

Lucy Forwood, Health Promotion Worker, WHW

## Student experiences of the Girls Talk – Guys Talk group:

“We learnt to respect each others’ different opinions.”

“Getting a lot more responsibility rather than just being told what to do.”

“Now that I know all this stuff I will make different decisions about going to parties, getting drunk and having sex.”

“I can explain to my sister the consequences of the risks she is taking.”

## Parents’ feedback

“It was very helpful and my daughter made me proud.”

“The play was really good as well as the doctor’s talk, overall it was brilliant.”

Women’s Health West (WHW) provided one-off sexual health programs in secondary schools for some years but has shifted toward a whole-school approach to sexuality education. This approach builds strength within schools to ensure the skills and knowledge developed have a greater impact on the sexual health and wellbeing of young people and are not lost.

Girls Talk – Guys Talk focussed on year nine students and encouraged a school environment that develops powerful young people with access to knowledge, skills and support. This knowledge enhanced students’ life chances and those of their community. In May 2007, WHW chose Laverton Secondary College (LSC) to participate in the project. Fourteen months on, the impact of Girls Talk – Guys Talk has surpassed our expectations.

Partnerships were key to the success of the project, with active involvement of students, the school nurse, school staff, local agencies and parents.

## Student Involvement

The working group of fourteen year nine students influenced all levels, and were crucial to the life, of the project. Students welcomed the consultation and embraced their responsibilities with high energy. They particularly enjoyed seeing their great ideas come to fruition.

A Hobson’s Bay Council youth worker will support the group to continue their collaborative work and become mentors to younger students.

*It’s about valuing students’ contribution and it’s a break from the teacher-student relationship. The students are driving this. They have ownership. The students are motivated. It acknowledges and validates their strengths. It provides them with a more active role in learning.*

Alison Webb, School Nurse, LSC

*Over the past twelve months, I observed remarkable personal achievements in the students. These included greater confidence to speak and act assertively; less wagging; a huge reduction in homophobic, racist and sexist behaviour; increased connectedness with one another; concerted efforts to complete school work; increased participation in school activities; some significant attitudinal changes about their education and aspirations for their futures. The students appeared to be happier than when I first met them.*

Lucy Forwood, Women’s Health West  
Health Promotion Worker

All year nine students completed an assessment of sexual and reproductive health issues at the commencement of the project, and completed a knowledge test before and after participating in a ten week sexuality education course. All students demonstrated a vast increase in knowledge of sexual and reproductive health after the course.

## School Staff Involvement

A working group of teachers, school leaders, ancillary staff and local service providers have been integral to the direction of the project. We have also established a Student Wellbeing Committee that will meet on a regular basis. Lucy developed a sexual and reproductive health policy for the school to embed sex education into the curriculum.

Lucy, the school nurse and teachers delivered the sexuality education course together as a training exercise so that teachers will be able to deliver the course in the future. School staff and leaders have been co-operative, committed and encouraging, resulting in terrific benefits for the project and the school.

## Parent Involvement

The student assessment of sexual and reproductive health issues found that most students turn to their mothers or female caregivers for help with a health problem.

# ONE CONVERSATION ENDS. ANOTHER BEGINS

While the sexuality education course was being delivered we held an event for parents focusing on ways to talk to their child about sexual health. Students produced 'Should I or Shouldn't I?' a performance about relationships, sexual decision-making and communicating with parents. Two students delivered a presentation of findings from their health issues assessment. A local GP also presented information on ways to talk to teenagers about sex. All parents rated the night as extremely useful, and reported feeling more confident about talking to their children about sex and relationships.

## Parents

Parental input into the project has required some creative thinking. The play was a great way of attracting parents to the school. Regular project updates in the school newsletter were another method used to reach parents.

## Engaging with Service Providers

Communication between local services and LSC has improved since Girls Talk – Guys Talk started. Hobson's Bay Youth Services and the Action Centre Family Planning Clinic were active reference group members and delivered elements of the sexuality education course. Hobson's Bay City Council invited the student group to participate in youth activities and consider them a voice representing young people at LSC.

*It was a wonderful experience working with the staff and students at the LSC and I was sad to leave, but really look forward to working with the next school.*

Lucy Forwood, Women's Health West Health Promotion Worker



**Lucy's (right) final goodbye celebration with the student group and Alison Webb (left) LSC school nurse.**

Photo: Joy Free



**Students from Laverton Secondary College during a session.**

Photo: Sue Manski

Girls Talk – Guys Talk is featured as a 'key success' in the Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy Action plan January 2007 – June 2008. Read more online at [http://www.health.vic.gov.au/vwhp/downloads/progress\\_report\\_keysuccesses.pdf](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/vwhp/downloads/progress_report_keysuccesses.pdf)

Lucy also presented a paper on the project at the National Health Promoting Schools Conference in Adelaide in April this year.