

Moving from scaling-up evidence-based programs to developing a supported implementation system: Testing a comprehensive approach to support social-emotional learning in youth

Presenters: Lana Wells, Associate Professor and Brenda Strafford Chari in the Prevention of Domestic Violence; Lianne Lee, Director, Alberta Healthy Youth Relationships Strategy, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence

What you need to know

For the last six years, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence, located in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary has led a multi-pronged Alberta Healthy Youth Relationships (AHYR) strategy to cultivate social-emotional competencies in youth across Alberta in order to prevent dating violence, bullying, and other risky behaviours. Despite the strategy's success in scaling-up evidence-based and evidence-informed programs in school and community settings, our research shows that greater attention needs to be paid to the social conditions and climate necessary to achieve high-quality, high-fidelity implementation of these programs. Drawing from the field of implementation science, presenters shared highlights of a new supported implementation system that aims to advance a whole-school, whole-community, whole-child approach (WSWCWC).

What is the issue and why is it important?

Adults play a critical role in promoting social-emotional learning in youth. It is important that all professionals and volunteers who work with youth have the knowledge, confidence and skills to foster social-emotional learning and create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe school and community environments. Without the ability to develop social-emotional competencies and healthy relationships, youth may engage in aggressive and bullying behaviours that are linked to relationship problems such as adolescent dating violence, a prevalent and concerning issue in Canada. Thus, dating violence prevention through the promotion of evidence-informed social-emotional learning programs and practices in schools and throughout community settings need to be part of a broader domestic violence primary prevention strategy.

To date, the AHYR strategy has worked with 35 school divisions in Alberta and trained over 900 teachers from over 285 schools in evidence-informed healthy youth relationship programs (i.e., Fourth R, Healthy Relationship Plus Program (HRPP) and Healthy Relationship Training Module (HRTM)). This has resulted in over 60,000 youth learning social-emotional competencies necessary for healthy relationships, academic achievement, and overall personal growth and well-being. Although there is extensive research showing that evidence-informed social-emotional programs do indeed produce desired outcomes under ideal conditions, the science on violence prevention has now shifted towards examining how to effectively embed evidence-informed approaches into everyday practices and organizational policies in multiple settings in order to promote sustainability. Our research findings align with this shift in prevention science: Throughout our process of scaling-up evidence-informed healthy relationships programs, Shift listened to and learned from our partners through multiple evaluations. We are now building on our findings and drawing from the literature on implementation science to adapt our approach to better meet the needs of our partners and the

youth they serve. Specifically, our research shows that the scaling-up of programs – alone – is not enough. This finding is in line with the literature on implementation science, which shows that evidence-informed programs and practices are unlikely to be faithfully implemented and sustained without extensive supports that ensure buy-in, organizational capacity, appropriate adaptation, fidelity, and ongoing improvement. If we want youth to learn and apply the social-emotional competencies being taught in schools and community programs, then the environments in which they live (families, schools, communities) need to reinforce these principles through their policies, structures, and everyday practices. The next phase of the AHYR strategy directly responds to these issues.

What did the researchers do? What did they find?

The next phase of the AHYR strategy starting in 2017 will focus on fostering high-quality implementation of evidence-informed programs in school and community settings. We are partnering with schools, school districts, and community organizations to pilot a system called the *Alberta Healthy Youth Relationships Supported Implementation System (SIS)*. This system will involve three school-community sites in Alberta, and partners will work together to develop the policies, structures, and practices that sustainably bolster teachers' and practitioners' abilities to effectively foster social-emotional learning in youth. Specifically, the SIS will focus on mobilizing the predictors of high-quality implementation of evidence-informed programs, including: 1) healthy socio-cultural norms and environments that promote social-emotional learning and the implementation of social-emotional learning programs. This involves embedding social-emotional learning in the policies of schools and community organizations. 2) Robust school-community connections that engage parents and link students' in-school and after-school social-emotional learning. 3) Effective teaching, service-delivery, and social-emotional learning. This involves embedding evidence-informed programs and practices in the everyday routines and activities of schools and community organizations, as well as supporting ongoing professional development in teachers, practitioners, and systems leaders.

