

Working *with* rather than *for* LGBTQ+ youth: Revising the *Healthy Relationships Program for LGBTQ+ Youth* (Teen Relationship Violence and Wellbeing among LGBTQ+ Youth)

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What you need to know

The Fourth R's *Healthy Relationships Program (HRP) for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) Youth* was designed to promote mental wellness and positive relationship development among queer, trans, and gender diverse youth. This program was adapted from the *Healthy Relationships Plus Program (HRPP)*, an evidence-informed program that promotes healthy relationships, positive mental health, violence prevention, and skills development. In 2015-2016, the *HRP for LGBTQ+ Youth* was piloted in eight public school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and one social/support group for LGBTQ+ youth. Program facilitators and youth participants provided significant feedback that was used to de/re/construct and revise the program. Facilitators appreciated having formal GSA curricula that emphasized skill development (e.g., active listening, assertive communication, etc.), but were critical of its LGBTQ+ content. Likewise, youth enjoyed learning about and practicing healthy relationship skills, but desired more affirmative LGBTQ+ content. Overall, the program was greatly enhanced by *listening to* and *working with* LGBTQ+ youth.

What is the issue?

Many LGBTQ+ youth experience mental health challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, self harm, attempting or dying by suicide, etc.) due to homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, transphobia, cissexism, and cisnormativity, and other interlocking oppressions (e.g., racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, etc.). Due to prejudicial attitudes and beliefs, LGBTQ+ youth may experience interpersonal issues with family members, peers, classmates, co-workers, etc. The *HRP for LGBTQ+ Youth* was designed to support queer, trans, and gender diverse youth as they navigate and cope with LGBTQ+-based oppression. Since youth groups and GSAs are 'safer' venues for LGBTQ+ youth to find support and develop relationships with like-minded folks, they are ideal sites to administer a program that seeks to bolster positive mental health and relationship development among queer, trans, and gender diverse youth.

Why is this important?

Although many LGBTQ+ youth are targeted and victimized based on their real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression, it is important to avoid typecasting all queer, trans, and gender diverse youth as victims. Researchers and practitioners must listen when youth call upon us to "...'challenge' the victim narrative" (Youth Participant, *HRP for LGBTQ+ Youth*). When we work *with* rather than *for* LGBTQ+ youth, we infuse their perspectives and experiences so they may see themselves reflected in *their* program.

What did the researchers do?

Both program facilitators and youth participants provided valuable feedback on the *HRP for LGBTQ+ Youth*. Facilitators completed tracking sheets for each of the original 16, 30-minute sessions, communicated informal updates via email and face-to-face meetings, and participated in a focus group. Seven youth, who participated in the program, attended a two-day workshop where they voiced their opinions on the program and offered suggestions. On day one, youth reviewed the sessions before they were asked to identify what they wanted the program to start, stop, and continue doing. The following chart summarizes their responses:

Start	Stop	Continue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- "...an overview of all programming"- "Take home information of what we learned"- "Queer representation"- "...educating the facilitators/teachers"- "More group discussions"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- "...'challenge' the victim narrative"- "Stop leading with downers—lead with affirmation"- "Overpowering cis/heterosexual relationships representation"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- "Group discussions"- "Identifying healthy and unhealthy relationships"- "Improving LGBTQ+ inclusion"- "Continue exploring identities in an AFFIRMATIVE manner"

Thereafter, youth broke out into small groups to provide in-depth feedback on each session. Youth were then asked to share a wish they had for the program. Collectively, they wanted it to be more affirmative, fun, and LGBTQ+ focused. To end the day, youth scribed messages to future facilitators of the program. Their comments are listed below:

- "...not everyone is on a binary, is sexual, only has one identity...people might get triggered...Don't rely on LGBTQ+ folks to define and explain your questions."
- "...Do your research..."
- "...pronouns are very significant to some people so please never assume someone's pronouns..."
- "...allow and remind students to leave whenever they feel uncomfortable..."

Youth wanted facilitators to know that there are 'guys, gals, and *non-binary pals*,' and that people have multiple, intersecting identities that should never be assumed, judged, or invalidated. They also wanted facilitators to understand that they may become triggered during the program - they may need time and/or space to process their thoughts and feelings, and this is ok. On the second day, youth responded very positively to the revised sessions, which were re-envisioned to address their feedback.

What did the researchers find?

By inviting youth to participate in the revision process, we discovered that the program needed to: include more queer, trans, and gender diverse content; emphasize LGBTQ+-positive representation; incorporate more realistic and relatable material (e.g., sample responses to questions generated by youth); and develop youth's intrapersonal (i.e., awareness of and appreciation of self) and interpersonal (i.e., friendship development and community building)

skillset. Because youth wanted to learn *with* and *from* each other, more group discussions and information sharing (e.g., opening and closing circles) was built into the revised program.

How can you use this research?

The revised program is 17, 45-minute sessions. Each session begins by listing a specific affirmation (i.e., a positive statement to uplift, give hope, or support LGBTQ+ youth), skill (i.e., a desired ability), and practice (i.e., a structured way to develop a skill). For example, session two asks youth to share their understanding of: sexual orientation, romantic orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and identities/ways of being.

Session # 2 Identities/Ways of Being

Affirmation: My identities are real, valid, and mine to name

Skill: I am aware of the many identities/ways of being, and expressions in communities

Practice: Reflecting on my ways of being

Youth appreciated how the revised session enabled them to share, listen, and learn from each other:

Sharing	Listening	Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I got to share my opinions" - "A lot of participation" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Hearing everyone's thoughts and opinions: - "Helps group develop a[n] agreed understanding" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Reminded me of forgotten info" - Learned more"

Just as youth are called upon to share, listen, and learn from each other in the *HRP for LGBTQ+ Youth*, researchers and practitioners must authorize and valorize youth's contributions in program development in order to better meet the needs and desires of youth.

Additional resources:

It's Pronounced Metrosexual (2015). *A Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions*.

Retrieved from: <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/>

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<http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trans-PULSE-Statistics-Relevant-for-Human-Rights-Policy-June-2015.pdf>

Canadian Mental Health Association (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans & queer identified people and mental health. Retrieved from: <http://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-people-and-mental-health/>

Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3-14.

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