norms associated with masculinity and femininity influence the ways in which social roles are assigned, and to understand how life opportunities and transitions can be influenced by these norms and associated practices (Cahill, Beadle, Davis, & Farrelly, 2016). Effective gender education pursues a transformative agenda by emphasising the development of rights-affirming attitudes, and the associated skills and capacities needed to engage in respectful gender relationships and advance gender equality. Young people need not just be passive recipients of the pressure to conform to various gender norms, but can also act as critically reflexive agents who work to resist or alter harmful or limiting practices or beliefs (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018; Neary, Gray, & O’Sullivan, 2016; Yu et al., 2017).

The importance of collaborative learning within wellbeing education

The inclusion of student voice is central to the pedagogy of effective wellbeing education. A large body of research studies have identified that use of collaborative learning activities is essential to the effectiveness of wellbeing education programs addressing social and mental health, sexuality education and drug use (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dix, Slee, Lawson, & Keeves, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003; Herbert & Lohmann, 2011; Kirby, Laris, & Rolleri, 2007; Payton et al., 2008; Stead, Stradling, Macneil, Mackintosh, & Minty, 2007). Collaborative learning activities involve students in peer-to-peer interaction within dialogic learning activities designed to foster development of critical thinking and social and personal capabilities and to foster the skills to carry choices into action (Cahill et al., 2013). Children and young people can provide rich and nuanced accounts of their experience that can effectively inform wellbeing education and shape pedagogy (Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2014). However, there remains insufficient data on students’ perspectives on wellbeing education, and an absence of qualitative data that takes into account children’s perceptions on how gender relationships impact upon their experience of both social relationships and school life.

The ‘Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education’ study is driven by the premise that effective education interventions must seek young people’s views and actively involve them within design and evaluation of programs. For this reason, the project used qualitative and quantitative measures to consult with primary school students about a wide range of social, emotional and educational issues that they dealt with in their everyday lives at school. The focus group discussions, in particular, provided rich opportunities to gather more nuanced understandings of experience than is possible via a survey instrument. However, the survey instrument takes a broad approach to gathering data about mental, social and physical health, and as such provides a backdrop against which to understand the range and pattern of students’ experiences.
This section presents finding from the study. It focuses on student accounts of factors influencing their relationships and wellbeing. Data from the student surveys illustrates and contextualises student reports of their psychological and social wellbeing. The focus group data presents the students’ experiences of social wellbeing as they navigate the complex and gendered relational landscapes of their schools.

Psychological Distress

Many of the students who participated in this research reported relatively high levels of mental health and wellbeing. Overall, the survey findings show that most students were engaged with their learning and felt connected to their schools, teachers and peers. Nonetheless, some students reported symptoms of probable psychological distress. The prevalence of possible psychological distress showed an increasing trend among girls from Year 4 to Year 6 with girls experiencing higher rates of distress than boys. Girls also reported higher rates of body image distress, loneliness and disconnection, a trend that also increased with age.

The survey used the Kessler Six-item Psychological Distress (K-6) Scale, a measure used to identify signs of possible psychological distress (Furukawa, Kessler, Slade, & Andrews, 2003). Students responded to six questions which inquired about how often they experienced anxiety and sadness in the previous week. A five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = all the time) was used to record student responses. To create a scale of psychological distress, the scores from individual questions were summed to create a total score of 5 to 30. Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. Scores at or above 19 are indicative of probable psychological distress.

