

## BRIEFING PAPER

# SUN PROTECTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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### Goal

**Ensure that all NSW primary schools are required to implement comprehensive sun protection measures, in order to reduce children's lifetime risk of skin cancer.**

### Problem

Currently, 2 out of 3 Australians will develop some form of skin cancer before the age of 70.<sup>2</sup>

Over 444,000 Australians are treated for skin cancer every year<sup>3</sup> and more than 1,800 people die from skin cancer every year.<sup>4</sup>

Reducing children's exposure to UV radiation, particularly in the first 15 years of life, significantly reduces their risk of skin cancer later in life. The good news is that almost all skin cancers can be prevented through effective sun protection measures.

In NSW, all children aged between 5 and 12 years of age spend up to 7 hours per day, 40 weeks per year in the care of a primary school setting. This means primary schools have a particularly important role in protecting children from sunburn and future skin cancer risk.

There has been some progress towards improving sun protection in primary schools, particularly with 42% of schools participating in the voluntary SunSmart Primary School Program. Through the program Cancer Council NSW supports schools by providing curriculum resources, SunSmart signage, and local incentives; and schools commit to developing and implementing a comprehensive sun protection policy.

However, it is clear that we are not doing enough to protect children from harmful levels of UV radiation while they are at school. An online survey of parents of children attending government primary schools in NSW found that 49 percent of children are wearing baseball caps to school, despite the fact that they do not provide adequate sun protection. The same survey found that 46 percent of parents believe that baseball caps do provide adequate sun protection when in fact they don't.<sup>1</sup>

One factor contributing to this problem is the lack of strong policy guidance and support for primary schools to do more to ensure adequate protection against UV exposure. The Department of Education and Communities "Protection from the sun" guidelines have not been updated since 1997. The guidelines do not reflect what is known to be important for optimal sun protection, current health evidence or statistics, and only 'encourage' schools to develop their own sun protection plans. For almost four years, the Department of Education and Communities has told us that they are in the process of updating the guidelines.

Specific gaps and concerns in the guidelines include the reference to SPF15 sunscreen instead of SPF30+, and absence of a requirement for broad-brimmed hats. There are also no requirements to *have* or *review* a written policy.

Skin cancer is not always easy to treat and can be more involved than simply having a lesion 'burnt off.' Treatment can, in some cases, be extensive and painful and result in permanent scarring, requiring time off work and/or other normal activities. Protecting children from the sun during these critical childhood years can help reduce this toll.

## **Solution**

All key health institutions and experts agree that protecting children from the sun while at primary school is an important way to reduce skin cancer risk. The World Health Organisation outlines specific standards for sun protection for children in primary schools, as does the Cancer Council NSW. The NSW Cancer Plan 2011-15 outlines the priorities for action on cancer in NSW and includes an objective to reduce over-exposure to ultra violet radiation by developing and implementing policies and guidelines for settings including schools.

The NSW Government is currently finalising a NSW Skin Cancer Plan 2011-15, which specifically notes the importance of evidence-based comprehensive sun protection policies which address scheduling of outdoor activities; shade; and clothing and hats; and states that primary schools are a key setting where such policies should be developed and implemented.

A national survey of primary schools shows that there is a strong link between a written sun protection policy and more effective sun protection practices in that school. Measures such as wearing a broad-brimmed hat, using sunscreen and minimising time spent outdoors in peak UV hours are more likely to be enforced when included in a written document.

This same survey found that sun protection is accepted by schools as part of their responsibility for the wellbeing of students<sup>5</sup>. Schools need to be supported in meeting this responsibility with a stronger policy and accompanying guidelines. In fact, in four other Australian states and territories - QLD, WA, VIC, and the ACT - the respective Departments of Education have specific, comprehensive sun protection policies.

National surveys of parents show high levels of awareness about the need for sun protection for primary school aged children and high levels of compliance while children are in their care. However, there is still considerable scope for state educational institutions and individual schools to ensure similar measures are taken while children are in their care, especially as this is where children spend the hottest part of the day.

## **Action**

Cancer Council NSW recommends that the State Government ensure that all primary schools are required to implement a comprehensive sun protection policy\*\* that reflects current evidence.

At a minimum, this would require the Minister for Education to:

- issue an updated comprehensive NSW sun protection policy\*\*, via the Department of Education and Communities, that includes a requirement for all public primary schools to develop and implement a sun protection plan that is consistent with the NSW sun protection policy
- encourage all non-government schools to adopt a comprehensive sun protection policy consistent with the NSW sun protection policy issued by the Department of Education and Communities.
- consider mechanisms for regular review and monitoring of sun protection policy and practices in primary schools.

If the NSW Government establishes a policy requirement that all primary schools need to meet best-practice sun protection standards, this will provide much needed guidance to principals and teachers in reducing the risk of later skin cancer in the children currently in their care.

## References

1. Research Now. (2010); Primary schools and sun protection headwear. Online survey with parents.
  2. Staples MP, Elwood M, Burton RC, et al. Non-melanoma skin cancer in Australia: the 2002 national survey and trends since 1985. *Med J Aust* 2006;184:6-10
  3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Non-melanoma skin cancer: general practice consultations, hospitalisation and mortality. Canberra: AIHW; 2008.
  4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Causes of Death 2009. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2011.
  5. ARTD Consultants. Skin cancer prevention program in NSW primary schools. Sydney: Unpublished Report; 2007.
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### **\*\*A comprehensive Sun Protection Policy includes the following:**

#### **The environment**

##### 1. Scheduling outdoor activities

Outdoor activities (assemblies, sport, Physical Education etc) are scheduled in the morning or afternoon, outside peak UV times.

##### 2. Shade

The school community is committed to providing shade (trees as well as built and portable shade structures) in eating, outdoor teaching and popular play areas.

##### 3. Role modelling of staff

Staff are asked to role model good sun protection behaviours, including wearing sun-safe hats, clothing and sunglasses; and applying SPF 30+ broad-spectrum water-resistant sunscreen 20 minutes before going outdoors.

#### **Behaviour**

##### 4. Hats

Students are required to wear legionnaire, broad-brimmed or bucket hats. Baseball caps are not recommended. Students who do not have a sun-safe hat are asked to play in the shade or a suitable area protected from the sun.

##### 5. Clothing

The school and sports uniforms include shirts with collars or covered necklines, sleeves, longer style dresses and shorts, and rash vests or t-shirts for outdoor swimming.

##### 6. Sunscreen

SPF 30+ broad-spectrum water-resistant sunscreen is available, and students and staff are encouraged to apply it 20 minutes before going outdoors.

#### **Education**

##### 7. Curriculum

Teachers are required to include sun protection principles in teaching programs for all year levels.

##### 8. Informing the school community

Sun protection information is regularly promoted to the school community through newsletters, noticeboards, online, parent meetings, staff meetings, school assemblies and on student enrolment.

Families and visitors are encouraged to use a combination of sun protection measures when attending or participating in outdoor activities.

##### 9. Sunglasses (Optional)

Staff and students are encouraged to wear close-fitting wrap-around sunglasses that cover as much of the eye area as possible and comply with Australian Standard AS1067 (Sunglasses: Category 2, 3 or 4).

##### 10. Review

The school parent body and staff will monitor and review the effectiveness of the Sun Protection Policy every three years.