



Research Snapshot

Resilience program for newcomer youth improves relationships, connectedness and coping

What is this research about?

This study investigated how newcomer youth perceived the benefits and acceptability of STRONG, a school-based intervention to promote resilience and mental health.

Since 2016, the number of newcomer youth (recent immigrants and refugees) in Canadian schools has increased, in part due to Canada's response to the crisis in Syria. These newcomer youth have many strengths such as supportive families, connection to their communities, and experiences that bolster their resilience. However, newcomer youth often face stressors and traumatic experiences during their journey to Canada. Consequently, they may be at risk of developing mental health difficulties, particularly if their psychosocial needs are not met. For mental health supports to be effective, they must be relevant, culturally meaningful, and address immediate needs as well as traumatic history. Schools are ideal places to deliver youth mental health interventions because they are accessible in communities and they have trained mental health professionals.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers collected data from 29 youth who participated in one of six STRONG intervention groups in a school district in Southern Ontario. School board mental health practitioners facilitated the groups. Study participants ranged from 11 to 20 years old. Over one quarter (28%) of participants had migrated from Syria. Other countries of origin included Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ghana, Philippines, Pakistan, and Rwanda.

Highlights

- This study examined newcomer youths' perceptions of a school-based resilience intervention.
- Youth reported improved coping skills, increased feelings of connectedness, and stronger sense of belonging to their peers after participating in the group intervention.
- Youth also enjoyed the group and would recommend it to their peers.

Youth participants completed surveys, a focus group, or both. Surveys consisted of pre- and post-measures of resilience, school climate, and STRONG skills (a survey reflecting each of the core skills taught during the intervention). Youth were also invited to participate in a focus group after they completed the STRONG program, to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceived the program.

About the STRONG Program

STRONG is a group-based resilience program for newcomer youth. The program combines a cognitive-behavioural approach, strengths-based activities, and narrative approaches. STRONG focuses on resilience building, increasing knowledge and awareness of distress, and developing cognitive-behavioural skills (e.g. improving coping, and relaxation skills). STRONG consists of 10 group sessions and one individual session. During the individual session with the group facilitator, youth share their migration story and reflect on their strengths.

Find out more about STRONG at:
<https://www.strongforschools.com/>



Benefits of STRONG:

In the focus groups, youth expressed many benefits from participating in the STRONG program. Benefits included: developing new coping strategies, increasing self-confidence, improving connection to and sense of belonging among peers, sharing and exchanging stories with peers, as well as learning more about the Canadian context. In addition, survey data showed that youths' resilience and STRONG skills increased during the program. As one focus group participant said,

"I think the coping skills are the most important [benefit of STRONG]. We liked the exercises, we liked the program, but the coping skills is what will stay with you forever. Whenever you are in a stressful situation, you will always remember what to do, and what advice they gave to you on how to handle situations, look at it from a different point of view, and how to make yourself stronger."

Youth also appreciated connecting with other youth who had similar experiences; they reported that they felt less alone after completing the program.

Acceptability Findings:

During focus groups, youth reflected on their experiences with the STRONG program. Researchers identified two broad themes among youths' reflections: a high level of program acceptability, and suggestions for improvements.

Youth indicated that they enjoyed the program content and the interactive activities. Youth expressed that,

"I love the exercises."

Overall, youth enjoyed the program and only offered suggestions for minor changes. When asked specifically for possible improvements, they suggested more language support, a greater variety of games and activities, and making the program available to more peers.

How can you use this research?

The findings from this study provide key insights into youths' perceptions of the STRONG intervention. Survey and focus group results both showed that youth benefited from the intervention and saw increases in their resilience, relationships with peers, and ability to cope.

Previous research has shown the potential risk for youth if their social and emotional needs are not addressed after they migrate to a new home country. The findings from this study show that STRONG can provide a psychosocial intervention for newcomer youth that bolsters resilience, promotes healthy ways of coping, and increases peer connectedness.

Original Research Article

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Crooks, C. V., Kubishyn, N., Syeda, M., & Dare, L. (2020). The STRONG resiliency program for newcomer youth: A mixed-methods exploration of youth experiences and impacts. *International Journal of School Social Work*..

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