The findings in Figure 1 show that about 15% of students across genders and year levels reported K-6 score of 19 or above. As the following graph indicates, girls in Years 5 and 6 were more likely to report psychological distress than boys. This is in line with the findings from other research which shows increased prevalence of psychological distress across year levels, with girls being more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (e.g. Kessler & Bromet, 2013). In our research, 17% of girls had K-6 score of 19 or above, compared to the 13% of boys. Year 5, in particular, proved challenging for girls in this study, with 21% (compared to 13% of boys) reporting symptoms of psychological distress.
Connectedness to teachers

When providing examples to illustrate the positive or negative dynamics of their school culture, the participants referred to their connectedness to teachers or to the school ethos more generally. A strong sense of school connection is reflected in the survey findings which showed that over 80% of the students across genders and year levels reported that they felt connected to their school (see Figure 2). Connectedness to teachers in the context of caring relationships is a major protective factor against student disengagement (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2018, 2019) and contributes to more positive wellbeing and learning outcomes (Freidenfelt Liljeberg, Eklund, Fritz, & af Klinteberg, 2011; Pittman & Richmond, 2007).
The survey data also showed that most students reported that their teachers ‘care about them as a person’. Only a small percentage (less than 3%) of students across genders and year levels disagreed or strongly disagreed that their teachers care about them (see Figure 3). As this graph shows there is a declining trend over years in girls’ perceptions about how their teachers care about them.

Connectedness to peers

The survey explored levels of social wellbeing through questions about peer connectedness and loneliness. The findings showed that while most students experienced positive peer connection, there is a decline in peer connection and an increase in loneliness in Year 5 (see Figure 4).
Around 1 in 6 students reported feeling lonely most days or every day. In Year 6, girls reported slightly higher rates of peer connectedness than boys, but were also more than twice as likely to feel lonely either most days or every day (see Figure 5).

**Navigating complex peer landscapes**

The focus groups were asked what factors caused the most stress at school. Their responses mostly referred to social stress: the challenges associated with making and keeping friends, negotiating conflict and responding to bullying, navigating social hierarchies, and maintaining a positive reputation amongst peers. The participants described complex social environments marked by distinct and exclusionary groups. Though at times membership in these groups provided a sense of belonging, the associated relational dynamics around navigating or maintaining belonging were also a major source of stress. Where there was minimal interaction between social groups, exclusion from one group could lead to prolonged social isolation.

*Lots of people have groups and that’s helpful, but sometime with groups people get excluded, which I see quite a lot. There’s just lots of groups and not many people go to different groups, which I think is not that good because you just stay with a specific group of people.*

Often these clearly delineated groups were organised into hierarchies of power and popularity.

*There’s the popular kids, and then there’s the unpopular kids, and then there’s all the kids in between. And if you’re down here, you get dirty looks and people call you names; and if you’re up ‘here’ … everyone’s scared to say thanks to you so no-one says anything to you.*

The extent to which students deviated from peer social norms was often a determining factor in their social status and inclusion.

*There are the popular groups … and then, not to be mean, but there are the not-so-popular group, and then there’s the normal.*

**Bullying and difference**

Overall, students talked less about “bullying” than about the more covert social challenges of group membership. Where bullying was raised, common examples included “big kids taking a bit of an advantage of younger kids” and “boys bullying girls”. Many reported that students rumoured to be in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships would get bullied. Some, though significantly fewer, reported that bullying was directed at religiously or ethnically diverse students, or those with special learning needs.

Where bullying was mentioned as a concern, its targets were frequently described in terms of their deviation from one or more peer social norms, or in relation to their size, shape or colour of their bodies. As one Year 6 student recounts, difference in appearance was a particular risk factor for bullying:

*Everyone’s different, he was a bit more different, and they started picking on him. Kids tease people for what they look like, body shape and stuff, being a bit different, skin colour.*
The survey findings showed that the majority of students believed that those who were ‘different’ were treated with respect at school, though around 20% did not agree with this statement (see Figure 6).

![Figure 6: People who are different are treated with respect at my school (Strongly agree or agree)](image)

While bullying was a real concern for some students, most believed that only a few children actually perpetrated it. This suggests that bullying was perceived less as a systemic problem and more as the fault of a few “trouble-makers”.

