MEDIA RELEASE
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ACU launches new resources for teaching respectful relationships education in Catholic schools

Australian Catholic University (ACU) theologians and safeguarding experts have designed a new suite of resources to support Catholic educators to plan and deliver evidence-based and theologically-informed respectful relationships education.

Scholars from ACU's School of Theology and the Institute for Child Protection Studies (ICPS) have launched a 5-part video series for respectful relationships and consent education facilitators, together with a comprehensive pastoral guide to designing educational programs for respectful relationships and informed consent in Catholic schools.

Funded by the Victorian Catholic Education Authority in response to Catholic educator and parent concerns about the Australian government mandate, the resources are the first of its kind in Australia to present consent and respectful relationships education with a Christian theology vision of the human person.

The resources also draw on the latest findings into child abuse and neglect by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), including the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual abuse, and growing rates of online sexual exploitation.

Jesuit Catholic priest, theologian and registered psychologist Associate Professor Calder SJ, who led the theological contributions, said the Christian vision of the human person was fundamental to any discussions on consent education in the Catholic sector.

"Catholic schools are entrusted and called by the Holy Spirit to create communities in which relationships are respectful, safe, inclusive, and so deeply humanising," Associate Professor Calder said.

"Consent education then is not just another safeguarding requirement or an add-on to the curriculum, but a clear way of participating in the humanising mission of the Catholic Church to become human together to invite peoples into ever deeper union God, themselves and each other."

The Australian government made consent and respectful relationships education mandatory in all schools, including Catholic schools, from the start of 2023.

The peak bodies for Catholic schools in all Australia states and territories have developed programs for consent and respectful relationships education or use approved platforms designed for faith-based institutions.

Associate Professor Calder said the new resources by ACU were created to equip Catholic educators to teach consent and respectful relationships education with confidence.

"Our new resources will give Catholic schools and educators a theological and spiritual framework to ensure consent education prevents harm whilst also enriching their understanding of the Church's teachings on the dignity of the human person and how to apply these teachings."

Professor Daryl Higgins, director of the Institute for Child Protection Studies and chief investigator on the ACMS, said comprehensive, evidence-informed consent and respectful relationships education is an important component of a broader, whole-school approach to preventing sexual harm.

"Preventing sexual harm is not the responsibility of children and young people alone. Effective consent and respectful relationships education needs to sit within a whole-school approach that supports respectful cultures and equips adults as well as young people with the knowledge and skills to prevent and respond to harm," Professor Higgins said.

"It is important to build the capability of teachers and school leaders, and equip them so they are confident to have conversations with parents and the school community about how consent and respectful relationships education is at the heart of the mission of Catholic education."

Dr Gabrielle Hunt, a research associate with ICPS who has investigated child sexual abuse in faith-based settings, said schools played a significant role in preventing harm.

"Research from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study tells us that sexual harm between young people is a significant child protection issue," Dr Hunt said.

"Schools have an important role to play in prevention, in part by creating environments where harmful behaviours are challenged, young people feel safe to seek support, and everyone understands their responsibilities in preventing harm."

Dr Hunt has called on educators and school leaders to teach young people the skills and knowledge to recognise harmful abuse.

"We cannot assume that young people will automatically understand consent, recognise coercion or know how to navigate complex relationships," she said.

"These are skills that need to be taught, modelled and reinforced. "

Created for Respectful Relationships was developed by Associate Professor Calder and Dr Janine Luttick from the School of Theology, and Professor Higgins and Dr Gabrielle Hunt of ICPS.

The resources can be accessed on ACU's Safeguarding Children and Young People Portal.

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