A Pilot Study of an Adapted Social-Emotional Learning Program for Justice Involved Youth

Amanda Kerry, Ph.D. Candidate, Claire V. Crooks, Ph.D., C. Psych., & Courtney Cadieux, M.A. Candidate
Centre for School Mental Health, Faculty of Education, Western University

ABSTRACT

The Fourth R Healthy Relationships Plus Program (HRPP) is an evidence-informed small group program developed for youth justice settings. It promotes healthy relationships, positive mental health, violence prevention, and skills development. A previous study evaluated the feasibility of the program in youth justice settings and identified necessary revisions. The present study piloted the adapted program (HRPP-Enhanced) and examined youth outcomes. The adapted program was piloted in youth custody facilities in Manitoba and Ontario. Results indicated that overall, youth described many successes associated with the program. Exploratory analysis of outcomes indicated significant improvements in youth self-reported problem solving, drug resistance efficacy, assertiveness, and self-control. This study highlights the importance of implementing social emotional learning program in youth justice settings.

PARTICIPANTS

Two youth custody facilities in Manitoba and one youth custody facility in Ontario, Canada piloted the program. Facilitators Eight program staff (37.5% female) employed by the youth correctional facilities. Facilitators received in-person training and implemented the program. Teachers 17 teachers (72.2% female) from the schools within the custody facilities. Teachers completed the research surveys.

Youth Overall, 87 youth (39.1% female) participated. The average age of participants was 16.6 years (SD = 1.34). Not all participants completed the sessions.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH GROUPS

Overall, 10 HRPP groups (6 male groups and 4 female groups) were implemented. The average group size was 7.7 youth.

MEASURES

Questionnaires:
- TCU Adolescent Thinking Form B
- Social Skills Rating System-Self Report
- Social Skills Rating System-Teacher Report

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

RESULTS

Comparing Baseline to Follow-Up:
- Youth Self-Report Problem Solving: \( t(38) = 2.58, p < .05, d = .41 \)
- Youth Self-Report Drug Resistance Efficacy: \( t(38) = 2.80, p < .01, d = .46 \)
- Youth Self-Report Assertiveness: \( t(38) = 2.58, p < .05, d = .41 \)
- Youth Self-Report Self Control: \( t(38) = 3.72, p < .01, d = .48 \)

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Overall, the pilot implementation was successful. The youth reported significant improvements from baseline to post-test and these gains were maintained at follow-up. Ongoing data analysis is being conducted to explore potential gender differences.

To date, most studies examining school-emotional learning (SEL) programs have focused on mainstream schools. These studies have found that school-based SEL programs increase self-efficacy, coping strategies, conflict resolution skills and decrease substance use (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). The current study extended these positive findings with justice involved youth.

Research examining school-based SEL programs have also found increased academic motivation, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, as well as reduced truancy and suspensions (Durlak et al., 2011 & Synder et al., 2010). Future evaluation research should explore if participation in SEL programs promotes justice involved youth’s engagement and performance at school in custody faculties, as well as their motivation and achievement when they re-integrate to community schools.

Stakeholders and policy makers who influence the youth justice system should consider incorporating SEL programs into the rehabilitation framework.

The youth highlighted many successes including:

- Interpersonal program
  - “I like how we’re able to move lots or like use our hands instead of sitting around all the time and just writing. We’re actually able to like go hands on with some of the activities.” (18 year old male)

Developed healthy communication skills
  - “It help me communicating in my relationship. I still yell, but not like as crazy. Before I would just freak out and just start crying. I actually talk about things now.” (16 year old female)

CHALLENGES

The youth also identified key challenges including:

- Small group size
  - “We had a small group so we couldn’t really do the little games. It would have been way more fun if there was more people probably.” (16 year old male)

- Sensitive topics
  - “There’s just like a lot of abuse in my family so that’s why I didn’t like the subject. That really stood out to me because that’s not something I’m comfortable talking about with others.” (17 year old female)