**Bullying is a big aspect ... There are certain kids who do it a lot of the time, not heaps of kids.**

### Challenging social landscape of the middle primary years

The participants reported that the middle primary years were most fraught with tension in interpersonal relations—an observation consistent with national data on young people’s wellbeing, and with the dip in connectedness to peers at Year 5 shown in data collected in this study. National data shows that bullying peaks around Grade 4 and 5, with almost 1 in 3 people aged 10-11 reporting being bullied or picked on by peers (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2018; Cross et al., 2009). Much of this bullying is covert and verbal rather than physical, with name-calling more common than physical bullying (Lodge & Baxter, 2013).

There was a common perception among the students that social fragmentation intensified around age ten. Students spoke about the pressure to act ‘big’ and suggested that getting older requires you to be socially selective, and be less friendly to certain peers.

*I feel like kids feel like they can do what they want ... because they turn 10 they think they are big, two digits, in Year 4, I hate to say this, but no one really liked each other. They had groups, but there’d be like three people in each group ... and all those groups would fight, and no-one would get along, ever.*

Some spoke about the shift in identity and self-awareness that occurs around Grade 4, as young people become increasingly aware of social pressures and expectations within peer relationships.

*Sometimes when people grow up they forget their old self and try and make a new person, but they use what other people do and they try and make another personality, they get information from other people and try and make a new personality.*
Another pair of participants discussed the growing preoccupation with self-image, driven by the fear that an unfavourable image will become reified into an unshakeable “reputation”.

**People worry about ... their reputation going down. Because if you get a bad reputation, it’s hard to get it back and with a bad reputation you can get bullied badly - you get targeted because of that.**

**Down more the senior end, some people tend to get a bit more worried about what they do, and what comes across to their friends, don’t want to be, sort of, weird in front of them.**

**They’re self-aware.**

The findings of the student survey reflected this heightened sensitivity to the judgment of others in the progression from Grades 4 to 6. While students had a positive sense of their ability—what they can do—they were much less accepting or confident about their bodily appearance. Boys regarded their bodies more positively than girls. While Year 4 girls had a more positive perception of themselves, this declined significantly in Year 5, and remained low in Year 6, whereas boys’ body image remained relatively stable across these years (see Figure 7). This data shows that as girls age through the upper half of primary school they tend to experience greater levels of body image distress.
Growing gendered tensions in the middle primary years

While social stress was a concern for all students, the nature of social stress becomes increasingly gendered as students progress into middle and upper primary school. This is shown in national data. For example, amongst those who contacted Kids Helpline in 2018, primary aged girls were over three times more likely to seek help with peer/friend relationships than boys (Yourtown, 2017). This is in line with the findings of this research which shows that while girls reported greater perceived peer connectedness than boys in Grades 5 and 6, they also more often mentioned social relationships as an issue of personal concern.

The social challenges of the middle primary years were described in largely gender-based terms as a widening chasm between boys and girls, a growing self-awareness and consequent pressure to perform gender normative roles, and an increase in threatening or harassing behaviours that were based on gender role expectations. The heightened sense of self-awareness in the middle primary years extended to a growing awareness of gender divides. One student described how boys and girls begin to segregate in Year 3.

They start having fights with each other, and girls start hating the boys mostly and will chase them around. They’re mostly mean to each other.

Many students reported that relations between male and female students became most challenging in the middle years of primary school. Participants in one focus group explained that while Prep students are too young to know the difference between boys and girls, and Year 6 students are ‘mature’ enough to reconcile their differences, those in the middle struggle to relate across genders.

Preps, they’re perfectly fine with playing boys and girls together, they don’t really know, some Year 6s they’re fine with that as well. Then it comes to the gap in the middle, 1/2s and 3/4s, they don’t really know.

Another focus group discussed how this heightened awareness of gender led to avoidance.

In Grade 4, most of the boys and girls don’t like each other that much. When we were in Year 4 and 3 we never played with each other.

