

POSITIVE CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Impact Statement: Children and Youth have developmentally appropriate social and emotional skills

This synthesis aims to bring together a selection of relevant program approaches from key strategy documents and practice reviews to provide agencies with a range of best and promising practices that may help them in their work. The source materials used for this document were either reviews of evidence-based practices or compilations of community suggestions intended to inform community-wide prevention strategies.

It is not within the scope of this synthesis to present a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature or best practice programs in each strategic area. Rather, this synthesis focuses on presenting a suite of relevant prevention practices that have been recommended by community funders, municipalities or government bodies, and researchers. With the practical needs of program staff and service providers kept in mind, this document focuses on outlining broader types of activities and programming with the intention that it may inform agencies and service providers of the general characteristics and principles of effective prevention initiatives.

While the strategies listed in this document are broadly aligned with Airdrie FCSS' prevention approach, program specifics such as implementation methods, participant risk characteristics, and program setting all impact whether an initiative falls within the FCSS mandate or not. Therefore, it is important for prospective applicants to note that the implementation of a highlighted strategy does not guarantee funding. Conversely, a program that falls outside of the strategies outlined in this document could still be considered a strong prevention initiative which contributes to the overarching priority area and could therefore be deemed eligible for funding.

Much of the content of this document consists of direct excerpts from the source material, with occasional minor changes in language – these were made for clarity or better communication with the audience of this synthesis and should not impact the overall intent of the original material. Given that much of the effort in reviewing and compiling the practices included in this document was done by the authors of the source material, it is important to acknowledge the key documents that this content is based on. This synthesis draws heavily on the following key documents:

- FCSS Calgary Research Brief 1: Positive Child and Youth Development
- FCSS Calgary Research Brief 2: Positive Parenting and Family Functioning
- The Need to Contribute During Adolescence by A.J Fuligni

Overview

The years before children enter the classroom are key for the development of social-emotional skills. Children who have frequent negative experiences and lack environmental support during this period are typically slower to build these skills and therefore at a disadvantage in comparison with their peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2016).

As described by a recent literature review to support FCSS Edmonton's program priorities: "SEL is foundational to healthy brain development and allows children to gain essential skills and knowledge through positive relationships and interactions. Brain architecture (participating in activities that are suitable for various stages of development), serve and return (encouraging interactions and building trust), and executive function (learning to manage complex information) are all essential focus areas to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for general well-being and perceived belonging. The healthy promotion of social-emotional development among children leads directly to later abilities to build healthy relationships with others in life—be they friends, romantic partners, or mentors. Healthy brain development in childhood promotes cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities. These components, working together, establish a strong foundation for the advancement of identity, stable emotions, and strong relationships. Collaborations between communities, families, and schools will help create all-encompassing environments in which children can develop and feel a sense of inclusion" (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2022).

- In Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death for children and youth aged 10 to 19 years.
- Results from a 2012 national survey (Canadian Community Health Survey – Mental Health) found that seven per cent of youth aged 14 to 24 had

experienced depression over the previous year, while six per cent of respondents had suicidal thoughts during the past 12 months.

- In 2017/18 in Alberta, the incarceration rate per 10,000 young persons was 4.32, compared to 5.61 in 2014/15. In 2017/18 the probation rate was 32.85 per 10,000, compared to 43.87 in 2014/15.
- In 2017/18, out of 16,664 youth admissions to correctional services in Canada, 7,194 were identified as Aboriginal (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020).

