

Research Snapshot

Feasibility trial of the school-based STRONG intervention to promote resilience among newcomer youth

What is this research about?

Researchers evaluated the feasibility of STRONG, a school-based intervention for newcomer youth.

Canada has welcomed many immigrants and refugees in recent years. In 2016, Canadian schools saw an influx of Syrian refugee students. Across Ontario, educators recognized signs of distress among these students and asked for support from the Ministry of Education. They offered support through School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO). SMHO invited trauma research experts, school and mental health professionals, and members from newcomer communities to join them in a collaborative planning process. Together, they developed a program called Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG).

STRONG is a 10-session manualized intervention, designed to strengthen the resilience of newcomer students (including recent immigrants and refugees). STRONG is based on cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative, and socio-therapeutic approaches. The program promotes students' individual strengths and coping skills, including relaxation, measuring and managing distress, and cognitive coping.

What did the researchers do?

Because few programs address the unique needs of newcomer students in Canada, researchers needed to assess how schools could facilitate such programs. They examined the acceptability, implementation, and perceived utility of the STRONG program.

Highlights

- This study assessed the feasibility of the STRONG program to support newcomer students in Ontario schools.
- STRONG is a 10-session manualized intervention to promote newcomer (immigrant and refugee) students' resilience and coping skills.
- In this study, clinicians reported high levels of acceptability and favourable perceived utility of STRONG.
- Clinicians also highlighted newcomer student's increased sense of connectedness, positive outlooks and coping skills after participating in STRONG.

Between April and June 2018, two Ontario school boards implemented ten STRONG groups. School board clinicians participated in a two-day training session before implementing STRONG groups in their school boards. The groups varied in size, composition, number of facilitators, and whether they involved interpreters.

Researchers collected data from STRONG clinicians (n=16) at the following times: (a) after initial training, (b) throughout program implementation, and (c) after the program ended.

Researchers used a mixed-methods approach, collecting data through training surveys, focus groups, and online post-implementation surveys. The researchers used thematic analysis to identify key findings among the data.

What did researchers learn?

Acceptability of STRONG Training

- **Post-training:** Clinicians indicated increased knowledge and self-efficacy after participating in the training. The most valuable aspects of the training included the activities and knowledgeable trainers. Clinicians voiced some concerns about the length of the STRONG program (i.e., how to schedule 10 sessions).

Acceptability of STRONG Program

- **Post-implementation:** Clinicians rated the program as positive and would recommend it to colleagues. They found STRONG to be an engaging intervention for elementary and secondary levels that was well-accepted among students (demonstrated by high attendance in STRONG groups).

Program Implementation

- **Successes:** Clinicians completed all STRONG sessions and activities, with few changes.
- **Challenges:** Clinicians encountered the following challenges implementing the program: a) short time frame to implement, b) different external influences (e.g., school events, disruptions during group time, Ramadan) c) varying understanding of concepts among students (e.g., language barriers, students' developmental stage, cultural context).

Perceived Utility

- **Increased connectedness among students:** Clinicians said the STRONG program promoted a cohesive group experience among students. Students increasingly supported each other. Some students developed a stronger sense of belonging in school (i.e., asking teachers for guidance, joining teams and clubs).
- **Improved stress management and coping skills:** All clinicians indicated students understood the impact of stress and the thoughts-feelings-behaviour triangle. Also, most (90%) clinicians indicated students learned relaxation strategies, positive self-talk, and processed their journey narratives.

- **More positive outlook:** 90% of clinicians shared that STRONG positively altered the way students envisioned their future. Students developed more positive self-perception and a stronger sense of optimism.

How can you use this research?

This research suggests STRONG is a feasible Tier 2 school-based intervention for newcomer students. Clinicians reported high levels of acceptability as well as favorable perceived utility of the program. They highlighted student's increased sense of connectedness, positive outlooks, and coping skills after completing STRONG. More attention is needed to explore and address implementation challenges.

More generally, this research supports schools as suitable settings for interventions with youth.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article: Crooks CV, Hoover S, Smith ACG. (2020). Feasibility trial of the school-based STRONG intervention to promote resilience among newcomer youth. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57. 1815-1829.

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