For all students, positive relationships with peers were important to their wellbeing. Perceptions of how well students got along varied significantly between schools, with some focus groups expressing unanimously positive attitudes towards their social culture and others expressing a shared sense of frustration or negativity about the peer social environment. In all groups, at least one participant suggested that students did not yet possess all the skills required to navigate the tricky social situations that they increasingly encountered from Year 4 onwards.

Gender as a factor in peer relationships

Students reported that gendered norms and expectations affected many aspects of their school life, including what they played, who they played with, how they interacted with and perceived their peers, and how they resolved conflict and coped with challenges. While most survey participants strongly agreed that boys and girls should be treated equally at school, the focus groups identified that peer-related gender inequality, sexism, and gender-based bullying and harassment existed in most of the primary school environments.

The survey findings show that the belief in the importance of equal treatment for boys and girls increased with age, with Year 6 students the most likely to agree with the statement that girls and boys should be treated equally (see Figure 8). There was, however, a dissonance between the strongly expressed belief in gender equality from the survey, and focus group participants’ descriptions of actual social behaviours that occurred in their schools. While a small number of groups reported environments in which gender equality was actively fostered and explicitly valued, many reported otherwise. Play, communication, conflict, and coping were described in highly gendered terms. Several boys also described gender-specific pressures to be “tough” and “rough,” to perform and “impress,” and often to do so by “putting others down.” Friendships between boys and girls were vulnerable to sexualised teasing by peers.
Survey findings showed that boys were more likely to report that they experienced and perpetrated physical violence than girls. While most students reported that they were not hit or pushed by others, boys were more likely to be pushed or hit than girls, and boys were more likely than girls to hit or push others. Boys were over three times more likely than girls to believe that it was okay for boys to hit other boys when they were angry. Boys were more likely than girls to engage in overt forms of conflict including name-calling, which also increased for boys with age (see Figure 9).
In contrast, girls were more likely to report having excluded others or felt excluded, suggesting that female students were more likely to engage in relational rather than physical forms of aggression (see Figure 10).

Gendered forms of play, coping, and conflict

Play was described in gendered terms. Boys were described as rough, competitive and physical in their play, and girls as gentle, compliant, and calm. Girls were more likely to “sit around and talk” than play sport, and when they did so it was often as participants in boys’ games. Some boys felt excluded from girls’ conversations, and many girls felt locked out of boys’ games and sports.

Around here we’ve kind of sadly split into two groups of boys and girls. If you look at the oval, most of the boys are on the oval; it’s like we have a very split school ... I think a lot of the boys in our school are very tough, so you know they do play Aussie Rules, and you have tackling...

Conflict and conflict resolution were also framed in highly gendered terms, particularly in relation to different ways boys and girls navigated conflict in peer relationships.

The way boys and girls are mean to each other is different, because boys end up with physical fights or screaming insults and the girls end up with things behind their backs or looks that may not be visible to them.

Almost all focus group discussions followed this same narrative of male conflict as commonly physical (e.g. pushing), visible (public fights, swearing) and quickly resolved, and female conflict as commonly verbal (negotiating, talking), covert (excluding, ignoring, backstabbing) and prolonged. This is also reflected in the survey findings which show that boys were significantly more likely to respond physically to provocation than girls across all year levels, with 16% of Grade 5 and 10% Year 6 boys saying that they would hit others who said mean things about them (see Figure 11).
Some male students also described boys as having a tendency to “get physical and then get over it”, or to emotionally detach or de-personalise as a means of dealing with conflict.

**Boys don’t show their feelings like girls do. So, when there’s a problem, they kind of just get over it.**

In contrast, girls reported using strategies that were “hidden,” enacted in “whispers,” “looks,” “ignoring” or “secret chats”. As one girl explains:

**Girls don’t get into fights, but they have lots of arguments.**

Some female participants believed arguments to be a productive process of negotiation and communication, even if they were also highly personal, complex, and could “last for months”.

