Healthy Relationships for Youth:

Making the Case for Youth Facilitated Dating Violence Prevention Programs

Final Narrative Report

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Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

and Sexual Assault Services Association

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In Partnership with:

Strait Regional Centre for Education, South Shore Regional Centre for Education, Chignecto Central Centre for Education, Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education, Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial, Nova Scotia Health Authority, Second Story Women's Centre, Pictou County Women's Centre

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HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH
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Introduction

Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) is a peer-facilitated teen relationship violence prevention program wherein trained youth facilitators from grades 11 and 12 deliver a series of twelve sessions to students in Grade 9 Healthy Living classes. The goal of the HRY program is to reduce the risk of violence by providing youth with the skills they need to build and maintain healthy relationships, as well as to increase awareness and knowledge surrounding dating violence and the underlying factors that contribute to it. The Public Health Agency of Canada provided $1,019,985 from October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2023 through the *Preventing Gender-Based Violence: the Health Perspective* investment. Other financial support came from the Leacross Foundation.

Background

The project was undertaken to address youth relationship violence in rural communities in Nova Scotia. HRY incorporates best practices, developmental research and youth feedback to create a youth-centered strengths-based approach to equip students with the information and skills they need to make empowered decisions about their own lives. The PHAC funding allowed for this promising program to continue to expand to schools. HRY has been cited as a promising practice program for the way it involves youth as peer educators in the classroom, schools and communities. The project also helped to expand our evaluation for the HRY program to assess its effectiveness in preventing dating violence, and to share the resulting knowledge with other interested parties. The research aimed to assess the use of peer-facilitated models in promoting healthy relationship practices and changing attitudes and behaviours towards dating violence in a high school context.

Key Activities and Outputs

Over the course of the funding period, HRY delivered a youth facilitated violence prevention program in 21 public highschools in Nova Scotia in five regional centres for education. The Strait Regional Centre for Education (SRCE) includes 10 highschools, all of which participated in HRY, and reaches Antigonish, Guysborough, and Inverness counties. Two schools from the Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education (CCRCE) participated in HRY, and they are located in Amherst, Nova Scotia. Three schools in the Lunenburg area (South Shore Regional Centre for Education-SSRCE) were involved in HRY. All five schools in the northern region of the conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP) participated in relations saines pour les jeunes. Finally, one school in the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education (AVRCE) was involved in the program. Within each school, grade 11 and 12 students received training as youth facilitators before going into Healthy Living 9 classes to deliver the 12-session program.

The SRCE, where the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association is located, is the most involved Centre for Education in the province. The AWRCSASA, which developed the program, has close partnerships with all schools in the area and has built a relationship of trust with teachers and administrators in all ten schools. From 2019-2023, regional coordinators trained 366 youth facilitators to deliver HRY in 71 Healthy Living 9 classes, reaching over 1,494 grade 9 students. HRY is well established in these schools, teachers enjoy the supplemental materials to help them reach their curriculum outcomes, and students not only enjoy participating in it in Grade 9, they look forward to their opportunities to become youth facilitators in later grades.

The CCRCE, which includes Cumberland and Pictou counties, had challenges as regional coordinators there had their HRY work halted when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The regional coordinator for the Amherst area, Christina Chitty, is a public health nurse and was deployed strictly to pandemic response in 2020 and has been unable to return to HRY coordination, though she remains a champion of the program and is connecting team members with Youth Health Centres in her area so that the program may continue in the future. Shelly Curtis Thomspon, as the ED of a Women's Centre, was similarly unable to take on the extra responsibilities of HRY coordination when the pandemic made her job more demanding.

In the SSRCE the regional coordinator worked out of the Second Story Women's Centre and had a contract with the AWRCSASA. At the beginning of the funding period, Saundra Vernon was the regional coordinator, and she established the program and cemented relationships with teachers and admins. About halfway through the funding period, Liz McCurdy took over and continued those relationships. However, during the course of the 2022-2023 school year she resigned her position with the Women's Centre, and was not replaced. Teachers took over delivery, but the program did not run as it normally does.

The CSAP regional coordinator is employed, full time, by the AWRCSASA, and has successfully run the program in 5 schools in the northern region of the CSAP. She continues to deliver the program in the 2023-2024 school year using bridge funding.

The Annapolis Valley Centre for Education has one school that ran the program. The regional coordinator for that area is a mental health and addictions worker with a particular interest in intimate partner violence, who has partnered well with a phys.ed teacher at the highschool to deliver the program.

A challenge for HRY has been that the different regional coordinators come to HRY through different avenues. The ideal scenario is what takes place at the AWRCSASA where 3 people are employed full time to work on HRY, and they work together as a team. When regional coordinators are doing this job off the side of their desk, dedicated as they may be, it cannot be a priority. Variation in program success around the province can be attributed to regional coordinators ability to commit to the program.

