PREVENTING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE THROUGH GENDER-BASED HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS PROMOTION: THE WISEGUYZ PROGRAM

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Introduction

The **purpose** of this project was to develop the evidence base for WiseGuyz, a gender-transformative, healthy relationships promotion program for adolescent boys. This project was co-created through a partnership between the HOPELab at the University of Calgary (UCalgary) and the Centre for Sexuality (C4S) in Calgary, AB. C4S are the developers and owners of the WiseGuyz program, and have partnered with the HOPELab since 2016 to evaluate the WiseGuyz program and understand what works, for whom, and in what settings in terms of program implementation and outcomes. The **objectives** of this 6-year project were to:

- Demonstrate the effectiveness of the WiseGuyz program through a longitudinal, quasi-experimental outcome evaluation with grade 9 boys in Alberta (Project One)
- Identify factors associated with promoting implementation quality and service provider capacity as WiseGuyz scaled to new sites in Alberta and beyond from 2018-2024 (Project Two)
- Explore the promise of WiseGuyz for promoting healthy relationships and reducing teen dating violence with higher-risk youth in community-based settings (Project Three)

This project was supported by funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), who provided $1,410,879 from October 19, 2018 to March 31, 2024, through *the Preventing Gender-Based Violence: the Health Perspective* investment. Financial and in-kind support for this project were also provided by: C4S, UCalgary, Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute (ACHRI), Compass Centre for Sexual Wellness, Hanna Learning Centre/Lynks, and Western University, in addition to several other anonymous partners.

Background

Teen dating violence (TDV) is experienced by 1 in 3 youth in Canada.[1] TDV is also associated with numerous adverse outcomes, including re-victimization well into adulthood.[2] Thus, TDV is a serious public health problem, and its prevention is critical to improving well-being across the life course. Most prevention efforts to date have been universal and gender-neutral,[3] and do not account for the ways in which gender shapes risk for experience and use of violence.[4] For boys in particular, substantial literature demonstrates connections between stereotypical aspects of male gender identity (e.g., toughness, emotional restriction) and violence perpetration, including in adolescent dating relationships.[e.x.5,6] Noting this gap in prevention practice, the Centre for Sexuality developed the WiseGuyz program in 2010. The goal of WiseGuyz is to promote mental and sexual health, and prevent violence, by engaging adolescent boys in school and community settings in a structured, sequential, and gender-transformative curriculum.[7] Although we had gathered preliminary evidence on the promise of WiseGuyz prior to 2018, we realized that to establish WiseGuyz as an evidence-based, Canadian TDV prevention program, we needed to conduct additional research on the program. Thus, we developed this project, which focused on outcome, process, and formative evaluation on the program, as well as service delivery, in a variety of settings. Together, this project has created the most robust evidence available on a TDV prevention program for boys in Canada.

Key Activities and Outputs

Overview of Key Activities, 2018-2024

- **Project One**
  - **Service Delivery:** By C4S facilitators to 909 adolescent boys in 17 Calgary and area schools. We also created a WiseGuyz Youth Advisory Committee in winter 2019 that continues to advise WiseGuyz research and practice.
  - **Intervention Research:** Longitudinal, quasi-experimental outcome evaluation from 2019-2024 (*N* = 435 participants). These data were collected over three cohorts, who were in grade 9 in fall 2019, fall 2021, and fall 2022. Survey data were collected from research participants in the fall of their grade 9 year, the spring of their grade 9 year, and the spring of their grade 10 year. We also collected focus group data from WiseGuyz participants in spring 2023, and completed interviews with school leaders. Approximately half the outcome evaluation participants took the WiseGuyz program (51.0%). Comparison group participants took grade 9 health only, and not the WiseGuyz program (49.0%).
- **Project Two**
  - **Service Delivery:** By scaling site facilitators to 390 youth in 17 scaling site schools in Alberta and the NWT.
  - **Intervention Research:** Mixed-methods implementation research with all facilitators at scaling sites from 2018-2024, using an implementation database created through this project. Survey data collection with youth at school sites from 2018-2020. Cohort study at a rural site that implemented WiseGuyz consecutively from 2018-2022. Arts-based evaluation research with youth participants at a rural and remote scaling site in Spring 2023. Arts-based evaluation research with youth participants in a Northern scaling site in Spring 2024.
  - **Translation:** The school-based WiseGuyz curriculum and associated research materials were translated to French.
- **Project Three**
  - **Service Delivery:** By C4S and scaling site facilitators to 317 youth at higher risk for violence in 13 community-based sites in Alberta and Ontario.
  - **Intervention Research:** Arts-based evaluation research with youth in a residential children's mental health setting in Summer 2020. Interviews with youth and program staff in a residential youth corrections centre in fall 2021, winter 2022, and spring 2023.