**They have more emotion, they think about how boys feel, are more sensitive, girls don’t really do physical fights, they negotiate more.**

**Experiences of sexism within peer relationships**

Gender norms pervaded descriptions of how boys and girls interacted with one another. One participant summarised the behavioural shifts that commonly occurred in mixed gender interactions.

**Boys act differently around girls to how they act around boys.**

Despite the survey findings demonstrating that most students believed boys and girls should be—and were—treated equally at school, most focus group participants described school environments in which boys did not treat girls as well as they treated other boys. When students were asked both, ‘How do boys treat girls at this school?’ and ‘How do girls treat boys at this school?’ all focus groups spoke for longer and in more detail about boys’ treatment of girls than they spoke about girls’ treatment of boys. In over half of the groups, participants reported that some boys treat girls “not well” or “really badly” at their school. Comparatively, just 3 participants across all groups reported that boys and girls treat each other “pretty fairly,” “nicely” or “like family”, and only one participant stated that girls treat boys badly at his school.
Several groups discussed the tendency of male students to be loud, physical and at times deliberately insulting to girls in order to try and gain the attention and favour of their female peers—what one participant coined the “primary school flirt.”

**Boys show off in front of the girls lots ... and they try and be cool, and in a way they flirt, but primary school flirt, how they’ll do something and then they’ll insult someone else and then a girl might laugh.**

Another recurrent theme was the tendency of boys to act roughly to gain the attention of girls.

**The boys like showing off in front of the girls, so they’re always wrestling and stuff like that.**

Both boys and girls noted they could get caught up in this type of behaviour. It was repeatedly implied that girls do not necessarily enjoy being showed off to in this way, despite laughing at the very behaviour that makes them uncomfortable.

**Girls sort of get a bit carried away and always just laugh and have to always do things with boys and just laugh at things that aren’t even funny.**

Moreover, many students implied that boys wanted more positive relationships with girls, but didn’t know better ways to interact to achieve this effect.

**Sometimes boys can go try to impress a girl because they think they like the girl or whatnot, and the girl hates them, but they still try to impress them.**

Contributions about boy-girl relations were frequently couched in language of male agency and female reactivity—for example, “girls receive insults”—with boys as the subjects who do things or act, and girls as the objects who have things done to them or react. The active/passive binary also framed descriptions of male-female conflict. A fight between a girl and a boy was not framed as a fight between equals: it was a fight between someone weak and someone strong, where the strong one respectfully curtails his strength, and pardons the weak one so that they both can move on.

**If a boy and a girl fights, the boy would kind of be more of a gentleman, when they’re around girls, if that makes sense, they try to be like ‘oh yeah I’m manly’ and stuff, the boys forgive the girls pretty easily.**

Sexism and gender stereotypes were a major source of anxiety and concern. Girls mostly complained about subtle and unconscious forms of sexist bias and poor treatment from their male peers. Displaying physical prowess could often elicit shock or condescension from male students. One girl describes a game of down ball in which her male peer, seeing her hit the ball, exclaimed: “Oh Ellie! You hit the ball!” She recounts her indignance at his surprise: I was like, “What did you expect from me?” Many female participants also gave examples of being belittled for being assertive.

**There was this boy being really rude to me, and I stood up for myself and he didn’t like that.**

**When a boy gets beaten by a girl, the boys get teased ‘Oh … you got beaten by a girl!’**

**Some boys say, ‘you’re acting like a girl.’ It’s worse than ‘acting like a boy.’**

Many participants, both male and female, acknowledged that boys’ treatment of girls was not ideal and suggested that, while they would like to know better ways to get along, they seemed to not yet have the skills to do so.

**I feel like some boys aren’t too experienced with girls, like they don’t know to treat a girl and some boys tend to think that they’re a lot cooler than girls, like they do try to impress girls even though girls don’t think they’re cool at all.**

While most groups freely responded to the question about how boys treated girls at school, several groups seemed genuinely surprised to be asked how girls treated boys, and either refrained from commenting or offered short responses. With the exception of one focus group, participants generally believed that girls were respectful to boys: they were “nice” and treated boys “pretty well,” even though they might not “like” the boys or feel respected by them.