KEY RISK FACTORS FOR POOR DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES¹

Research shows that the key factors that place a child at risk of poor health and developmental outcomes include:

- Family low income
- Living in a lone-parent family
- Having parents with low levels of education
- Having parents who abuse drugs or alcohol and/or have mental health problems
- Teenage pregnancy
- Negative parenting practices, among others

The more risk factors that a child experiences, the greater the likelihood that he or she will experience problems such as:

- Behavioural and conduct disorders
- Hyperactivity
- Poor school performance
- Emotional problems
- Aggression and delinquency

¹ The following section is an excerpt from FCSS Calgary Research Brief 1: Positive Child and Youth Development

Such childhood problems are individually and collectively associated with negative outcomes in adolescence, including criminal involvement, poor academic achievement and decreased likelihood of completing school, and young parenthood. These adolescent outcomes are correlated with:

- Employment problems
- Poverty
- Ongoing criminal involvement
- Homelessness
- Healthy problems including addictions
- Perpetuation of the poor conditions and parenting practices that young people experienced in childhood. (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020a)

PRIORITY STRATEGIES

Social Emotional Learning Programs: Provide access to development and social emotional learning programs for children and youth²

DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING

Research shows that sustained participation in high-quality, structured developmental programming can provide supervision and help children and youth to stay out of trouble and achieve age-appropriate developmental milestones. The benefits of participation in developmental programming may be greatest for young people who face challenges in life, such as physical or intellectual disabilities, dysfunctional families or negative environments, language or cultural barriers, and living in chronic low income, and for young people who feel excluded from the “mainstream” for any number of reasons. For vulnerable children and youth, participation in developmental programming can afford protective or “buffering” factors that can offset multiple risk factors. The most common types of programs to improve child and youth development include: • Mentoring programs • After-school programs • Social emotional learning programs.

MENTORING PROGRAMS

Mentoring is an evolving field that uses many new approaches, such as group mentoring and on-line mentoring, but the most common types of mentoring

² The following section is an excerpt from FCSS Calgary Research Brief 1: Positive Child and Youth Development

programs are one-on-one community- based mentoring, where mentors meet with mentees in community settings after school, in the evening, or on the weekend. Recently, school-based mentoring, where mentors and mentees meet at the mentees' schools at lunch time, after school or, in some programs, during school hours, has become more common. Some mentoring programs focus explicitly on providing academic supports or preventing specific problems; others have broad child and youth development goals.

DuBois and colleagues' thorough and comprehensive 2011 meta-analysis of research concluded that mentoring can both prevent and redress developmental problems from early childhood to adolescence, depending on both child and program characteristics. The most studied developmental outcomes affected by mentoring programs are attitude and motivation, social and inter-personal skills, emotional well-being, conduct and behaviour, and academic outcomes (attendance, grades, achievement). The evidence also indicates that many types of mentoring programs — traditional adult-child matches, school- based programs, cross-age peer mentoring, group mentoring — can be effective when delivered in accordance with best practices.

DuBois and colleagues concluded that, at a high level, mentoring program effectiveness was greatest when:

- There was a relatively high proportion of male youth participants.
- Participating youth had a background of relatively high individual risk (e.g., experience of abuse or neglect) or environmental risk (e.g., high crime neighbourhood).
- The program included an advocacy role for mentors.
- The program included a teaching/ information provision role for mentors.
- Mentors and youth were matched based on similarity of interests.

Qualitative research on Aboriginal mentoring programs indicates that Aboriginal youth may be best served by Aboriginal mentors. Likewise, while youth mentoring may be a positive intervention for immigrant and refugee youth, cultural differences need to be taken into account. Mainstream mentorship programs may require cultural adjustments to meet the needs of immigrant youth mentees.

The common cautions offered by researchers about mentoring programs in general are that few evaluations have followed participants over time to determine whether benefits are sustained. In fact, two highly publicized programs that were believed to be effective were subsequently found to have no enduring developmental effects. Also, not all youth are equally suited for mentoring - mentoring is neither a substitute for professional treatment among youth with serious emotional, behavioural, or academic problems nor a necessary inoculation for all youth.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

In recent years, the term “social emotional learning” (SEL) has been coined to summarize the process of acquiring age-appropriate competencies in two developmental domains: social competence and emotional well-being. Research indicates that various forms of programming and interventions can help young people, especially those in early and middle childhood, to master these competencies and thereby prevent a host of problems throughout life. For example, research shows that lacking emotional self-regulation in childhood can predict a wide range of consequential life outcomes, including income and financial security, occupational prestige, physical and mental health, criminality and gambling problems, even when family background and other factors are controlled for. (It should be stressed that SEL programs are not a substitute for counselling or therapy for children who are experiencing mental health problems.)

