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# LEADING FOR CHANGE

NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION TEEN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS  
PROGRAM, 2013-2017

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
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# ABOUT THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's public foundation for women and girls. We empower women and girls in Canada to move out of violence, out of poverty, and into confidence and leadership. Since 1991, we've raised money and funded programs in more than 1,500 communities across Canada, and are one of the largest women's foundations in the world. We take a positive approach to addressing root causes of the most critical issues facing women and girls. We study and share the best ways to create long-term change and bring community organizations together for training and to learn from each other. We carefully select and fund the programs with the strongest outcomes and regularly evaluate their work. We have a special focus on building a community of women helping other women. Helping women creates safer families and communities, and a more prosperous society for all of us. We invest in the strength of women and the dreams of girls. For more information, please visit [www.canadianwomen.org](http://www.canadianwomen.org).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

In 2013, the Canadian Women's Foundation implemented its *Teen Healthy Relationships Program* (the Program) – a four-year cycle of funding to 17 non-profit organizations across Canada in support of their provision of school-based teen healthy relationships programming. The Foundation's Program was comprised of two distinct (though interrelated) initiatives:

**1) Teen healthy relationships project funding:** Four-year grants were given to support the implementation of 17 teen healthy relationships projects, which together were understood to represent the range of different approaches to the provision of teen healthy relationships programming currently being implemented in Canada; and

**2) Grantee/sector capacity building:** By facilitating a variety of formal and informal learning and networking opportunities, the Foundation sought to enhance grantees' capacity to deliver effective programming and to strengthen the teen healthy relationships field at the sector and policy levels.

The Foundation engaged InsideOut Policy Research to conduct the evaluation of its Program. The four-year, mixed methods evaluation has generated findings in response to the following questions:

- What can be said about the approaches taken by the grantees to the provision of teen healthy relationships programming?
- To what extent do participants report positive effects of taking part in the projects?
- What are the conditions that support or limit project effectiveness?
- What effect has the Teen Healthy Relationships Program had beyond individual project participants (e.g. on participants' families, on teachers, and the school environment)?
- Did the Program contribute to building the teen healthy relationships sector?

During the evaluation process, as a means of dealing with the diversity of the approaches represented by the 17 funded projects, the evaluation team identified a number of key program design characteristics against which to describe and assess the projects, and to create groupings of project types. Two of these characteristics emerged as particularly important to the team's analysis of the data generated:

- Whether projects were "universal" (i.e. delivered to all students in a particular grade/community) or whether they were selective (i.e. targeting a specific sub-group of youth); and
- The amount of programming that each project provided for participating teens – known as "dosage."

Some of the most interesting findings of the evaluation relate to the reported effects of projects against these characteristics.

## TEEN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS PROJECTS FUNDING: KEY FINDINGS

### Effects of Project Participation

Overall, teens reported positive effects of participation across all projects – both on the participant survey and as part of the site visit activities. However, statistical analyses of the participant survey data demonstrated that reported effects of project participation were stronger for selective projects than for universal projects and increased in strength with the increase in project dosage.

### Aggregated Findings

#### *“Most significant” impacts on participants*

During site visits, project staff and stakeholders, and project participants were asked what they felt was the “real” or “most significant” impact of the projects on teens. There was broad agreement in their responses, with adults and teens identifying the following key effects of project participation:

- Increased knowledge about healthy and unhealthy relationships;
- Greater awareness and capacity for critical thinking;
- Increased self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence;
- Enhanced healthy relationships skills (e.g. communication, decision-making, problem-solving);
- Increased social, cultural and school connectedness.

In addition, project participants highlighted increased self-awareness and self-respect as an important outcome.

### Participants’ understanding of healthy relationships

Overall, the funded projects were successful in increasing participants’ **understanding of healthy relationships**, regardless of project design. For instance:

- 72% of teens reported that, as a result of participating in their project, they *were better able to recognize what a healthy relationship is*.
- A “Healthy Relationships Posters” activity (conducted with selected participants from the majority of the funded projects) demonstrated that all groups were able to articulate the primary components of a healthy relationship, as well as the appropriate feelings and behaviours associated with such relationships.