**The girls are more respectful [to the boys, even though] they don’t really like them. Girls are unharfmal and they’re not mean.**

**I think we treat the boys how they should treat us.**
Children value whole school approaches to enhancing inclusion and connectedness

In general, students found their school environments were enhanced when they were inclusive. Students who found their schools to be friendly places often spoke about the value that their schools placed on inclusive behaviours, which were taught to them within class and also modelled by staff. These students gave examples of explicit, whole-school strategies that helped bring about a strong sense of connection to their school and peers. Examples of explicit, whole-school strategies that helped bring about a strong sense of school connection included “buddy benches” and “bus stop buddies” to promote social connection across different ages. Students at one school with a reported positive social culture described how special peer mediators helped to reinforce social skills during playtime and coached isolated students to reconnect with their peers.

**They always help people who are getting ignored or bullied. The teachers teach how to be kind, and the students learn from them.**

Several students across different schools attributed their positive social culture to school size. Small communities, these young people felt, more easily facilitated the feeling of being known and connected.

**This school’s small, so if you’re the first time coming to this school, and you don’t have any friends that come here, or any people that are related, there’ll be people that are willing to be friends with you.**

Familiarity and community were important for these students, many of whom spoke proudly about knowing everyone.

**Because it’s such a small community … out in the yard and in the classrooms, we always get to have a chat to everyone, and know everyone’s personalities and make friends easily.**

Other students described the strong relationships between students as sibling-like, traversing a range of cultures, backgrounds, and abilities.

**All the kids here, they kind of act like sisters and brothers, so they all interlock … they’re all nice to each other and they all treat each other the way they want to be treated.**

Participants with overall positive views of their school culture often referred to the treatment of newcomers as evidence of its success.

**If there are new kids that come to our school, the next day they already have friends they can play with.**

In contrast, those students who reported weak social ties in their school described newcomers as a threat rather than an opportunity for new connections. In one school, new students were framed as unwelcome interlopers requiring a renegotiation of hierarchies and alliances that could lead to previously ‘in’ members of a group being suddenly displaced, friendships being “crushed” or “broken”, and newly excluded people experiencing “rejection” or “abandonment”.

**If someone new comes into your group then everyone will act differently — and the friendships will … be broken apart.**

In general, participants who described their school social environments in predominately negative terms also reported low levels of trust in teachers and did not identify having learnt inclusive or prosocial behaviours within a class program. Several of these students expressed a more deterministic attitude towards bullying, with conflict seen as inevitable and the norm.

**Of course, there’s going to be groups of people who don’t like other people, and, of course there’s going to be fights with friendships and bullying.**
The data collected in the second wave of focus groups (conducted in 2018) provided opportunity for students to report on their experiences of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program. In the schools actively engaged in implementation, students made frequent reference to the positive impacts of participating in the RRRR learning activities. These positive impacts included: a) improved capacity to manage emotions, and to resolve conflicts; b) more positive relationships between genders; and c) improved peer support and help-seeking skills.

A) Improved ability to manage emotions, resolve conflicts and provide peer support

Many students who participated in the RRRR learning activities reported an improved capacity to recognise, understand, express and manage their emotions, either for themselves personally or among their peers. Some students discussed how learning about ‘calming’ strategies helped them deal with adverse situations in the school.

I used to get angry a lot because people used to get angry at me for no reason and I used to lose it and get really mad. I can control it now; I can ignore them. I can get help from the teacher, and if I’m really mad, I can go into the reset space for ten or fifteen minutes.

These skills for self-regulation enabled students to maintain more positive peer relationships, and to resolve tensions before they escalated into conflict or fights.

It’s improved a lot, there aren’t anywhere near as many fights and stuff because a lot of people now they know what to do and stuff… If they are getting angry they just walk away, go into the reset space or go into a different area. I think this is because of the program and how much this has helped them.

