

PRESS RELEASE

IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Power to Kids in Schools - recognising and responding to cries for help

When model student Camille started acting up at school, skipping class, and self-harming, she was rushed into mental-health support and medicated for anxiety and depression, but no-one ever asked what had happened to her.

At 12-years-old, Camille was subjected to child-on-child sexual abuse from within her peer group, and she didn't know how to ask for help.

"The teachers and health professionals around me concentrated on my behaviour. Looking back now, I can't believe no-one sat me down and asked why I was acting this way! I couldn't cope with the abuse and was crying out for help," Camille recalls.

An average of six alleged child-on-child sexual abuse incidents are reported to police each week of term in Victorian public schools and more than half the incidents involved children under 10 ^[1]. Many more stories, like Camille's, are missing from these numbers.

Smeeta Singh, National Program Director of Power to Kids in Schools at The MacKillop Institute, says educators are at the frontline of this national crisis but can't do this work alone.

"We continue to hear from schools that they need comprehensive training, and a whole-of-school community approach that includes parents. We know that one in four children in Australia have experienced child sexual abuse, and increasingly by other children ^[2]. We need to shift the dial to proactive prevention and build the confidence of schools and parents to initiate 'brave' conversations around sexual safety that empower young people to raise concerns, seek help and feel safe," Smeeta said.

Developed by The MacKillop Institute and the University of Melbourne in consultation with schools across the sector, Power to Kids in Schools is a professional learning program that upskills schools and educators to strengthen prevention and responses to child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and dating violence.

Aligned with Consent and Respectful Relationships Education, Power to Kids in Schools deepens the focus on sexual safety and is contextualised for each school community.

"Nationally, implementation of a consent and respectful relationships curriculum can be dependent on the confidence, knowledge and skills of individual teachers. Power to Kids embeds a whole-of-school approach to identify the indicators of abuse, intervene, and respond effectively within the scope of their role.

"Now available nationally, Power to Kids in Schools has already reached over 400 educators, with feedback showcasing positive outcomes, and participants demonstrating an appreciation for additional knowledge, support and practical tools that can be put straight into practice," Smeeta said.

Now aged 27 and a social worker, Camille is doing her PhD evaluating sexual violence prevention programs.

Camille adds, "My entire high school experience was overshadowed with the impact of what happened to me. There is still so much shame and avoidance around harmful sexual behaviour and children, and I want to see that change.

"If just one person had recognised I was being abused and asked the right questions, I would have received the correct support instead of spending years being medicated for a mental health diagnosis that I didn't have. Teachers and parents, know that this is happening around you, and quite possibly to the kids in your care. Equip yourselves with the skills to intervene to help all kids involved and don't be afraid to ask children difficult questions about what might be happening to them."

[1] Freedom-of-Information document released to ABC 2024

[2] Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2023

- Ends -

For further details or interviews contact:

anna.masci@mackillop.org.au

Mob: 0428 029 012

Notes

[Power to Kids in Schools](#) is a professional learning program that upskills educators and schools to strengthen prevention and responses to child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and dating violence. It supports educators with the knowledge and practical skills to hold 'brave conversations' around sexual health and safety and features three evidence-based strategies including a school-wide education approach, early identification and intervention, and connecting with appropriate services to disrupt harm.

[The MacKillop Institute](#) delivers trauma-informed programs that promote school and organisational wellbeing and strengthen child safety.

The MacKillop Institute
237 Cecil Street
Melbourne Australia 3205
anna.masci@mackillop.org.au
[unsubscribe](#)