

Girls need a positive approach to sex and relationships

Young people, sexuality and the influence of pornography will be key areas of discussion for educators from girls' schools attending the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia's conference **Fearless Girls Strong Women** at the Adelaide Convention Centre this weekend.

More than 240 educators from 87 schools across Australasia, specialising in the education of girls, will hear the very latest insights into issues affecting teenage girls including sex education, the effect of rising teen pornography consumption, how to combat anxiety, and more at the Biennial Educators Conference from 5-7 May.

Alliance of Girls' Schools Executive Officer Loren Bridge said girls' schools have a pivotal role to play in helping young women navigate the often troubling and contradictory landscape of sex and relationships.

'Research¹ shows that girls prefer single-sex classes for sex and relationship education and that they feel vulnerable and uncomfortable in co-ed sex education classes.

'Unfortunately the mainstreaming of pornography through advertising, movies and music videos is influencing many young people to develop unrealistic attitudes towards sex and relationships. Girls' schools are perfectly positioned to support teenaged girls who face objectification and sexualisation at a far earlier age than previous generations,' said Ms Bridge

'This conference will provide schools with a deeper understanding of these issues and strategies to help them support their students,' she said.

Leading US author Peggy Orenstein, a headline speaker at the event, said we need to educate young people to have the same kind of ethics in their personal and sexual relationships that we expect them to have in other realms.

'It's vital that we instil responsibility and respect in our youth, teaching them that sex should be something joyful, whilst conveying the importance that sexual interactions must always be consensual,' said Ms Orenstein.

'Right now our kids are living in a hyper-sexualised world where they see images that are not even *remotely* age appropriate by the time they are in middle school, if not well before,' she said.

Maree Crabbe, co-founder of Reality and Risk, a violence prevention program which aims to understand and address the influence of pornography, said more than 60% of girls are seeing porn online.

'For young people growing up online, exposure to porn has become normalised. In order to assist our youth to navigate this new reality, parents, schools and community organisations must first understand the issues,' said Ms Crabbe.

‘Schools contribute significantly to students’ sexuality education, a context in which many of pornography’s messages – about, for example, gender, body image, consent and sexual safety – can be appropriately addressed,’ she said.

Ms Orenstein added that one of the toughest things for teachers in relation to sex education is dealing with community standards.

‘Parents often perceive that talking about sex and relationships is not allowing children their “innocence.” But we know through research that, especially for girls, the more they know, the more educated they are about sexual ethics, the more understanding they have of their own bodies and their own capacity for pleasure the more likely they are to make more discerning choices in partners and the *less* likely they are to succumb to pressure by a partner,’ said Ms Orenstein.

‘Teachers can face fear and ignorance around sex education so you need to create community around it. Even as we push for truly comprehensive sex-ed, we need to have broader conversations among parents, in the media, wherever we can about what normative sexual development looks like,’ she said.

The conference will be officially opened by Senator the Hon Penny Wong on Saturday 5 May at the State Library of South Australia.

Interviews available with:

Peggy Orenstein - New York Times bestselling author, award-winning journalist, and internationally recognized speaker on issues affecting girls and women. She has authored seven books and her [TED](#) talk has been watched almost 12 million times.

Maree Crabbe – Co-founder and Director of *Reality & Risk*, a violence prevention project that supports young people, parents, schools, government and the community sector to understand and address the influence of pornography.

Madonna King – Accomplished journalist, author and broadcaster. She has authored seven books, including her latest book *Being 14* containing insights from two hundred 14-year-old girls she interviewed.

Dr Terry Fitzsimmons - Director of the Centre for Research into Gender Equality in the Workplace at the University of Queensland and Managing Director of the Australian Gender Equality Council (AGEC).

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Ref:

1. Pound, P., Denford, S., Shucksmith, J., Tanton, C., Johnson, A., Owen, J. ... & Campbell, R. (2017). [What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders’ views.](#) *BMJ Open*, 7(5), e014791. DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-014791

To arrange an interview or for more information:

Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia

Teva Smith | Director of Communications | 0416 812417 | teva.smith@agsa.org.au

About the Alliance

The Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia is a leading voice for the advancement of girls' education. We advocate for and support the distinctive work of girls' schools in their provision of unparalleled opportunities for girls. We contribute to the development and promotion of education in Australasia and the empowerment of young women to reach their potential and become influential contributors to our complex and changing world.

The Alliance connects educators from our 170 plus member schools across six countries. We represent over 132,000 girls, over 10,000 educators and attract over 2000 program participants annually to local events, and regional conferences.