One student reported that he was better able to manage difficult interactions outside of school as a result of the RRRR activities.

I do cricket training. I play different clubs and sometimes people from those clubs aren’t very nice and they say ‘oh you suck’ and things like that.

These classes help me because they help me calm down instead of getting angry and antagonising them.

Some students also reflected on general improvements in peer connectedness and capacity to independently resolve conflicts as a result of better self-management and problem-solving skills across the school.

I used to get into fights with my friend; we used to go and speak to the teacher because we could never sort it out. But since we did the program, we can talk about it and work it out.

Where the RRRR implementation was embedded in a broader, whole-school approach that consistently prioritised social and emotional learning and respectful relationships, students were more likely to report that a behavioural shift towards improved self-awareness and self-management had taken place at a whole school, as well as at a personal, level. In these instances, older students also reported noting improved conflict resolution skills amongst students in other year levels.

With the younger year levels, I see them being a lot more independent now. I mean like they can somehow sort out their own problems.

Several students also discussed how improved problem-solving skills developed their capacity to support others, including younger students, to resolve their problems in the yard.

I’ve been using problem solving skills. I try to calm them down and then I ask questions and that leads to the answer which we use to solve it.

When you’re in the playground and there are some kids who are arguing, you can work out easy ways to stop it instead of always having to go to the teacher on yard duty and asking them to stop it for you.

B) Building more positive cross-gender relationships

In several primary schools that implemented the RRRR program regularly and with fidelity to the design of the curriculum, students recounted benefits such as reduction in the rates of observed and experienced bullying as a result of participating in the program activities.

There’s not as much bullying as there has been before. There’s upstanders that stick by the victims.
There was also evidence of improved gender relations. Focus groups in these high-implementing schools suggested that the relationships between male and female students had become less segregated since their involvement in the program, and that students were more likely to develop friendships between and across genders.

Last year when the teacher said, “go pick a partner that’s a boy” everyone would just sit there – sit there and wait until, but then – now we’ve got friends that are boys and we just go straight to our friends.

At one school, the students reported that exclusion was no longer an issue at the school with boys and girls feeling less inhibited to socialise and play with each other.

Everyone is playing with each other more – no excluding people out of recess and lunch, we are being respectful to each other and basically just respect in general to each other.

Many students who had participated in activities from RRRR program reported that it had helped to broaden the sense of possibilities, and opportunities, for both male and female students.

I think that when we learned about gender stereotypes that people got more tolerant of other people. In our class not many girls play basketball, only the boys. Learning about this helped people to realise that girls can do this as well, it’s not just the boys.

There were also accounts about the way in which the program had helped reduce instances of hetero-sexualised teasing. In the exchange below, students described how boys and girls felt more comfortable to interact with one another, without being deterred by fears that they would be teased for doing so.

S1: Like a girl talking to a boy, or a boy talking to another girl, people automatically assume, ‘Oh, you’re talking to him – you like him.’ But it’s also like, I feel like Respectful Relationships sort of helped us sometimes bond, I don’t really know how to say it. I feel like at the start of the year everyone was separated into boys and girls. But I feel like now sometimes some people can mix.

S2: And some people spread rumours around to other people. Like, ‘Oh, this girl likes that boy or that boy likes that girl’ and we get that a lot at this school. And I feel like we should stop this happening.

S3: I reckon the Respectful Relationships has helped that a lot, because it used to be really bad but you don’t see it as much anymore.

C) Improved capacity to seek help from peers, teachers, and other adults

Another impact of the RRRR program was enhanced peer support and help-seeking. Several students reported that the RRRR program not only improved their capacity to empathise with their peers, and recognise when others might need help, but also equipped them with skills needed to provide peer support.

I’ve learned to read people’s faces. If you see them in the morning and you can tell that they don’t look that well you can help them out and tell them a joke or something.

