



### The Fourth R Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships

### ABSTRACT

The Fourth R classroom curriculum is an evidence-based school prevention program designed to build skills and reduce harm among adolescents. The Healthy Relationships Plus Program (HRPP) is an evidence-informed small groups program that promotes healthy relationships, positive mental health, violence prevention, and skills development. In 2016, these programs were piloted in two youth custody facilities in Manitoba, Canada. This study sought to evaluate the feasibility of the programs in youth justice settings and identify necessary revisions. Results indicated that overall, facilitators positively rated the HRPP, but found that the classroom-based Fourth R was not a good fit. They also reported implementation challenges. Based on the findings, revisions were made to the HRPP. This study provides relevant implementation information for program facilitators and those developing programs for youth justice settings.

### BACKGROUND

Historically, the perception of youth offender treatment programs was “nothing works” (Andrew & Bonta, 2010). Fortunately, we have shifted from that view and current research suggests that programs for youth offenders should address both risk and protective factors, and include evidence-based components. Although the Fourth R and HRPP were not originally developed for youth justice populations, these programs are consistent with the key components of effective programs for youth offenders. Additionally, previous research has suggested that the impacts of the Fourth R might be especially positive for youth who have experienced multiple adversities.

The grade 7 Fourth R classroom-based program consists of 27 lessons that target peer and dating violence, substance use, and unhealthy sexual behaviours.

The HRPP is a small groups program developed for non-classroom settings. It was designed for youth ages 12 to 18 and consists of 14 sessions targeting the same core principles of the Fourth R, as well as mental health and suicide prevention

The objective of this two-stage study was to examine the feasibility and fit of the programs in youth correctional facilities and identify necessary revisions. Phase I piloted the original programs and Phase II will pilot the adapted program.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The specific objectives of Phase I was to determine:

1. What was the acceptability (i.e., satisfaction with the content and delivery) and feasibility (i.e., compatibility and usefulness) of the programs in a youth justice setting, according to facilitator and administrator feedback?
2. What were the successes and challenges associated with implementation?
3. What modifications should be made to the programs and why?

### METHODS

#### PARTICIPANTS

Two youth custody facilities in Manitoba, Canada piloted the programs.

#### Facilitators

Teachers and program staff employed by the youth correctional facilities received a one-day, in-person training on the Fourth R and HRPP. Overall, 34 facilitators were trained (67% females).

#### Administrators

Five administrators (i.e., chief psychologist, unit managers, assistant superintendent of programs, and superintendent) participated in the study.

#### Youth

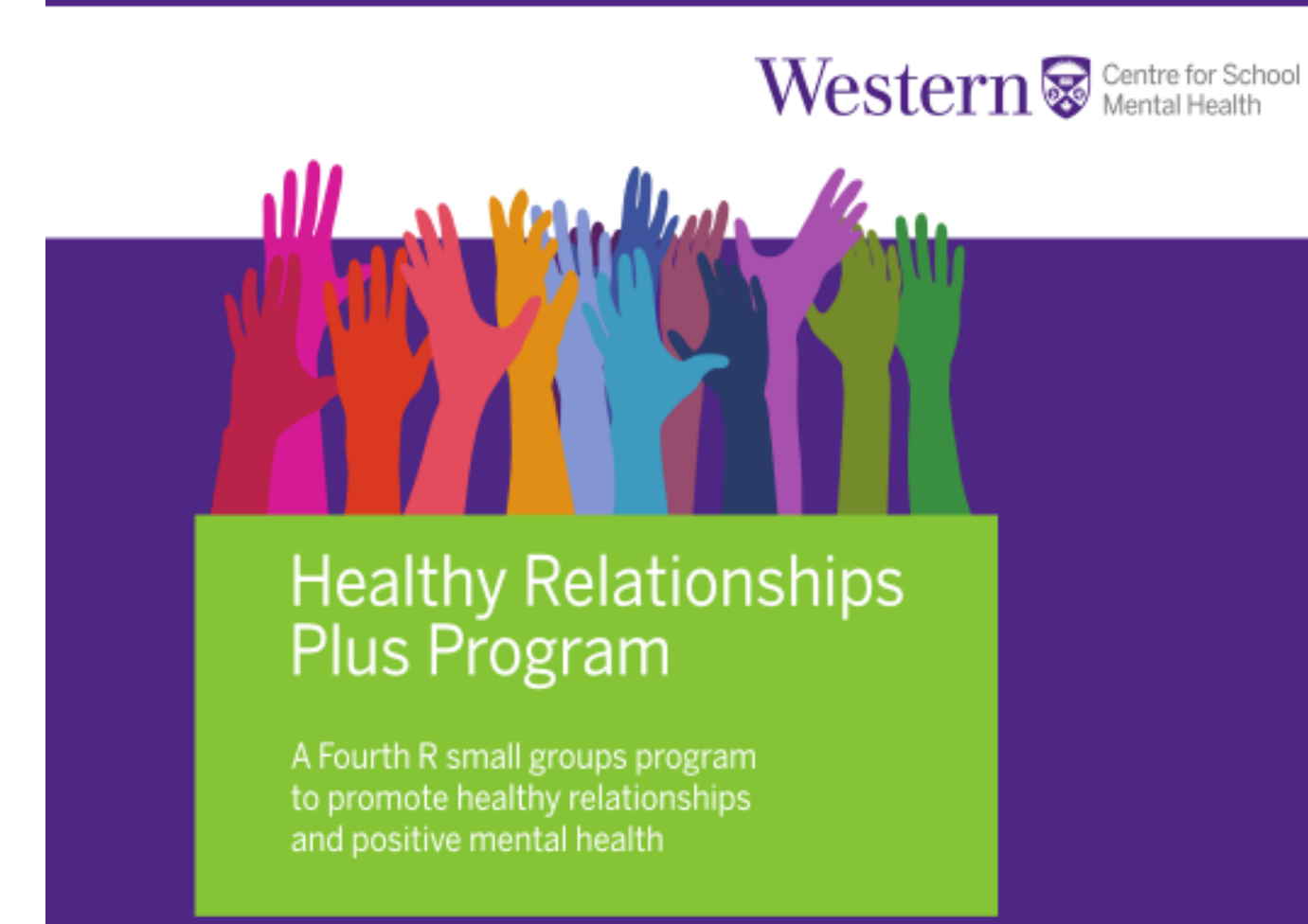
Overall, 110 youth participated. The average age of participants was 16.2 years ( $SD = 1.67$ ). Not all participants completed the sessions.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH GROUPS

