# The Shark Cage® Program for Young Women

*A human rights approach to gender violence, healthy relationships and gender equality*

**PROGRAM SUMMARY** An engaging, evidence-informed prevention program for schools and community services.

The Shark Cage Program for Young Women uses an accessible metaphor to help participants understand their rights, recognise behaviours that may be abusive or exploitative, strengthen boundaries and build respectful relationships.

Developed by Australian psychologist Ursula Benstead and educator Angelle Hughes, the program draws on extensive clinical and educational experience. It is adapted from the Shark Cage Group Program for Women, which has been delivered by community services across Australia since 2011.

The program was updated in 2024 to incorporate the Commonwealth Consent Policy Framework.

## Who the program is for

The program is designed for cis and trans young women, and for non-binary young people who are comfortable participating in a space that centres the experiences of girls and women.

## Why a young women's program?

The program responds to demand for a youth- and school-friendly prevention program that can be delivered sustainably by trained school and agency staff. It complements respectful relationships education for all genders while creating a dedicated space in which participants can explore gendered experiences, rights, safety and consent.

This setting can make it easier to discuss issues that some participants may find difficult to explore fully when boys or men are present. The learning objectives also align with Australian school curriculum priorities relating to respectful relationships and healthy relationships.

## The Shark Cage metaphor

The Shark Cage metaphor is the first step in a five-step framework. Participants imagine an ocean containing friendly fish and dolphins, as well as sharks. Each bar of the Shark Cage represents a fundamental human right. Together, the bars create a structure that helps participants notice when a right is being disrespected and, where possible, move away from people or situations that may be unsafe.

The strength of each bar is shaped by the messages and experiences received while growing up - from caregivers, family, peers, communities and wider society. Some bars may already be strong; others may need to be installed or strengthened.

When another person pushes against a bar, the body may respond with sensations and emotions. This is described as the Shark Cage alarm: an internal warning that a right may be under threat. Participants learn to recognise this alarm, strengthen their sense of entitlement to rights, and defend their Shark Cage when it is safe to do so.

## Program learning objectives

By the end of the program, participants are supported to:

- increase their knowledge of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- increase their capacity to set boundaries
- develop respectful, assertive communication skills
- increase their understanding of consent
- reduce victim-blaming attitudes
- increase their ability to care for and be kind to themselves
- increase their awareness of ‘gut feelings’ about people and situations
- strengthen their sense of self-worth
- strengthen their belief in their entitlement to rights
- increase their ability to recognise a potentially abusive or exploitative person
- increase their awareness of, and respect for, the rights of others.

## Delivery formats

The program has been delivered in two formats:

- a one-day, six-hour workshop
- seven 90-minute sessions, suitable for delivery during double lesson periods.

The one-day format was delivered in three schools: two regional NSW government high schools and a boarding school for Aboriginal girls in regional Victoria. Its success generated demand for a more comprehensive seven-session program, allowing greater time to consolidate learning.

Research also indicates that longer programs offering deeper exploration have greater potential to change behaviour (Flood, Fergus & Heenan, 2009). Program development has therefore focused on the seven-session format.

# Pilot delivery and evaluation

## One-day program

Fifty-four students participated across three schools. Post-program evaluation results were:

| Evaluation statement | Agreed |
|---|---|
| I understood most of what was discussed today. | 100% |
| I know more about my rights now. | 96% |
| I will be better able to recognise a shark after today. | 98% |
| The workshop discusses things that are important for girls to know. | 96% |

## Seven-session program

The seven-session program was piloted in one Victorian and one NSW high school. Forty students aged 12 to 16 participated across four group programs in 2018. Across four groups and 28 sessions, 85-95% of participants agreed that they would be able to use what they had learned in their lives.

Qualitative and quantitative feedback indicated that participants found the program informative, engaging and enjoyable. They responded positively to its imaginative, visual and activity-based approach to human rights and gender violence. Detailed demographic information, full evaluation data and a sample evaluation form are available on request.

# What participants and staff said

## Young women

> *"I liked that it is all right to say no, and we learnt our rights for relationships: physically, mentally, financially and spiritually."*
>
> *"I know now that I can tell someone if I am being harassed and ask for help."*
>
> *"I liked that it was really fun and creative ... It was a fun way to learn about respect for your rights."*
>
> *"I now understand more about my rights and understand how to recognise sharks."*
>
> *"Sharks and Dolphins makes you understand. I liked how we got to do lots of fun things but still learnt lots, and it will help us with our future."*

### Facilitating staff

*"I think this is an excellent and valuable program."*

*"I've loved the enthusiasm and questions from the girls, and the things they say they have learnt."*

*"I liked the way the students engaged with the information - especially the consent and human rights information."*

*"It is set out brilliantly and so easy to follow."*

*"We have had parents calling the school requesting that their child complete the program."*

## Seven-session overview

### 1. Exploring gender and the Shark Cage metaphor

Participants explore what it means to be a girl or boy and use the metaphor to understand how a sense of human rights can be supported - or undermined - while growing up.

