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## Knowledge Summary

# Healthy Relationships and Wellbeing among Youth Offenders

### ***What you need to know***

The Fourth R 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 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. Program facilitators and administrators provided significant feedback that is currently being used to revise the program. Overall, facilitators enjoyed implementing the program and perceived the program to be beneficial for their youth. According to facilitators, the HRPP was a better fit for youth justice settings compared to the classroom based Fourth R. Recommendations for HRPP adaptations included, lower literacy options, more relevant practise scenarios, a workbook for the youth, and a brief 2-hour training for all correctional staff. Moving forward, the adapted HRPP Youth Justice Version will be piloted in two youth custody facilities to assess the feasibility of the program and examine preliminary youth outcomes.

### **What is the issue?**

Historically, the perception of youth offender treatment programs was “nothing works” (Andrew & Bonta, 2010). Fortunately, we have since shifted from that view and current research suggests that effective programs for youth offenders should aim to reduce re-offending by targeting multiple risk factors and promoting the development of healthy, prosocial skills. Consistent with the effective ingredients of programming, the Fourth R and HRPP programs target multiple risk factors (i.e., substance use, risky sexual behaviour) and promote social and cognitive skill building (i.e., communication skills, help seeking). The goal of this research project was to examine the feasibility and fit of the Fourth R and HRPP in youth justice settings.

### **Why is this important?**

According to Statistics Canada, it is estimated that over one-third of Canadian youth have engaged in some form of delinquent behaviour by the age of 14 (Savoie, 2006). Juvenile offending has been linked to many negative outcomes for youth including psychological, emotional, health, social, academic, and employment challenges. In addition to individual impacts, youth delinquency is associated with significant societal costs, including a strain on finances and resources (de Vries, Hoeve, Assink, Stams, & Asscher, 2015). The prevalence of youth offending, as well as the individual and societal impacts of these behaviours, highlight the importance of supporting the needs of these youth.

Research has identified many factors that influence the likelihood that a youth will engage in delinquent behaviours. Risk factors include family disruption, deviant peers, weak attachment to school, and neighbourhood violence. The combination of multiple risk factors places a youth a greater risk of offending, compared to the presence of specific risk factors. Protective factors include, positive socioemotional skills, external support systems, and healthy relationships with parents and other (Allard, Ogilvie, & Stewart, 2007). Ideally, programs for youth offenders address both risk and protective factors, and include evidence-base components. Currently, there are a limited number of programs for these youth that are deemed evidence-based (Guerra, et al., 2008). 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.

## What did the researchers do?

In Phase I, the Grade 7 classroom-based Fourth R and the HRPP were piloted in two youth custody facilities in Manitoba to examine the compatibility of the programs with the population and settings. Two Fourth R classroom groups (n = 46 boys) and six HRPP groups (37 boys and 27 girls) were implemented. Not all participants completed the sessions. Data collection included session tracking sheets, implementation surveys, facilitation focus groups, and administrator interviews. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inductive coding of transcripts. Subsequently, adaptations were made to the HRP based on the feedback from Phase I. Phase II will pilot the adapted program to evaluate feasibility and preliminary youth outcomes.

## What did the researchers find?

Both program facilitators and administrators provided valuable feedback on the classroom based Fourth R and the HRPP. 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:

- Youth attending school in custody typically complete independent work and found partner/group work a challenge.
- The classroom-based program is 27 lessons (HRPP is 14 session). With youth entering and being released from the facilities, it was difficult for youth to complete the longer program.
- 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.

Other recommendations included having a workbook for the youth, adapting the scenarios to higher risk, offering the youth booster sessions, and providing brief training for all correctional staff to create a culture where all staff can reinforce the prosocial skills being practised.

## Tips for Effective Practise

The facilitators and administrators offered valuable feedback for future implementation of the adapted HRPP. They recommended that youth be screened and carefully selected to participate in the program. For example, select

youth with risk factors/ offenses related to unhealthy relationships and ensure the youth selected do not have pre-existing violent histories with each other. In addition, given the prevalence of low literacy among youth involved in the justice system, it was suggested to use simpler language and reduce the number of reading and writing activities. Reading and writing activities can be replaced with group discussions or role plays.

When working with youth offenders it is necessary to recognize their strengths and not only focus on their deficits. Consistently, each facilitator and administrator acknowledged that the greatest strength of youth involved in the justice system is their resilience, *“These youth have been through anything and everything and it doesn’t matter what’s been thrown at them, they are all survivors.”*

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## About the Author:

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## Keywords

Youth offenders, youth justice system, delinquency, crime, prevention

## Additional Resources

The Fourth R: <https://youthrelationships.org/>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/>

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