



# Promising Practices:

## *Sustainability of school-based programming*

### Fourth R Overview

The Fourth R includes a range of healthy relationships programs that have been shown to promote positive peer interactions and reduce dating and peer violence. There are different components for different grades, as well as community-based versions. Some of the recent program components have a particular emphasis on promoting positive mental health. In addition, we have developed strengths-based programming that is uniquely designed to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, LGBT2Q+ youth, and vulnerable youth. Between 2010 and 2018 we were funded through the Innovation Strategy of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Across three project phases we developed new programming components, evaluated programs, made regional adaptations, and scaled up nationally. By 2018 Fourth R programs were implemented in more than 5000 schools and community organizations nationally.

### Sustainability of school-based programming

After significant resources are directed towards implementing school-based programming, the focus may shift to sustainability, especially if the program is perceived to have a positive impact for students and educators. Sustainability is often conceptualized as the long-term implementation of a program at a level of fidelity that continues to produce successful and valued outcomes for youth. There many factors that influence the sustained use of a program over time. For example, ongoing changes in context such as competing initiatives, changes in capacity, such as staff turnover, and changes in outcomes, such that the outcome is no longer perceived as important to schools, can all influence the sustainability of programs. Thus, sustainability is not merely a matter of continuing the same activity over time, but rather includes the capacity to adapt to changing contexts and priorities.

The purpose of this summary is to provide a brief summary of promising practice in the area of the sustainability of school based programming. It is one of eight issue-specific summaries designed to share actionable, positive strategies to improve effectiveness in the mental health promotion and violence prevention efforts underway.



## Promising Practices

### *Sustainable school-based programs are the exception rather than the rule*

Effective school-based programs are often not sustained for a variety of reasons. Staff turnover and competing and shifting priorities can impact the continued use of a program. Sustainability can be difficult to achieve in school settings in large part because the importance of sustaining the program is often directly related to the importance of the outcome the program delivers. If providing youth with evidence-based programming about healthy relationships and preventing violence is important for schools, efforts to sustain the program become relevant and a priority. If there is a shift in priorities at a school or district level, there is a good chance the program might be re-evaluated or abandoned.

### *Features of the program, the organizational setting, and the broader environment influence sustainability*

If a program fits the values, goals, and priorities of a school district, is likeable, flexible, and produces visible benefits to students, the likelihood of sustaining that program increases. The existence of champions within settings can foster sustainability of the program. A strategic approach to identifying and supporting these champions can improve sustainability. When the program aligns with the mission of the organization, and the organization has the capacity to implement and deliver the program effectively, the continued use of that program is much more likely.

### *Programs are more sustainable when they are adaptable*

It is likely given the dynamic and changing nature of schools that some program adaptation and modification will occur. Intentional adaptations of school-based programs may not be counterproductive because programs that have some built-in flexibility to be modified might remain relevant to the school, and increase motivation to continue to implement the program long term as long as key features and core components for success are maintained. Identifying key components of an intervention and providing guidelines about acceptable modifications can help ensure high quality implementation while increasing sustainability.

### *Ongoing stakeholder involvement and engagement throughout implementation leads to be better sustainability*

Ongoing stakeholder engagement and involvement throughout implementation will help to increase the fit between the program and the local context within which it is implemented. This engagement and involvement of stakeholders on an ongoing basis may also provide a structure early on for addressing evolving issues as they arise that might interfere with sustainability. For example, the Fourth R team has always made it a priority to meet face to face with stakeholders irrespective of distance, hold regular meetings, and co-create programs and processes that fit local settings.

## Sustainability of School-based Programming: Fourth R Research and Resources

Over the course of this project we have developed numerous resources that include information and guidance about implementation. We have also published several research articles and chapters for edited books.

### Journal Articles and Chapters

Crooks, C. V., Chiodo, D., Zwarych, S., Hughes, R., & Wolfe, D. A. (2013). Predicting implementation success of an evidence-based program to promote healthy relationships among students two to eight years after teacher training. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 32*, 125-138