Projects also enhanced teens’ **sense of fairness and equality**, with 70% of participants reporting that they better understand that all genders should have the same opportunities.

### Participants’ acquisition of healthy relationships skills

Participant survey results suggest modest to strong positive effects of project participation on teens’ **healthy relationships skills**, including: effective communication; non-violent conflict resolution; and healthy boundary setting/assertiveness. Results for boundary setting/assertiveness were particularly encouraging with 66% of survey respondents reporting that they *are better at saying “no” to things that seem wrong or make [them] uncomfortable* and 67% reporting that they *are better able to choose friends who treat [them] respectfully*.

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**72% of teens reported they were better able to recognize what a healthy relationship is.**

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“I learned that I was in an unhealthy relationship and learned how to get out of it safely.”

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Project Participant

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“I’ve become more aware of how I should be treated—what I deserve.”

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Project Participant

## Building participants' Protective Factors

Overall, participant survey results indicate that project participation was perceived to have had a positive effect on a number of protective factors associated with increased resilience, enhanced wellbeing, and a reduced likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating violence. For instance:

- **Sense of self-efficacy:** 85% of respondents reported that project participation had, to some extent (“yes”/ “kind of”), helped them to feel that they can better handle whatever comes their way.
- **Self-esteem:** 80% of respondents reported that project participation had, to some extent, helped them to feel better about themselves.
- **Social connectedness:** 72% of respondents reported that project participation had, to some extent, helped them make new friends or strengthen existing friendships.
- **School connectedness:** 72% of respondents reported some degree of positive effect on how safe they feel at school and 64% reported some degree of positive effect on how much they enjoy school.
- **Cultural connectedness:** 69% of respondents reported that project participation had had some degree of positive effect on their feelings of pride in their culture, race or ethnic group.

## Findings for Selective Projects

A statistical analysis of the participant survey data by “selective” and “universal” projects demonstrated that the reported effects of project participation were stronger for the selective projects **across all of the survey items**. The items for which the difference in the results were particularly wide are:

- ***I have more pride in my culture, race or ethnic group*** (cultural connectedness) – 67% of respondents in selective projects compared to 31% in universal projects;
- ***I feel better about myself*** (self esteem) – 71% of respondents in selective projects compared to 37% in universal projects; and
- ***I am making new friends and/or strengthening the friendships I already have*** (social connectedness) – 68% of respondents in selective projects compared to 36% in universal projects.

These findings do not mean that the universal projects were not effective – rather they indicate the particular value of delivering targeted programming to subgroups of teens who may (for a variety of reasons) have fewer protective factors, and therefore have a higher risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence.

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**70% of teens said they better understand that all genders should have the same opportunities.**

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## Findings for Higher Dosage Projects

A statistical analysis of the participant survey data by project dosage revealed that the reported effects of project participation increased in strength with increased dosage. **Broadly speaking, survey respondents in very high dosage projects reported the strongest effects of project participation and those in the very low dosage category, the weakest.** (As an indication of the spread represented by the dosage categories, very high dosage projects provided between 56 and 171 hours of programming, while those in the low and very low categories provided between 1.5 and 12 hours of programming.) A select sample of results is shown below.

Survey Item	"Yes"				
	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low
<i>I am better able to recognize what a healthy relationship is</i>	87%	81%	66%	58%	60%
<i>I know where to go to get help with a problem</i>	72%	69%	53%	55%	49%
<i>I feel better about myself</i>	76%	60%	37%	34%	21%
<i>I enjoy school more</i>	60%	47%	27%	22%	13%
<i>I have more pride in my culture, race or ethnic group</i>	83%	52%	29%	27%	18%
<i>I am better at saying "no" to things that seem wrong or make me uncomfortable</i>	76%	76%	58%	60%	59%
<i>I am making new friends and/or strengthening the friendships I already have</i>	73%	59%	35%	33%	19%

The difference between the reported effects is striking and illustrates the value of projects that are designed to engage and support participants over a longer period of time. The findings also provide some support to emerging evidence suggesting that single session workshops on healthy relationships topics are not particularly effective.



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“To be able to share my honest opinion and have everyone respect/listen to my opinion made me more confident.”

