

We are a group of high school students from Frankston North, Victoria. For the past 5 years we have been participating in Project O, a family violence prevention program in our school, supported by mentors and Rosie Batty. We have learnt more about what we already felt and thought – our community has some of the highest family violence rates in the country. Some of us have lived it, all of us are impacted by it.

Together we learned to speak up, by making content, holding events, and creating a documentary about our journey called ***It Starts With Us***. This film, which has been screening nationally, is an offer to you from us, so you can better understand what we need.

Here's what we know, because we live it: young people are affected by domestic and family violence, young people have something to say about it, and we deserve to be part of preventing it. This work is urgent. We're calling on you to commit to prevention that genuinely centres children and young people.

We didn't join Project O to prevent violence, and no-one put that responsibility on us. We joined because it was creative, supportive, fun, and a break from the pressures of school and being a teenager. We stayed because we were learning new skills, building trust, feeling understood, and connecting with people we would never normally meet. Prevention was something we grew into gradually, because the environment was safe, respectful, and inclusive.

When young people feel valued, we are willing and able to engage in deeper conversations about safety, respect, and community.

Through creativity and mentorship, our hearts have been opened to the importance of prevention - to end violence against women and children. Our minds are now ticking with ideas. We want to see:

- A rise in the standard of behaviour, language and respect in our communities.
- Meaningful support in high-risk areas delivered in ways that actually engage us
- Education that includes us, and our families, in ways that are positive and connected.
- Community spaces to be strengthened so they can host prevention programs

This is why programs like Project O work. They create environments where respectful relationships are modelled, not lectured about. They welcome girls, boys and gender diverse young people into the space. Many programs start with heavy topics in rooms where young people barely know each other, and that approach does not work for us. We need spaces where we are treated with respect, where adults know how to speak with us - rather than at us. Excluding young people from these discussions is not safe - it leaves us without the tools we need to navigate real challenges.

As the 2025 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence draws to a close, our message is simple:

Invest in prevention approaches that centre young people. Invest in long-term programs that build safety, respect and connection from the ground up. This is the investment that will end violence against women and children in a generation.

It starts with us.

Signed:

Archie, Bailey, Kaden, Matang, Rish, Xiao, Zoe

We are so grateful to the adults and partners who have backed us over the years, and those who have taken our story to the nation. Visit our website, view our film and explore our education resources at:
[**itstartswithus.com.au**](http://itstartswithus.com.au)

JOINT STATEMENT FROM THE PARTNERS OF *IT STARTS WITH US*

As impact partners in *It Starts With Us*, we stand alongside these young people from Frankston North in calling for meaningful, long-term investment in prevention that places children and young people at the centre.

For more than three decades, **Big hART** has seen firsthand the power of creativity to build brave, safe spaces for young people to grow, connect and lead. Through ten years of running Project O across Australia, we know young people are ready to contribute to preventing family violence - they simply need opportunities, resources, and adults who are willing to listen.

At **Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC)**, every day we balance the needs of urgent crisis response with a necessary focus on primary prevention. We believe every child and young person deserves consistent, positive messages about healthy and respectful relationships - whether they are in school or not. We champion programs that help them heal, recover, prevent violence and rebuild lives. Role modelling matters. Young people thrive when they are surrounded by adults and environments that uphold dignity, respect, and care from early childhood through to early adulthood.

As Victoria's dedicated family and gendered-violence prevention agency, **Respect Victoria** recognises young people as powerful advocates for change. Their voices must be centred. Early intervention has profound long-term impacts: it helps shape social norms, equips young people to question harmful attitudes, and supports them to build respectful ways of relating. But the scale of the challenge - from online misogyny to widening inequalities - requires urgent, coordinated commitment across all levels of government.

2 in 5 young people in Australia have been exposed to family violence*. Less than 5% of allocated spending goes towards prevention**. How do we shift the balance?

Growing evidence for prevention clearly supports the need for responses that recognise the complex and cumulative ways children and young people experience the harms of family violence. The data shows they want to be heard – especially those overlooked by services and systems. This means building into our policy processes the time for children and young people to meaningfully engage – including sharing their lived experience to inform the development and reform of laws and other capital 'P' policies.

From an economic perspective, the call is clear: prevention is not only a moral imperative but a sound investment. Family and domestic violence costs the Australian economy an estimated \$35 billion each year, but as recent Productivity Commission research shows the long-term benefits of prevention are often missed due to short-term budget cycles. Embedding evidence-based prevention into government decision making is essential for reducing costs and improving outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. Prevention pays off, over years and generations.

Together, as partners, we affirm what these young people have articulated:

Prevention works when young people are valued, supported, and invited in.
Prevention succeeds when communities are resourced to lead.
And prevention must be prioritised now - with urgency, courage, and long-term commitment.

We stand with the young people of *It Starts With Us*, and we ask decision makers to do the same.

Signed:

Rosie Batty AO, Big hART, Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC), Respect Victoria

To discuss this open letter or ask questions about *It Starts With Us*, contact Sophia Marinos
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*Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2024

**Australia lacks consistent data on funding allocated to prevention funding. This statistic has been derived from a range of sources in different states.