### 2. Human rights, consent and renovating the Shark Cage

Participants identify the categories of human rights that form the bars of the Shark Cage, begin strengthening their cages and develop their understanding of consent.

### 3. Self-care and fixing the Shark Cage alarm

Participants explore self-care and the internal alarm that can signal when a person or situation does not feel right.

### 4. Yoga and defending the Shark Cage

A short yoga activity supports self-care, healthy coping and connection with the body. Participants then learn strategies for defending their Shark Cage when it is safe to do so.

### 5. Assertiveness and healthy coping strategies

Participants practise respectful assertive communication, recognise communication that disrespects others' rights and further develop healthy coping strategies.

### 6. Recognising shark and dolphin behaviours

Participants compare shark-like behaviours that disrespect rights with dolphin-like behaviours that support rights. They also reflect on how to respect the rights of others.

### 7. Building self-worth and celebrating strengths

Participants identify personal strengths, consolidate their learning and celebrate their achievements by completing a collaborative Shark Cage mural.

## Facilitator accreditation and program delivery

Teachers and other professionals must complete the accreditation process before delivering the program through their school or service.

### Accreditation pathway

#### 1. Complete Part 1 training

Foundational Shark Cage: A Practical Framework for Prevention and Addressing Re-victimisation in Girls and Women. This is a prerequisite for Part 2 and is available through live online training or as an on-demand e-course.

#### 2. Complete Part 2 training

The Shark Cage Program for Young Women: A Human Rights Approach to Gender Violence, Healthy Relationships and Gender Equality.

#### 3. Enter into a Service Agreement

The employing school or service enters into a Service Agreement with Ursula Benstead Consulting. The agreement sets out how program materials may be used and delivered.

#### 4. Deliver a first group as a provisional facilitator

While delivering their first group, the facilitator completes and submits an assessed reflection task to Ursula Benstead.

#### 5. Receive full accreditation

After successfully completing the training and reflection requirements and delivering one group, the facilitator receives full accreditation.

> **TIMEFRAME** The accreditation process must be completed within 12 months of the Service Agreement unless Ursula Benstead grants a written extension.

### What accreditation includes

- 24 hours of training
- a digital program manual with detailed session plans, worksheets and condensed session running sheets
- seven PowerPoint session guides and digital copies of program worksheets and forms
- the Shark Cage animation
- professional development certificates for the training components.

The accreditation process and Service Agreement protect the integrity and fidelity of the program. They also ensure that lead facilitators have a sound understanding of the drivers of gender violence and consent, and are equipped to respond appropriately to disclosures.

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## Service Agreement

A school or service must hold an active Service Agreement with Ursula Benstead Consulting while its facilitators deliver groups. The initial 12-month agreement is included in the Part 2 training and resources fee. At the time of writing, annual renewal costs $275 (including GST). Facilitators may not deliver the program if their organisation does not have an active agreement.

## Training options and fees

Both training components are offered as live, interactive online training with limited participant numbers. Foundational training is also available as an on-demand e-course. Tailored in-house training can be delivered online or face to face; face-to-face costs vary by location.

| Training component | Included | Fee per participant |
|---|---|---|
| Part 1: Foundational Shark Cage | Two six-hour live webinars; training resources; professional development certificate | $895 incl. GST |
| Part 1: Foundational Shark Cage (Learn on Demand e-course) | Self-paced on-demand e-course; training resources; professional development certificate | $699 incl. GST |
| Part 2: Program for Young Women | Two six-hour live webinars; digital program manual; seven PowerPoint session guides and other digital resources; professional development certificate; initial Service Agreement | $1,295 incl. GST |

If Part 1 has already been completed, the total public-training cost is $1,295 (including GST). If both Part 1 and Part 2 are required, the combined cost is $2,190 (including GST) with live Part 1 training, or $1,994 (including GST) with the Learn on Demand e-course.

**FEES** Costs are accurate as of September 2026, are reviewed annually and may change. Contact The Shark Cage for current dates, availability and tailored in-house quotations.

## Program authors

### Ursula Benstead

Ursula Benstead is a psychologist based in Central Queensland, Australia, with 35 years' experience in complex trauma, particularly family and domestic violence and sexual assault. She is the author of The Shark Cage Group Program Manual and How to Spot a Shark: 5 Steps to Healing from Abusive Relationships, and co-author of The Shark Cage Program for Young Women. Ursula has delivered Shark Cage training to more than 10,000 professionals in Australia and internationally.

### Angelle Hughes

Angelle Hughes is a Central Queensland educator who promotes gender equality and respectful relationships in schools and communities. She is passionate about science education and reducing gender disparity in STEM. Her experience also includes supporting adolescents and parents through teaching, community leadership and martial arts instruction focused on respect and self-defence.

## More information

Program, accreditation and fee enquiries: info@thesharkcage.com

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The Shark Cage® is a registered trademark of Ursula Benstead.