In addition, some SEL programs have been demonstrated to improve cognitive development, as evidenced by academic outcomes. This is because students who can pay attention, persevere with tasks, solve problems, and work well with others generally do better in school than those who do not have these abilities or whose abilities are compromised by stress, anxiety, depression or anger. Advances in neuroscience are clarifying the complex relationships between emotional self-regulation and the brain's executive functions (e.g., reasoning and memory), and shedding light on how promoting social and emotional competence can facilitate cognitive skills and the development of self-regulation and, ultimately, learning.

A wide range of developmental programs, usually but not necessarily delivered in schools by teachers, have now been coined “SEL programs.” SEL programs fall into three categories — **violence prevention, mental health, and character education** — with each type of programming targeting one or more core social and emotional competencies. SEL programs can be “universal” (provided to all children through school-wide implementation to promote mental health and prevent emotional or behavioural problems); “selective” (provided to groups of children with similar risk factors to prevent emotional or behavioural problems); or “indicated” (provided to individual children or groups of children experiencing emotional or behavioural problems).

Considering all programs together, the analysis found improvements in self-perceptions, school bonding, social behaviours, conduct, and achievement tests but these changes were either not sustained over time or the participants were not followed longitudinally so longer-term impacts could not be identified. The programs did not influence school achievement, with the exception of those programs that used evidence-based practices.

Research indicates that, to be effective, programs must:

1. Be delivered in safe, caring, participatory and well-managed learning environments
2. Provide sequenced, developmentally- appropriate instruction in five major areas of social and emotional competence

While thousands of programs in Canada might be described as SEL programs, few have been empirically evaluated. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has expressed concern that scarce resources – and opportunities to make a difference – might be wasted on short-term SEL programs that have been developed in response to a local need, are not evidence-based, do not include the features for effectiveness, and have not been empirically evaluated. An additional concern is the implementation of evidence-based programs without fidelity to the model, which can mean that the program is not effective anymore (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020a).

Critical Hours Programming: Provide access to critical hours programming for children and youth³

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Some after-school programs do not seek to improve developmental outcomes. Rather, they exist to provide children and youth with an opportunity to participate in supervised recreational or other non-structured activities while their parents are at work. The primary purpose of such programs is to provide a safe haven for children and an alternative to hanging around in the community or at the mall. The vast majority of the research on recreational programming has focused on sports and/ or physical activity programming, which overwhelmingly reveals positive impacts in areas such as physical health, psychological well-being, social status and socialization, inter-group relations, and educational attainment. In addition, highly-structured sports programs built on youth development principles and with specific features have resulted in improved outcomes on an array of development indicators.

Contexts that emphasize positive experiences, characterized by enjoyment, diversity, and the engagement of all, and that are managed by committed and trained teachers and coaches, and supportive and informed parents, significantly influence the character of these physical activities and increase the likelihood of realizing the potential benefits of participation.

Many after-school programs are now required to have a developmental focus. This means they seek to improve participants' developmental outcomes in one or more aspects within one or more of the four domains of child and youth development. The importance of program structure and program intentionality

³ The following section is an excerpt from FCSS Calgary Research Brief 1: Positive Child and Youth Development

for improving developmental outcomes cannot be overstated. Research shows that good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes, and unstructured programs can actually promote negative outcomes.

Analysis of program effects by program characteristics revealed that these negative effects were occurring in large, unstructured programs, especially when program staff responded neutrally to undesirable behaviours. The researchers suggest that, in large, unstructured programs, participants spend a great deal of time socializing, and a group of participants with negative behaviours can engage in “deviancy training,” (i.e. reinforcing each other’s bad behaviours).