Across both youth custody sites:

2 Fourth R classroom groups ( $n = 46$ ) were implemented. The average group size was 9.2 youth.

6 HRPP groups ( $n = 37$  boys and 27 girls) were implemented. The average group size was 9.3 youth.



#### MEASURES

**De-identified attendance sheets:** to provide information about the continuity and dosage of the program and drop-out rates.

**Session tracking sheets:** to comment on the successes and challenges of each session and activities, as well as any modifications made.

**Implementation survey:** completed by facilitators upon program completion to identify successes and challenges, modifications made to the delivery and material, and perceived benefits for the youth.

**Focus Groups:** to gather more descriptive data about the pilot study.

**Administrator Interviews:** to gather macro-level descriptive data about the pilot study.

### FACILITATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Facilitator recommendations included:

- Screening and carefully selecting youth to participate in the program
- Having a workbook for the youth
- Adapting the scenarios to higher risk
- Offering the youth booster sessions
- Having a male and female co-facilitator, especially given the relationship content
- Providing brief training for all correctional staff to create a culture where all staff can reinforce the prosocial skills being practised
- Providing literacy supported options
- Integrating the youths' strengths and resilience into the program
  - *“These youth have been through anything and everything and it doesn't matter what's been thrown at them, they are all survivors.”*

### ADAPTATIONS

Both program facilitators and administrators provided valuable feedback on the classroom-based Fourth R and the HRPP. Based on the feedback and consultation with the Chief Psychologist, it was decided that the HRPP would be adapted, while the existing classroom-based Fourth R would no longer be implemented in the custody facilities. The HRPP was adapted to better meet the needs of youth offenders and the constraints of the setting. The adapted version of the HRPP is currently being finalized.

### CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Overall, the Phase I pilot implementation was successful. Once the youth justice version of the HRPP is complete, the adapted program will be piloted at two youth custody facilities in Manitoba, Canada.

The objective of Phase II is to continue to monitor the feasibility of the adapted programs, in addition to examining preliminary youth outcomes.

The specific objectives of Phase II will be to determine:

1. What was the acceptability (i.e., satisfaction with the content and delivery) and feasibility (i.e., compatibility and usefulness) of the adapted program in a youth justice setting, according to facilitator, administrator, and youth feedback?
2. What were the successes and challenges associated with implementation?
3. Are there observed differences between the program group compared to the comparison group in terms of mental health outcomes, resiliency, coping, and knowledge and attitudes towards dating violence, bullying, drug and alcohol use, and help seeking?
4. Given the heterogeneity of youth offenders, which youth was the program most and least effective for (i.e., age, gender)?

It is hoped that results from this study will advance the use of evidence-based programs and promote the well-being of youth involved in the justice system.

### PHASE I FINDINGS

#### FEASIBILITY & FIT

The HRPP was well received and proved to be a better fit for youth justice settings compared to the classroom-based Fourth R.

*“Excellent program! Youth have been very responsive to the interactivity of it and have stated that it is their favourite program that we offer. It has brought to light topics that are not talked about often, but are much needed in the correctional environment.”*

The classroom-based Fourth R was not compatible with the setting for the following reasons:

- The classroom-based program is 27 lessons (HRPP is 14 sessions). With youth turnover, it was difficult for youth to complete the longer program.
- Youth attending school in custody typically complete independent work and found partner/group work a challenge.
- Youth attending school in custody are trying to earn their credits. The Grade 7 classroom-based Fourth R was selected because of the lower literacy levels; however, this did not allow for youth who participated to earn their high school credits.

#### SUCCESSSES

Stakeholder buy-in is essential for successful implementation of programs. The facilitators and administrators were motivated and enthusiastic about the programs and the research components.

The facilitators perceived that the programs benefited the youth. Particularly, the youth appeared to be engaged by the activities.

The HRPP target age range (12 to 18) is consistent with the ages covered by the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). Also, the program content was developmentally appropriate.

The HRPP content (risk and protective factors) and approach (skill building) was consistent with other correctional programming which facilitates greater generalization of knowledge and skills.

#### CHALLENGES

Given the high turnover of youth in the justice system, it was a challenge to maintain stable group numbers. For the classroom-based Fourth R 0.09% of the youth completed the entire program. For the HRPP 47% of the youth completed the entire program.

Many youth had literacy deficits that made it difficult to attend to and understand program material.

Since these programs were not originally developed for youth justice populations, many of the scenarios did not match the high-risk levels of the youth.

Some program activities involve the youth being in close proximity to each. For many youth offenders, this can feel threatening and lead to aggressive behaviours. These activities were not implemented for security reasons.