Many students reported greater confidence in seeking help from their peers, teachers, and other adults as a result of the program.

People feel more confident in sharing when they need help, to parents and teachers and friends.

This increased confidence with help-seeking was attributed to several factors. On the one hand, explicitly rehearsing how, where, and when to ask for help made students less afraid to do so in real-life situations.

The lessons have helped us to know not to be scared to ask for help.

I think it really helps because it gives you that mindset that it’s ok to get help from other people, that it’s not bad if you don’t know something.
On the other hand, prioritising social and emotional issues at a whole school level legitimised these issues as appropriate topics for discussion, and helped students to recognise that their teachers care about their wellbeing.

*My teacher, you could probably ask him anything. I could …the program kind of shows that they (our teachers) care about us, even though we knew that the whole time. It helps to reassure us of this.*

Students commonly reported that the collaborative learning tasks used in the RRRR program played a crucial role in developing peer relationships by helping them to cross the social barriers that existed within and between genders.

*The games that we play help to bond us together and create more of a calm environment, like there’s no arguments.*

Collaborative pedagogies provided students with opportunities to get to know peers with whom they might not otherwise interact, and to engage in meaningful conversations with them.

*The scenarios and group work helped me make a few friends that I didn’t think I could be friends with before and this helped you to think about how other people would do things in the same situation.*
Part 5: Summary of the findings

In this report, we presented the data collected from primary school students through focus group discussions and a wellbeing survey. We provided an overview of the students’ psychological wellbeing, and the social issues that they described as impacting on their everyday experiences in schools and classrooms. These include issues relating to navigating the social landscape of primary school, as well as experiences of gender within peer relationships. We also discussed some of the positive impacts that students reported from the provision of the RRRR program.

Overall, the participants reported relatively high levels of wellbeing. Our findings show that most students were engaged with their learning and felt connected to their schools, teachers and peers. Boys were more likely than girls to experience violence and to report that they perpetrated violence. Girls were more likely to report being lonely and to note that friendship problems could take a long time to resolve and result in exclusionary practices. Some students reported symptoms of psychological distress, with greater prevalence amongst girls. The prevalence of possible psychological distress showed an increasing trend as girls aged from Year 4 to Year 6. Girls also reported higher rates of body image distress, loneliness and disconnection, a trend that also increased with age.

The focus group data provided a more nuanced view of experience. It showed that the health of the social environment was of major importance to students. Navigating the complex social environment was named as the most pressing concern they encountered at school. Specific stressors included making and keeping friends, bullying and peer harassment, negotiating and responding to conflict, social isolation, and dealing with the gendered power norms and expectations that governed their day-to-day interactions.

Most students believed that girls and boys should be treated equally and restrain from being mean to others, however gendered patterns of behaviours pervaded all aspects of students’ social life within their schools and classrooms. Students reported chiefly working and socialising in gender-segregated groups, and the presence and detrimental effects of barriers to developing positive cross-gender relationships. The findings highlighted the prevalence of subtle forms of gender-based teasing among students. Students noted the negative influence of comments which sexualised male-female friendships, and led some students to avoid developing male-female friendships altogether.

Data collected in the second wave of focus groups included input about student experiences of the Resilience Rights and Respectful Relationships program. This data shows that they greatly valued its contribution to their capacity to manage their own emotions, and to solve conflict and peer problems in positive ways. They reported increased capacity and willingness to engage in peer support and in help-seeking and improved belief that they could use their teachers as a source of help. They found that the collaborative teaching methods used in the program also helped them to mix better with other students, and to form better cross-gender relationships.

These findings can help educators to develop a better understanding of the social and relational landscape of primary schools. The data shows that the quality of peer relationships matter greatly to students, and that they value opportunities to learn how to mix and work well together. The findings also highlight the importance of schools as sites where students can learn and practice positive ways of interacting with others. They provide further evidence of the importance of school-based provision of social and emotional learning and respectful relationships education.
References