Opportunities for knowledge dissemination came in the form of regular meetings with the research and evaluation team, as well as regular meetings with regional coordinators. In these meetings we were able to share, anecdotally, what we were learning with regards to what worked, what didn't work, and what was needed. Further, we heard from the evaluators what the data was telling us. We have also had ample opportunity to share knowledge gained through presentations with multiple partners including Bachelor of Education students at St. Francis Xavier university, Healthy Living 5 teachers in the SRCE, Healthy Living 9 teachers in the SRCE, and principals in all schools that were targeted. Presenters and participants alike learned about best practices in engaging with youth.

Project Outcomes

The mixed-method intervention research approach relied on pre/post survey data, participant voice and partner organization reflections to build an understanding of the effects of the program pertaining to objectives outlined in the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) funding agreement as well as emerging themes identified by participants themselves. Due to

many COVID-related school interruptions, the cumulative results reflect mainly data gathered in the final two-to-three years of the project.

Building knowledge and developing skills

- **85% of grade 9 participants, 89% of youth facilitators, 57% of teachers and 100% of regional coordinators** surveyed report **increased knowledge and skills** for healthy relationships and violence prevention (respectively 756 out of 892, 219 out of 246, 13 out of 23 and 6 out of 6).
- For both grade 9 students and youth facilitators, learning about **healthy conflict in relationships, supports available for people involved in violent relationships and understanding hypersexualization** remain the three most consistent and greatest areas of change throughout the project.
- For youth facilitators, the ability to **present information** in a way that was engaging for youth, effectively **co-facilitating** and **leadership** were three top skills gained.
- For both youth facilitators and grade 9 participants, a gender comparison showed that cis-girls showed slightly more skill development than cis-boys while knowledge increase was more evenly spread between genders. Cis-boys tended to have lower pre-program results than cis-girls and gender non-binary/trans/other gender identifying students.
- Teachers, regional coordinators and youth facilitators emphasized the cumulative nature of the program where knowledge and skills are scaffolded from learning in grade 9, practicing skills in life then returning to the content again for review with more context as youth facilitators. Many repeat youth facilitators continued to build their understanding and abilities as they repeated the program over several years.

Shifting behaviour

- **42% of grade 9 participants and 87% of youth facilitators report positive behavioural change** because of the program (respectively 290 out of 684 and 131 out of 150). 82% of teachers said they are able to have more discussions about sensitive and difficult topics in their classrooms because of the program (18 out of 22).
- Youth facilitators and teachers noted that grade 9 students became more comfortable discussing difficult and sensitive topics in a respectful manner throughout the course of the HRY sessions. Both normalizing and teaching the skills for healthy discussion of sensitive topics helps youth better articulate their values, needs and boundaries in relationships.

Shaping culture

- **91% of youth facilitators and 53% of grade 9 participants** report that the school feels like a **safer space** because of HRY (respectively, 108 out of 146 and 186 out of 348 cumulative). Responses on school safety varied considerably between schools but not between genders.
- **91% teachers** reported that HRY helped **challenge cultural norms** of acceptable relationship behaviour (21 out of 23).
- The top most meaningful aspect of HRY for youth facilitators was teaching younger students and helping to **make a difference** in their lives. What's more, 86% of grade 9 participants preferred learning about healthy relationships and violence prevention from older students than from their teachers (343 out of 399). This experiential learning for the youth facilitators of putting knowledge and skills into action through peer education helps youth see themselves as agents of change. It also leads educators to embrace youth knowledge as valuable.

Reducing violence

- **46% of grade 9 participants and 62% of youth facilitators report experiencing less violence** or being less violent because of HRY (respectively, 174 out of 378 and 93 out of 149).
- While youth facilitators felt strongly that the program either prevented or reduced violence, teachers generally were more hesitant as they found prevention difficult to measure and quantify. They remained hopeful that the knowledge and skills gained would translate into healthier relationships outside of the classroom, but several also pointed out that more intervention would be required for students more at risk of violence (especially perpetrators). Teachers and administrators felt that HRY was most effective in collaboration with other programming in schools and communities; and due to this collaborative nature, was difficult to measure effectiveness on its own. Therefore, indicators of violence reduction used were self-reported changes as well as anecdotal observations made by youth, school staff or regional coordinators.

Project Learnings

- The peer education model provides a multi-tiered experiential educational opportunity for youth who can participate in grade 9 as learners then become youth facilitators. This gives them the chance to deepen their understanding as well as practice their skills. The youth facilitator approach to healthy relationships and violence prevention education is effective with training, teacher buy-in and on-going support for both reflection, education and safety.

