

FREE TO BE ME



Case Story: Real progress towards gender equality in the early years

Early childhood centres in Boroondara and Manningham are making practical changes that support gender equity and respectful relationships to prevent future attitudes and behaviours that drive violence against women.

Background

Over the last 18 months, Access Health and Community (AccessHC) has built strong relationships with six early childhood centres across Boroondara and Manningham to promote respectful relationships and gender equity.

These centres joined the AccessHC *Free to Be Me* program to create an environment where children can be free to be whoever they are, without the restriction of gender stereotypes. As a Together for Equality and Respect partner, the vision for this work is to teach and model respectful relationships to children so they can grow into adults that are equally valued, heard and respected, and have equal access to opportunities.

What we did

Robert Cochrane Kindergarten is one of the centres that signed up to our *Free to Be Me* program in 2020. Together we worked to complete a series of assessment tools to review their policies, practices, language use and learning activities.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns Robert Cochrane Kindergarten remained committed to progressing through the program. All staff were involved in completing the assessment tools, attending the gender equity training provided and developing and implementing an action plan.

Robert Cochrane Kindergarten also successfully applied for project funding through the Action Grants Program. A grants program coordinated by AccessHC to create local action around gender equity and social inclusion.

Outcomes

The *Free to Be Me* program has enabled us to increase the capacity of the 11 early childhood educators working at Robert Cochrane Kindergarten. As a result, these educators better understand the link between gender equity in the early years and how it works towards preventing violence against women. They also have increased knowledge, skills and resources to promote gender equity and break down gender stereotypes.

The *Free to Be Me* program reached 85 children currently attending the 3 and 4-year-old kindergarten program at Robert Cochrane Kindergarten, and will reach future children who are educated and cared for in their service.



Overall, Robert Cochrane Kindergarten has been able to create sustainable change by embedding gender equity practices into their existing processes and quality improvement plans.

Some of the actions within their Action Plan included:

- Updating their Inclusion and Equity Policy to strengthen references to gender equity
- Integrating gender equity tools within their daily and room reflective practice
- Providing opportunities for staff to share teaching strategies that challenge gender stereotypes in their classroom
- Promoting further gender equity professional development opportunities
- Involving children in the development of different play spaces and resources; and
- Sharing resources with families to promote gender equality at home.

In addition, the complementary Action Grants Program assisted Robert Cochrane Kindergarten to provide a Body Safety Program for educators, families and children. Body safety education works towards preventing violence against women because it helps children understand body-ownership and the right to feel safe. It is also an important part of gender equality as it teaches children to value and respect their own body as well as others. By extending the Body Safety Program invitation to parents, carers and other family members this program will reach into the wider community.

Next Steps

The need for the *Free to Be Me* program is demonstrated by its value to participating centres and interest from more centres. To increase the scale and sustainability of the Free to Be Me program, we are in the process of turning it into an online program. This will enable early childhood centres across the Eastern Metropolitan Region, and potentially Victoria, to join the program and complete it more independently.

The review and redesign of the program will involve stakeholder consultation to ensure it will meet the **needs of future early childhood centres' and educators. AccessHC is also developing partnerships to integrate the online program with other existing health promoting programs.**