



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health;
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer

DATE: 2022 October 20

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS PLUS PROGRAM

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 59-22, re: “Healthy Relationships Plus Program,” for information.

Key Points

- The Child Health Team takes a proportionate universalism approach to servicing elementary schools by providing a more intense level of support to the school communities that need it most.
- Many health compromising behaviours emerge during adolescence, increasing the need for a focus on mental health, substance use prevention, and healthy relationships at the elementary school level.
- The Healthy Relationships Plus program is an evidence-informed strategy developed through Western University’s Centre for School Mental Health. Through well-established partnerships with Southwestern Public Health, Western University, and local school boards, the Child Health Team will implement and support an evaluation of this program in priority elementary schools.

Background

The Child Health Team (CHT) and the Young Adult Team (YAT) collectively make up the MLHU School Health Team, supporting elementary and secondary schools, respectively. The CHT implements a proportionate universalism approach to working with schools. This means the team prioritizes engagement and provision of programs and services with school communities at risk for increased health inequities and negative health outcomes by delivering a more intense level of service in the school communities with the greatest needs. Using the Ministry of Education’s Education Opportunities Index (EOI), schools have been categorized as Priority or Universal. Priority schools are those with a higher EOI score, which combines factors such as low-income household, single parent status and a low-level of parental education; all of which are factors that, at higher proportions, increase risk for poor health outcomes both in childhood and throughout the life course.

Public Health Nurses (PHNs) assigned to priority schools have approximately seven schools each and provide intensive programs and services such as frequent school visits, comprehensive school health assessments and plans, class/small group facilitation and training, and engage with students, families, and school staff. PHNs assigned to universal schools provide support through a centralized model which includes offering high-level planning and consultation with school administration and staff. Additionally, universal school PHNs provide communication support for all schools; participate in community partnership committees; engage in local policy development and community-level assessment; and support service evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement with school health programs and services.

Early adolescence (grades 6-8) is an important developmental period and peer and dating relationships become very important influences on youths. It is a time when many mental health challenges and health compromising behaviours emerge. Many adolescents experience anxiety and depression at a clinical level, and many others at a subclinical level that can interfere with functioning (Lapshina, Crooks, & Kerry, 2018). These symptoms are associated with mental health challenges and other negative outcomes in adulthood (Crooks, C., 2017). Therefore, there is an increasing need for mental health, substance use prevention, and healthy relationships support at the elementary school level as these schools are ideal settings for universal prevention programming for early adolescents.

Through ongoing collaboration with Southwestern Public Health (SWPH), the Thames Valley District School Board and the London District Catholic School Board around mental health and well-being promotion, partnerships have improved, and priorities have aligned. This alignment has been instrumental in bringing the Healthy Relationship Plus (HRP) program to priority elementary schools in Middlesex-London.

Healthy Relationships Plus Program Description

The HRP program is an evidence-informed small groups program designed to promote healthy relationships, increase positive mental health, target unhealthy substance use, and promote skills and protective factors in preventing gender-based and peer violence. It is based on the same core principles of skill-building and awareness as well-established classroom-based programs known collectively as the Fourth R, which are currently taught in more than 4,500 schools across North America, including schools in the Middlesex-London region.

The HRP program is a universal, competency enhancement program focusing on prevention, rather than treatment. This means that it is appropriate for all youth (aged 12-18 years), including those who have never been involved in violent or unhealthy relationships. Involving all adolescents in education about safety and risk, rather than just those who in whom concerns are identified, builds resilience for future difficulties. Rather than focusing solely on negative behaviors to avoid, the program takes a social and emotional learning approach by developing the capacities youth require to be well-adjusted and succeed in school (Crooks, et al., 2015). The HRP program consists of 14 one-hour sessions, and all students will receive a certificate upon completion of the program.

The HRP program, which was developed and evaluated by Western University, has already been implemented by the YAT in select secondary schools, using an enhanced version of the program. The HRP-Enhanced Program was adapted from the original HRP to better meet the needs of high-risk youth. The 16-session HRP-Enhanced Program includes a harm reduction approach and trauma-informed adaptations (Western University, Centre for School Mental Health, 2019).

Next Steps

The CHT is working with Western University, Thames Valley District School Board, London District Catholic School Board, and Southwestern Public Health to implement and evaluate a universal delivery model of the Healthy Relationships Plus Program in priority elementary schools in the Middlesex-London region. To achieve this, the following next steps will occur:

- Ensure all CHT PHNs are trained in the HRP program by mid-October.
- Work with local school boards to select the schools that will receive the program during the 2022-23 school year. The goal is to deliver the program in at least 20 classrooms throughout the year, or as capacity allows.
- CHT PHNs to work with the Grade 7 and/or 8 educators at selected schools to deliver the program during class time.
- In collaboration with Western University and the school boards, support an evaluation plan that will include feedback from school administrators, educators, and students. Continue to work with

Western University on a more formal data collection plan to contribute to mid- and long-term program outcomes and sustainability of the initiative.

- School Health PHNs and Managers to share program implementation and evaluation plan, successes, and challenges with national partners of the program, as well as other health units across the province.
- School Health Team to explore opportunities with the French School Boards to deliver the HRP program in their priority schools for the 2023-24 school year.

This report was prepared by the School Health Team, Healthy Living Division.



Alexander Summers, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health



Emily Williams, BScN, RN, MBA, CHE
Chief Executive Officer

References

- Crooks, C. (2017). *The Healthy Relationships Plus Program: National implementation study* [Knowledge Summary]. Western University, Centre for School Mental Health.
https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/docs/hrpp/knowledge_summary/healthy-relationships-plus-program-national-implementation-study.pdf
- Crooks, C. V., Scott, K., Broll, R., Zwarych, S., Hughes, R., & Wolfe, D. (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. *Health Education Research*, 30(3), 513-519.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyv014>
- Lapshina, N., Crooks, C. V., & Kerry, A. (2018). Changes in depression and anxiety among youth in a healthy relationships program: A latent class growth analysis. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 34(4):,1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573518777154>
- Western University, Centre for School Mental Health. (2019). *Healthy Relationships Plus Program feedback report: London District Catholic School Board*.