By using a whole-school, whole-community, whole child approach, the SIS is responding to the call for greater alignment, integration, and collaboration among education, community-based, and health sectors to improve each young person's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The WSWCWC framework provides partners of the SIS with a common language and framework to discuss the interdependent relationship among learning, health, and overall well-being.

In summary, the SIS moves away from the scaling-up of evidence-informed programs and towards an approach that builds the social and structural conditions required for youth to effectively develop the social-emotional competencies needed for healthy relationships. This leads to reduced rates of bullying and dating violence, and increased levels of social inclusion, mental health, academic achievement, and overall well-being.

Tips for Effective Practice / Using the Research:

1. Adopt an ecological approach to support healthy youth relationships and prevent bullying and dating violence. An ecological approach recognizes that youth influence, and are influenced by their relationships with peers, families, schools, communities, and society at large. Therefore, an ecological approach requires policy makers, researchers, systems leaders, and professionals to promote healthy youth relationships (and prevent aggression, bullying, dating violence, and other risky behaviours) by working at multiple levels. This includes shaping the social and cultural contexts in which youth live, influencing policies and legislation that affect youth well-being, strengthening the capacity of schools, community service-providers, and parents to foster social-emotional learning, and working directly with youth to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for the development and maintenance of healthy relationships.

2. Focus on the high-quality implementation of evidence-informed programs and practices by drawing on the field of implementation science. The science on prevention has shifted from answering factual questions, such as whether an intervention works or does not work under ideal conditions, to the study of how policy makers, systems leaders, and professionals can sustainably embed effective interventions into their everyday practices and organizational policies. Below is an implementation matrix that describes the importance of high-quality implementation, predictors of high-quality implementation, and implications for policy and practice (adapted from: Frameworks Institute):
 - What is implementation?
 - Purposeful process: Implementation is the purposeful process by which something is put into use in the real world.
 - Distinct: Implementation of an innovation is distinct from the innovation itself.
 - A focus on “doing as intended”: High-fidelity use is a critical outcome – whether the innovation is being used in the matter and to the degree intended.
 - Stage-based but non-linear: Implementation proceeds in stages, but is iterative and nonlinear.
 - Why is high-quality implementation important?
 - Improving outcomes requires both an effective innovation and successful implementation of that innovation.
 - Implementation science and practice bridge gaps between research and practice by ensuring that evidence-based intervention components are delivered as intended.
 - Implementation processes and activities build organizational and individual capacity to implement other initiatives (or innovations) as well.
 - Directing resources towards implementation at the outset avoids wasting resources in the long term

- What predicts high-quality implementation?
 - Dedicated resources
 - An ecological perspective
 - Supportive organizational leadership and policy environments, and opportunities for practitioners to practice and receive feedback
 - Monitoring, measurement and continuous learning
 - Evidence-informed
 - What are the implications for policy and practice?
 - Fund the “how” – not just the “what”
 - Provide longer-term funding to support implementation and sustain high-quality programs
 - Link science and practice
3. Advocate for the use of a whole-school, whole-community, whole-child approach to social-emotional learning. The WSWCWC framework provides the language and lens required to foster alignment, integration, and collaboration among health, education, and community-based sectors. By working from the perspective that learning, health, and overall wellbeing are intricately connected, policy makers, systems leaders, researchers, and professionals can collectively cultivate the structures, policies, and practices that effectively address the needs and assets of the whole child. Below is the WSWCWC framework:



Figure source: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/wscw/>

Additional Resources

1. National Implementation Research Network: <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/>
2. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: <http://www.casel.org/about-2/>

3. Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports: <https://www.pbis.org/>

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About the Authors

Lana Wells is Associate Professor and the Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary where she is leading *Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence*. The purpose of Shift is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large, to significantly reduce the rates of domestic violence through primary prevention.

Lianne Lee is the Director of the Alberta Healthy Youth Relationships Strategy with Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence. Lianne has led a broad range of community programs and systems-change initiatives that seek to enhance the wellbeing of children and youth from diverse backgrounds. Her research focuses on building university-community partnerships that foster reciprocity and social change.