In addition, some research has reported negative outcomes (problem behaviours, fewer positive peer influences, lower academic achievement) resulting from participation in after-school recreational programs that include sports, although the researchers speculate that this may have been attributable to the participation of high numbers of at-risk youth.

Researchers suggest that increasing participation in structured, along with unstructured, programming may have additional benefits for participants, noting that “the motivators of recreation, sport, and friends are essential program strategies necessary to especially engage harder-to-reach adolescent populations (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020a).

INTENTIONALITY AND THE SAFE PRINCIPLES – SEQUENCED, ACTIVE, FOCUSED AND EXPLICIT

Research shows that programs must be intentional to be effective. Program “Intentionality” means that a program includes specific components intended to bring about one or more particular outcomes and uses an evidence-based skills

training approach to develop particular competencies or attributes associated with those outcomes.

In a ground-breaking meta-analysis on the effectiveness of social emotional learning programs, researchers found that:

“Of the 68 programs included...that were effective, 41 were evidence-based and clearly intentional, as their programming reflected what have been coined the “SAFE” principles (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit). The effective programs clearly featured a sequenced, step-by-step set of activities to achieve skill objectives (sequenced); used active, experiential forms of learning to practice new skills or behaviours and receive feedback on their performance (active); focused specific time and attention on skill development (focused); and identified which social or personal skills they intended to improve (explicit). The SAFE programs were associated with significant improvements in self-concept, positive social behaviours, school bonding, school grades, and achievement test scores, and with significant reductions in conduct problems. However, programs that featured only some of the SAFE principles were not effective; **all four principles had to be in place to improve social or personal skills.**”

A general rule of thumb from the research for after-school programs is somewhere between 50 and 100 days of participation (or at least 100 hours of programming) over at least one year is required to significantly effect change, but this should not be considered a hard and fast directive. It should also be noted that, in some ways, the participants’ perceptions about the quality of the experience may be as important as the quantity of the experience. For example, research indicates that after-school programs that are demanding and offer challenging, relevant activities are most likely to yield positive outcomes (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020a).

Caregiver Knowledge and Skill-building: Provide access to caregiver skill building, family cohesion and natural supports building programs⁴

PARENT EDUCATION/TRAINING PROGRAMS

A wealth of studies completed in recent years have consistently demonstrated improvements in parenting practices and children's developmental outcomes resulting from participation in comprehensive parenting training programs.

Drawing on the research on parenting programs targeting fathers, effective parenting programs:

- Are grounded in a clear theory of change based upon solid theories of child development and therapeutic support.
- Use an evidence-based program model with a proven track record of improving outcomes for parents and children, and implement the model with fidelity
- In most cases use behavioural or cognitive behavioural training strategies
- Promote authoritative parenting which includes positive discipline skills

Specific components of parenting programs that are consistently associated with improvements in parenting include:

- Increasing positive parent-child interactions and emotional communication skills
- Teaching parents to use time out and the importance of parenting consistency

⁴ The following section is an excerpt from FCSS Calgary Research Brief 2: Positive Parenting and Family Functioning

- Requiring parents to practice new skills with their children during the parent training sessions

Programs that focus on (i) teaching parents problem solving; (ii) teaching parents to promote children’s cognitive, academic, or social skills; and (iii) providing other, additional services, are less effective or ineffective in changing parenting behaviours.

Effective parent training programs typically include eight to 10, 1.5 to two hour sessions, with more sessions provided in programs targeting parents at risk of child maltreatment. Systematic Training for Effective Parents (STEP) and Triple P Level 4 (Standard Level P) (see Appendix B) are examples of such programs.

STRENGTHENING PARENT SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Studies conducted over the past two decades indicate that both structured parenting and support groups and the development of personal networks can increase social support and may result in modest improvements in parenting behaviour.

