# Promising Practices:
# Healthy Relationships and Dating Violence Prevention Programs in Canadian Schools

Determining the effectiveness of a dating violence prevention program for youth is challenging. There are certain measures that can be helpful in ensuring an impactful program. This fact sheet is designed for funding and program officers and is meant to guide program development, implementation and delivery in the areas of healthy relationships and dating violence prevention. It is a checklist of promising practices of such programs delivered in Canadian schools.

Research indicates there are at least nine key components to a successful healthy relationship or dating violence prevention program. They are:

## Evidence-informed, well researched and developed program

✓ Standardized texts incorporated into curriculum strengthen a program's validity and impact
✓ Program's impacts must be evaluated over time to truly assess whether students retained the knowledge gains, demonstrate a shift in attitude and/or behaviour and to ensure no unintended negative effects occur
✓ Process evaluations are equally important to ensure the program is properly implemented

## Flexibility / Adaptability

✓ Promising programs grow and adapt over time to address feedback from participants, funding changes or grade level
✓ Adaptability is also important to ensure inclusion with respect to age-appropriate, gender-appropriate and culturally relevant materials for accessibility of participants. This includes leaving space within the curriculum to allow for youth-directed/youth-driven content

## Experiential learning

✓ Activity-based sessions are more engaging and ensure youth participation, interaction, and voice
✓ Role plays and follow-up activities are good ways to ensure the information being taught is being applied and absorbed



## Inclusivity

✓ Successful programs include mixed audiences and different communities (e.g. First Nations communities), and may require targeted approaches
✓ Similarly, programs that include special needs students by, for example, making their materials accessible to visually- and hearing-impaired students, have likewise ensured all target groups are reached
✓ Programs that use LGBTQ and gender-variant language, and have scenarios or role plays that demonstrate the different factors involved in violence in LGBTQ relationships also ensure that all students can identify with the program and will therefore meet outcome goals as well

## Gender lens

✓ Programs that had separate components for girls and boys with an opportunity to regroup and discuss what is important to girls and boys were most successful
✓ Similarly, programs that have both male and female co-facilitators are better received by the youth, as they feel better represented and are more likely to express themselves
✓ While gender separate programs can be helpful, a gender analysis in all programs is important to address, particularly regarding root causes of gender inequality, the fact that women are more likely to be abused, consent, and the benefits of healthy, equal relationships
✓ LGBTQ students also must be represented, whether by the gender identity of the facilitators, in the language and materials used, the scenarios discussed, etc.

## Youth leadership & involvement

Youth can be involved in many ways as part of the program, which helps to engage them and ensure their commitment and follow-up:
✓ Peer leaders in the development, implementation and evaluation of the program
✓ Youth as facilitators, co-facilitators and mentors, which can foster trust and relatability of content
✓ Youth clubs as vehicles of information, and youth advisory committees for program content & strategic direction
✓ School contests / community projects as instruments for follow-up
✓ Youth role plays during the implementation of the program
✓ Youth testimonials
✓ Opportunities to express values, ask questions, explore further, interact with facilitators
✓ Youth-centred approach and youth-driven content, while ensuring myths and harmful attitudes and behaviours aren't perpetuated

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### Simultaneously educational and skill-building

Programs that serve to both equip with knowledge and enhance skills, including opportunities to understand and apply the informational content, have shown promise. Such programs would:

✓ Cover detailed and accurate information on relationships – both positive, healthy relationships and unhealthy ones, in order to distinguish between desired versus undesired behaviours
✓ Include skill-building exercises and strategies in the areas of social competence and emotional learning, e.g.:
  ‣ conflict resolution
  ‣ decision-making
  ‣ problem-solving
  ‣ analyzing issues
  ‣ applying ideas
  ‣ effective communication (active listening, speaking, presentation skills)
✓ Challenge social norms and create opportunities to reframe an issue. Successful approaches use emotional persuasion to connect the audience with the issue, as well as use male peers to change social norms

### Medium to long-term in duration

✓ Long-term intervention leads to more sustainable outcomes. While short-term, one-off presentations have shown immediate increases in knowledge, longer-term programs have proven more effective in terms of continually increasing knowledge over time, reinforcing shifting attitudes of youth, and ultimately changing their behaviours and actions with respect to healthy relationships
✓ Providing opportunities for follow-up (amongst themselves, with program facilitators/teachers and supported by schools) that is supported by schools is essential to ensure lasting impacts in terms of shifting attitudes and behaviours, leading to healthy relationships and overall violence prevention

### Curriculum-based or strong partnership between school & service provider

✓ A universal program tied to curriculum outcomes means all students will be exposed to the same information and skill-building life lessons
✓ Universality also means there will be no stigma associated with the youth involved in the program
✓ In addition, this approach may be more cost-effective and leave less room for teachers to opt in or out of having external presenters who are only involved in specific topics, which can lead to sporadic and non-defined learning objectives for youth
✓ Alternatively, if it is a community agency delivering the program, it is important to have school buy-in and to maintain a good relationship with them to ensure follow-through with students for long-term effect
✓ A combination of school curriculum and outside agency programming ensures comprehensive coverage of the subject
✓ Partnerships with community agencies are also important to utilize their expertise, and for youth to gain additional information about external resources
✓ Partnerships with teacher federations/unions are important to support dissemination and in classroom use

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