Project Reach

The primary audience for this project was youth participants in the WiseGuyz program. Across all projects, we reached **1,616 adolescent boys** with WiseGuyz programming in school- and community-settings from 2018-2024. The vast majority of these boys (80%) were in grade 9 (~age 14), and the remainder (20%) were primarily in the age range 14-17. Most participants were from service delivery sites in Alberta (91%), with the remainder from sites in the Northwest Territories (7%) and Ontario (2%). In **Table 1**, we provide reach by the sociodemographic characteristics of the settings where WiseGuyz implementation took place.

Table 1. Site Types Across All Projects, By Percentage of Participants (*N* = 1616)

Type of Site	% of total youth reached
School-based urban	30%
School-based rural	25%
School-based suburban	17%
Community-based justice	10%
School & community-based Indigenous	7%
Community-based mental health	5%
Community-based youth serving	3%
School-based remote	2%
Community-based newcomer	2%

The secondary audience for this project was service providers trained to deliver WiseGuyz. The training model for these service providers (now called the WiseGuyz ScalE-up (WISE) model) was iteratively built and tested from 2018-2024 with the support of PHAC funding. The WISE model consists of a multi-day WiseGuyz Training Institute, where facilitators from scaling sites (i.e., facilitators from sites outside of Calgary who are not employed by C4S) are trained to deliver the WiseGuyz program; ongoing training and technical assistance across the first 2 years of implementation (WiseGuyz Community of Practice, coaching calls, capacity building); and a formal licensing process. To train more providers, C4S leveraged funds from other funders to support additional Training Institutes during the project period.

Table 2. Locations of WiseGuyz Scaling Sites, 2018-2024

Date	Scaling Site Location(s)	Primary Funding Source for Training Institute	Number of Facilitators Trained
March 2022	Grande Cache, AB; Lac La Biche, AB; St. Albert, AB; Valleyview, AB	WAGE	8
June 2022	Edmonton, AB[1;] Hanna, AB[1;] Kenora, ON	PHAC	4
September 2022	Northern NWT[2]	WAGE	17
November 2022	Airdrie, AB; Edmonton, AB; Mountainview, AB	PHAC	4
September 2023	Cochrane, AB; Lethbridge, AB; London, ON; Trenton, ON	Movember	9
October 2023	Edmonton, AB	WAGE	3
October 2023	Northern NWT[2]	WAGE	7
November 2023	London, ON; Trenton, ON	Movember	3

[1]Received initial training in April 2018, prior to funding start. Table does not include training of internal C4S facilitators during the project period. [2]Exact location not disclosed for privacy.

Beyond training scaling site facilitators, another key Project Two activity was the development of the WiseGuyz Implementation Database. This database is used so that facilitators at all sites (Calgary and scaling sites) can track WiseGuyz implementation fidelity and dosage.

Collaboration

This project was grounded in collaboration and co-creation. The primary partnership was between the HOPELab at UCalgary and the C4S, a partnership that has only become stronger over the past 6 years and continues to thrive. For service delivery and intervention research, the C4S and UCalgary, respectively, **collaborated with over 45 other school- and community-based organizations**.

