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Research Snapshot: A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Evaluation of a Universal Healthy Relationships Promotion Program for Youth

Centre for School Mental Health

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Research Snapshot

A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Evaluation of a Universal Healthy Relationships Promotion Program for Youth



What is this research about?

Bullying and mental health problems are pressing health concerns for adolescents. Therefore, programs that promote the well-being of all students are a critical part of school mental health strategies.

The *Healthy Relationships Plus* program (HRP) is a universal, small groups program which focuses on the promotion of positive mental health and the reduction of bullying and problematic substance use. The goal of this study was to evaluate the HRP program with a group of 212 youth randomly assigned to either complete the HRP program or a control condition.

What did the researchers do?

Data were collected during the summer of 2014 in Southwestern Ontario. Participants were in grades 9 or 10 and were randomly assigned to either the HRP or control group. Fourteen groups (7 HRP, 7 control) were offered simultaneously to students. Youth completed self-report questionnaires assessing mental health, bullying behaviour, and substance use at five time-points (before and after the program, and at a 4- 8- and 12-month follow-up).

Youth were asked to report on their emotional, social and psychological well-being; bullying victimization and perpetration; alcohol and marijuana use; help-seeking intentions; and adverse childhood experiences in the series of questionnaires administered.

What you need to know:

This study evaluated the Healthy Relationships Plus program (HRP) with a group of Canadian youth. HRP aims to promote positive mental health and reduce bullying and substance misuse. Researchers found that HRP participation significantly reduced the odds of physical bullying victimization at one-year follow-up compared to the control group.

Baseline scores (time-point 1) were compared to ensure equivalency between the treatment and control groups on all outcome variables. Additional analyses were conducted determine whether group status (HRP vs. control) predicted scores on the outcome variables across time.

Main Findings:

Compared to the control group, youth who participated in HRP were at a significantly lower risk of physical bullying victimization one year later. This finding was mediated by a increased intention to seek help from a professional following HRP participation. Additionally, youth who had experienced trauma reported less marijuana use one year later compared to control youth with similar experiences.

HRP facilitators also provided feedback on their experiences with the program. Study findings showed that facilitators followed the curriculum closely; however, time constraints restricted some facilitators from completing all program activities.

How can you use this research?

Participation in HRP was associated with significantly lower rates of physical bullying victimization one year after completing the program. Given the high rates of bullying among Canadian adolescents, this finding speaks to the need for the implementation of universal prevention programs, such as HRP.

This study employed a relatively small sample size and a group of youth who were considered low-risk. The program was also offered over a compressed time-frame. While promising, replication studies should implement the program over an extended period of time and utilize a more diverse population.

Based on these findings, it is possible that a strengths-based, relationship-focused program can reduce behaviours such as bullying and marijuana use and encourage help-seeking by youth. This has important implications for school-based prevention and intervention efforts to promote adolescent well-being in our schools.

Original Research Article:

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

Exner-Cortens, D., Wolfe, D., Crooks, C. V., & Chiodo, D. (2019). A preliminary randomized controlled evaluation of a universal healthy relationships promotion program for youth. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*. doi:10.1177/0829573518821508

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About this Summary: This summary was written by Courtney Cadieux, MA Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit www.csmh.uwo.ca.

Learn more about HRPP:

To learn more about the Healthy Relationships Plus (HRP) Program, visit www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/PHAC-TDV-vulnerable-youth.html