- School delivery is an appropriate general violence prevention strategy. The program is possible to run for all grade 9s because it is curriculum linked. HRY works best in schools that have it every year, with consistent staffing, to build up a culture of shared language and understanding as well as an expectation as to responsibilities of various parties in implementing the program.

- Since HRY is a school based program, we learned to be flexible in our approach in order to meet school/teacher needs while staying true to the objectives of the program. For example, in some schools youth facilitators volunteer to participate, whereas in other larger schools, they facilitate the program as part of a leadership class. We also learned the value of continued relationships with schools, administration and teachers as well as collaboration with more intervention focused programs and organizations. Youth learn in different ways over time. Having consistent messaging at various points of their development but using different approaches allows for them to revisit the content and better integrate it into their lives. This happens in their experience as youth facilitators but also as they continue to explore healthy relationship topics in other classes and in their life experiences. Teachers noticed that students carried conversations over into other classes and projects after the program was over.

- HRY demonstrated an incredible ability to shift from in-person classrooms to an on-line then hybrid format, in response to COVID related school shut-downs and restrictions. Although all participants preferred the in-person format, the shift allowed for the development of some standardized presentation resources and interactive technological tools. The shift also allowed the program to continue in a modified way during a difficult time for many youth. On the technological side, we know that using platforms already in use at school (i.e. google classroom, google surveys) facilitates integration of the program with Healthy Living 9. Teachers appreciated having more tools and educational opportunities for students without additional technological hiccups. As students and teachers were fast adapting to a new, hybrid model of schooling, having a familiar program with familiar content in a new and easily accessible format was appreciated and enhanced learning.

- Regional coordinators met yearly for the revision and creation of a standardized youth

facilitator training, in response to participant feedback, that can also provide a flexible framework to accommodate varying logistics at different schools. They stressed the importance of having on-going training and support to enhance the initial training days as to provide a more experiential educational approach for youth facilitators to reflect on and integrate their learning into their work with grade 9 students and into their own lives.

- Although a summative evaluation report was prepared on an annual basis, the use on-going, formative evaluation was valuable to be able to respond to needs or issues that arise in a timely and safe manner. Evaluators met regularly with regional coordinators and reviewed survey data to share preliminary feedback. This allowed regional coordinators to better support youth and address any issues that were identified in anonymous survey data.
- We also learned the value of building in opportunities for peer-to-peer learning at all levels (ex. youth facilitators from different schools, grade nine healthy living teacher conversations to support organization in-school of the program, regional coordinator training sessions to reflect on program and increase cohesion). This helped motivate all participants in terms of being part of a larger program rather than acting as an isolated class or school and to strategize together. These meetings and conversations became valuable opportunities for knowledge dissemination, to share research and get feedback from project participants. In future programs, we would seek more opportunities and audience-appropriate resources to share research with participants and partners.

- We identified a need for more education about how binary gender norms harm everyone and to increase understanding of gender identity (this result was apparent from comments that indicated either misunderstanding of gender nonbinary identities or transphobic attitudes). Youth also indicated an appreciation for additional training and support that was provided. The evaluators also increased their understanding as they became aware of some cis-normative questions in the surveys/reports and implemented changes as a result.
- Using a mix-method approach allows for youth voice and participant analysis to help contextualize and validate the data. The qualitative focus groups and comments as well as the self-reporting questions provided a richer analysis than reliance on proxy statements that showed more mixed results and didn't necessarily reflect on the program content thoroughly.

6. Next Steps

Though PHAC funding is not continuing at this point, thanks to the relationships that have been established, the demonstrated impact of the program, and access to bridge funding, HRY will continue. The AWRCSASA is committed to finding funding sources in order to keep the program going into the future.

Youth who have participated in the program have shared the long lasting impact it has had on their lives. Former youth facilitators report that their experience as an HRY facilitator has shaped who they have become as adults. Not only are they better able to navigate their own relationships in healthy ways and support their friends to do the same, they report that they are more aware of societal issues and sensitive to the harms of unhealthy norms in our society.

Furthermore, there has been a cultural shift in schools leading to students feeling safer and more aware of harms that others may experience. Teachers and students alike report being more comfortable in having conversations on difficult topics. All participants- from grade 9s to youth facilitators to teachers to regional coordinators- show an increased understanding of problematic trends in society and increased empathy to those who are most at risk.

We remain hopeful that we will access further funding that will allow us to utilize knowledge gained to improve the program, improve the evaluation process, gain ethics approval to deepen our research and evaluation, and, above all, to continue to support youth in our communities across the province to navigate relationships in a healthy way.