We have had numerous rich learnings about collaboration during the project, but one key learning for collaboration with scaling sites is the progressive nature and time required for new scaling sites to fully onboard the program (i.e., 2-3 years of technical assistance after initial facilitator training). Instead of expecting sites to achieve high fidelity in their first year, we have learned that the focus should be on establishing the program foundation. This involves intentionally building trust and relationships between C4S and the site facilitators and their leadership, encouraging them to prioritize their continuous training and capacity building and to utilize the many technical assistance supports C4S offers, supporting them to invest resources into generating community buy-in for the program, simply "getting a group running," and introducing them to the basic elements of implementation fidelity. The second year builds upon the first and involves developing a deeper understanding of fidelity and its achievement through adherence to the WiseGuyz program design, core components, mechanisms of change, theory of change, context-specific coaching, and intended program outcomes, as well as the start of any intervention research with HOPELab. These learnings underscore the importance of taking a gradual and incremental approach to scaling site implementation, allowing sufficient time for sites to integrate the program into their existing structures and processes while ensuring fidelity to the program. Related, another key learning was about how to effectively tailor how, when, and what intervention research is conducted based on the needs of each individual scaling site. This includes the learning to not start any research until the site's second year of implementation.

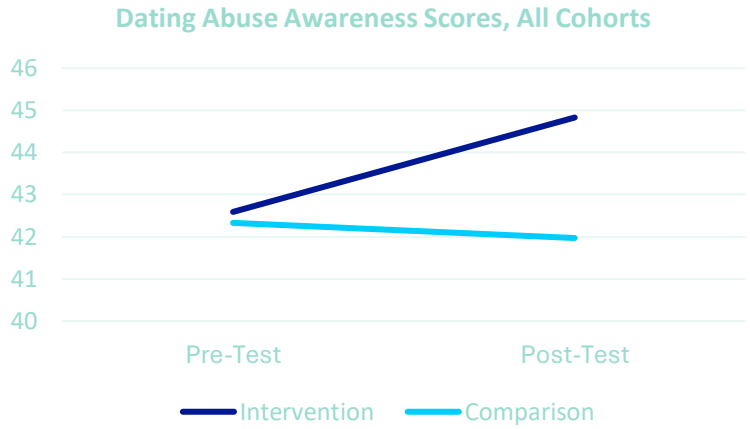
Knowledge Dissemination & Exchange (KDE)

- Over **30** presentations across Canada and the United States to researchers, practitioners, school leaders, policymakers, and the general public on WiseGuyz intervention research and practice
- **11** research snapshots on published WiseGuyz intervention research in French and English
- **9** infographics on WiseGuyz intervention research
- **8** peer-reviewed publications (5 of which are open-access)
- **6** plain-language research overviews (accessible to screen readers)
- **2** research-practice briefs
- **1** Whiteboard video on the WiseGuyz program and research
- **1** Implementation Manual (designed to support new and existing scaling sites understand key factors for successful WiseGuyz adoption, implementation, and sustainability) in French & English
- **1** policy brief on suicide prevention with adolescent boys that highlighted WiseGuyz

All KDE documents and open-access publications are available at www.hopelab.ca.

Project Outcomes

Across all projects, **we collected survey data from 576 youth, and conducted 131 interviews and focus groups with youth, facilitators, and school/organizational leaders.** Our outcome evaluation (Project One; *N* = 435) is our project's primary contribution to the TDV prevention evidence base. We are still collecting final follow-up data for this project, but have complete data for all participants in the fall (pre-test) and spring (post-test) of their grade 9 year. Spring of grade 9 (post-test) is when our main secondary outcome (dating abuse awareness) was collected. With data from all 3 cohorts, we see a significant intervention effect for dating abuse awareness: grade 9 guys who took the WiseGuyz program reported significantly higher dating abuse awareness following the program, as compared to the comparison group (*b* = 2.56, 95% CI: 0.86, 4.27, *p* = .003).



These and the vast amount of other data collected over the project period demonstrate that (1) with generally surface-level adaptations (except in Northern and Indigenous sites, where deeper-level adaptations are required), WiseGuyz is well-received across settings and (2) new providers can be trained to effectively facilitate the program, but require ongoing training and technical assistance in their first 2-3 years of implementation to support integration and sustainability.

Next Steps

Based on our activities and learnings in this project, our next steps will focus on further building the WISE model, and continuing to scale the WiseGuyz program nationally. To sustain program effects, we will also be designing booster content for guys in grades 10-12. We are very excited to continue our research-practice partnership as we pursue these next steps in WiseGuyz research and service delivery.

References

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