



Research Snapshot

Healthy relationships program improves adolescents' ability to manage peer violence



What is this research about?

Many health-compromising behaviours begin in adolescence. The inclusion of social and emotional learning in schools has become more important in promoting skills that are critical to positive development and protect against risky behaviours. For example, students who have strong social and emotional skills have more positive relationships with peers and adults and have better positive emotional adjustment and mental health. A number of effective programs have been identified for use in schools to build skills aimed at preventing dating violence and bullying. However, many of these programs have only been evaluated using a particular grade or age group. Therefore, there is a need to continue to evaluate these approaches for use in new contexts and with different age groups.

“Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) programming throughout curricula to support the development of healthy behaviours and prevent violence is critical for a comprehensive approach to school health.”

What did the researchers do?

The researchers evaluated a program for building social and emotional skills for grade 8 students in regards to healthy relationships and peer violence. This was based on the Fourth R program that has been found to be effective for grade 9 students.

What you need to know:

This study investigated whether a healthy relationships program would improve students' social and emotional skills related to knowledge about violence, critical thinking about the impact of violence, identification of coping strategies, and their acceptability of violence. The researchers found that the program promotes knowledge, critical thinking, and coping strategies among seventh and eighth graders.

Schools (n=57) in a western Canadian province were randomized into intervention or control schools. In total, 951 grade 7 and 8 students (control = 429; intervention = 522) from these schools participated. Students who were in schools placed in the intervention group completed a curriculum designed to build social and emotional skills relating to violence and peer relationships. The intervention program was delivered by regular classroom teachers who had attended one day of training. Students in intervention schools completed a survey during regular class time one month after the program.

Students in schools in the control group received their normal Physical & Health Education class. The researchers were interested in students' abilities in four areas relating to violence:

- Knowledge about violence
- Critical thinking
- Coping strategies
- Acceptability of violence

What did the researchers find?

Overall, the findings of this study provide preliminary evidence that the Fourth R program promotes knowledge, critical thinking, and coping strategies among seventh and eighth graders. Specifically, students in the intervention groups reported better knowledge of violence demonstrated greater critical thinking and awareness related to the impacts of violence. Students in the intervention groups also identified a greater number of positive coping strategies for stress than students in control groups.

Female students were more likely than males to answer knowledge questions correctly, to show greater critical thinking and awareness of the impact of violence, to report greater knowledge of coping strategies, and were less accepting of violence. Students in eighth grade were more aware of the impact and less accepting of violence than those in seventh grade. More affluent students had greater knowledge of violence and were more aware of its impact. Finally, students who identified as Caucasian were more likely than non-Caucasians to answer knowledge questions correctly, to have greater awareness of the impact of violence, and were less accepting of violence.

How can you use this research?

The findings from this study highlight the importance of helping youth develop healthy peer relationship skills. Healthy relationships are related to many positive outcomes including positive mental health and adjustment.

Schools are an ideal setting for teaching important health promoting behaviours to adolescents. School prevention and intervention programs that explicitly teach students social and emotional skills will promote their engagement in healthy relationships. As such, identifying developmentally appropriate approaches that can be integrated into school-based curricula across grades is an important step towards integrating social and emotional learning throughout the education system.

Original Research Article:

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

Crooks, C. V., Scott, K. L., Broll, R., Zwarych, S., Hughes, R., & Wolfe, D. A. (2015). Does an evidence-based healthy relationships program for 9th graders show similar effects for 7th and 8th graders? Results from 57 schools randomized to intervention. *Journal of Health Education Research*, 30, 513-519.

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