There is some indication that the cohesion of the group itself may be related to both maternal well-being and parenting outcomes. As summarized by Balaji, et al., “[u]ltimately, combining treatment approaches intended to reduce or prevent mental health problems, expand social networks, and enhance mothers’ knowledge of child development may be more effective than any single approach. Joining treatment modalities into one intervention offers a comprehensive model for addressing multiple problems (Calgary Neighbourhoods, 2020b).

Youth Community Participation and Contribution:

Provide opportunities for youth to contribute to and participate in community

A range of strategies for community participation and contribution are covered in the Social Inclusion synthesis document. However, it is important to contextualize the significance of the social contribution to youth in particular and to examine the types of opportunities that are well suited to their capacities and needs. Research suggests that adolescence is a time where contribution takes on a new significance, as young people's social worlds expand and they develop a greater capacity to meaningfully contribute to the world around them. Opportunities for contribution promote autonomy, identity and intimacy which are key needs for young people in the adolescent stage (Fuligni, 2018). The family, peer groups, school and community have been identified as appropriate environments for young people to contribute to – the following excerpt, taken from Fuligni's work, provides further details about schools and community:

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTRIBUTE IN SCHOOLS

Secondary schools can be rich settings for providing adolescents with opportunities to contribute. Extensive research has shown that student motivation is enhanced by school environments that allow them to play at least some role in decision-making about coursework, classroom practices, and school policies. School belonging, typically considered to be a result of the support provided to students, is strongly predicted by students' beliefs that their ideas and contributions are valued and respected.

Opportunities to contribute can be offered to students in a variety of ways. Adolescents can play a role in classroom practices from choosing seating arrangements to learning activities and grading practices. Cooperative learning practices that encourage students' involvement in goal setting and discovery tap into adolescents' desire to share their ideas and assist their peers achieve a shared objective. Student government can provide responsibility for some aspects of student life. Service-learning curricula offer structured opportunities for students to affect their local communities and to process the meaning of their contributions. Myriad clubs and sports give youths the chance to fulfill roles, contribute to groups, and have an impact on their peers. Unfortunately, limited resources and the multiple demands placed on schools can restrict their ability to provide a rich array of opportunities for students to contribute. Large, overenrolled schools simply cannot provide a sufficient number of extracurricular slots. Student-led learning activities can be logistically challenging for teachers in packed classrooms. Poorer schools without the support of resourced communities and booster organizations are at a distinct disadvantage in what they can offer. Such schools and their students face numerous other challenges, but their inability to provide an environment rich in opportunities for youths to contribute and belong has been cited as a factor in students' under-achievement and dropping out of school.

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTRIBUTE TO COMMUNITIES

Societal ambivalence about providing youths with responsibility and the chance to have a measurable impact can be seen in the inconsistent quantity and quality of community-level opportunities to make contributions. On the one hand, many efforts promote youth development through opportunities to contribute. Programming includes youth participation in decision making, activities that have a true and notable impact, and the chance to reflect on the meaning of such contributions for themselves and their communities. Local organizations

dedicated to the unique needs and issues of their populations may provide youths with structured opportunities to make a difference in their communities through service-learning, volunteering, and social action. Religious communities often include youth groups that give adolescents ways of having a voice and impact in their congregations. Employment opportunities can be positive for youths if the time and demands do not create undue stress and interfere with other important aspects of development, such as schoolwork and sleep.

Community programs, however, vary dramatically in their availability and quality. Many programs lack key features—such as “opportunities to be efficacious, to do things that make a real difference and to play an active role in the organizations themselves” - that make for a high-quality program. Some programs can provide such opportunities, but the necessary time, personnel, and resources put them out of reach for many (Fuligni, 2018).

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SUPPORTING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH POST-PANDEMIC

UCLA’s Centre for the Developing Adolescent has summarised six key developmental needs that youth are experiencing post-pandemic. Although they do not identify specific practices as such, understanding these needs should help service providers and practitioners think of how they work with youth to better support positive development. The six needs are described as follows:

1. Adolescents need safe and satisfying ways to take healthy risks and explore the world.

Make room for healthy exploration and create safe spaces to learn from failures, keeping in mind that just “returning to normal” might feel very risky in itself for many young people.

2. Adolescents need real-world scenarios to build emotional regulation, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

Young people had varying experiences during the pandemic, but most experienced some kind of loss, from missed birthdays to a parent’s lost job to the death of a loved one. Help youth navigate, regulate, and direct (not squash!) the complex emotions they may be feeling.

3. Adolescents need avenues to develop a sense of meaning, identity, and purpose by contributing to peers, families, schools, and communities.

One of the best ways to create a sense of belonging and motivation is to include youth as contributing members of the group. Bring young people to the table for decisions about topics like what school and extracurricular activities should look like as we rebuild.

4. Adolescents need positive, attainable ways to earn respect and social status.

Acknowledge, praise, and uplift youths’ creativity and the ways in which they have supported one another and their communities during the pandemic and the recent social justice movements.

5. Adolescents need support to develop values, goals, and personal and group identities.

Create space to reflect on questions like, what’s important to me? Who do I want to be? What does it mean to be a member of society at this moment? What does it mean to be part of the “pandemic generation”?

6. Adolescents need warmth and support from parents and other caring adults.

Make room for a well-paced transition that focuses on the full range of adolescents' developmental needs, not just "learning loss." (Centre for the Developing Adolescent)

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APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

Provide access to development and social-emotional learning programs for children and youth

- Developmental Programming
- Mentoring Programs
- Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Provide access to critical hours programming for children and youth

- After-school programs
- Intentionality and the SAFE principles

Provide access to caregiver skill building, family cohesion and natural supports building programs

- Parent Education/Training Programs
- Strengthening Parent Social Supports

Provide opportunities for youth to contribute to and participate in community

- Opportunities to Contribute in Schools
- Opportunities to Contribute to Communities
- Supporting Positive Development for Youth Post-Pandemic

APPENDIX B: PROGRAMS AND APPROACHES

- Triple P⁵ - The overall Triple P program is a multi-tiered system of 5 levels of education and support for parents and caregivers of children and adolescents. As a prevention program, System Triple P helps parents learn strategies that promote social competence and self-regulation in children. Parents become better equipped to handle the stress of everyday child rearing and children become better able to respond positively to their individual developmental challenges. As an early intervention, System Triple P can assist families in greater distress by working with parents of children who are experiencing moderate to severe behavior problems. Throughout the program, parents are encouraged to develop a parenting plan that makes use of a variety of System Triple P strategies and tools. System Triple P practitioners are trained, therefore, to work with parents' strengths and to provide a supportive, non-judgmental environment where a parent can continually improve their parenting skills.
- Systematic Training for Effective Parents (STEP)⁶ - Is a multicomponent parenting education curriculum. The three STEP programs help parents learn effective ways to relate to their children from birth through adolescence by using parent education study groups. By identifying the purposes of children's behavior, STEP also helps parents learn how to encourage cooperative behavior in their children and how not to reinforce unacceptable behaviors. STEP also helps parents change dysfunctional and destructive relationships with their children by offering concrete alternatives to abusive and ineffective methods of discipline and control. STEP is offered in three

⁵ CEBC " Program ' Triple P Positive Parenting Program System. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.cebc4cw.org/program/triple-p-positive-parenting-program-system/>

⁶ CEBC " Systematic Training For Effective Parenting ' Program ' Detailed. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.cebc4cw.org/program/systematic-training-for-effective-parenting/detailed>

separate programs covering early childhood, children ages seven through twelve, and teenagers. Each program contains a leader's resource guide, promotional tools, videos and parent handbooks.