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Project Participant

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“I’ve come out ... to the group, as it’s my safe space and I know I won’t be treated unfairly.”

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Project Participant



## Key Project Components

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data generated by the project site visits identified a number of components of project design and implementation as being fundamental to effective programming. These are:

- **Creating a “safe space”** – to enable the building of trusting and respectful relationships within the project and to create the appropriate environment to explore relationships issues candidly and without judgement;
- **Giving participants the appropriate language** – to name their emotions and to talk about relationship-related issues respectfully and clearly;
- **Having important conversations** – to address teens’ inherent curiosity about relationships and their need for accurate and comprehensive information, and to provide opportunities for open self-expression;
- **Providing positive role models** – with whom teens can relate and who can model qualities such as respectfulness, inclusiveness and cooperation; and
- **Providing food** – an important component of after-school programming, feeding project participants not only satisfies their hunger but also supports social bonding and relationship building.

## Other Notable Findings

The following emerged as important themes in the qualitative data gathered:

- **Quality and consistency of facilitation is critical to the effectiveness of a project** – effective facilitators possess key competencies with respect to connecting with youth, building trusting relationships and navigating sensitive topics adroitly and respectfully. Frequent turnover in facilitators, or hiring facilitators without the appropriate skills for working successfully with teens, compromises the potential impact of the project.
- **Tailoring projects to meet the specific needs of participants supports participant engagement and learning** – project content and delivery style should be responsive to the particular needs, interests and strengths of the group of teens being served. While it is more challenging for universal projects aligned to a provincial curriculum to achieve this, the design of universal projects should prioritize student-centred, active learning approaches that make space for participants’ voice and choice.
- **While delivering school-based programming is regarded as a promising practice with respect to teen healthy relationships work, establishing functional and sustained partnerships between the education community and the non-profit agency is fraught with challenges** – these challenges include: lack of buy-in from school administration; negative impact of staff turnover at the schools and non-profit organization; and limited capacity (on both sides) to put the time in to build reliable connections.
- **Comprehensive projects that provide school-based and community-based programming for teens, and that work with participants’ parents, are meeting more vulnerable teens’ need for wraparound supports that address a wide range of risk and protective factors** – in addition, the participant survey data suggests that such projects saw stronger effects on teens’ learning and behaviour change.

## GRANTEE/SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING: KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the outcomes of the Grantee/Sector Capacity Building Initiative suggest that the capacity-building approach taken by the Canadian Women's Foundation made an important contribution to:

- Fostering authentic and trusting relationships between members of the grantee network;
- Generating a sense of belonging as a group; and
- Supporting the exchange of ideas and expertise with respect to program delivery.

The approach did not, however, support the development of a network that had the capacity to take action nationally to positively affect the teen healthy relationships sector as a whole.

The following findings highlight some of the notable successes and challenges of the Foundation's approach to capacity building, as suggested by the qualitative and quantitative data gathered from grantees.

### Successes

- Grantees reported **high levels of satisfaction** with the capacity building activities supported by the Foundation. In particular, grantees valued the opportunity to come together in person at the Annual Grantee Meetings.
- All grantees reported that being part of the grantee network had helped them to **apply learning about evidence-informed practices** to the design and delivery of their teen healthy relationships projects.
- The grantee network made substantial progress with respect to **learning about the field of teen healthy relationships**, especially as a result of learning from each other.
- Grantees reported the following **contributions of the network to the teen healthy relationships sector**:
  - Sharing of promising practices and validation of evidence-informed approaches;
  - Fostering a shared vision;
  - Enabling collaborative approaches to issues/challenges; and
  - Furthering dialogue at the community, regional and national levels.
- Grantees described the **experience of being part of the grantee network** as *wonderful, enriching, uplifting, and rejuvenating as well as educational, productive, helpful and insightful*.

### Challenges

- **Lack of time and/or insufficient resources** was the main barrier to grantees' active participation in the learning and capacity building activities supported by the Foundation.
- Grantees were **not always clear about the expectations** with respect to participation in the capacity building and networking activities.
- Some grantees reported that the **lack of continuity with respect to the individuals attending the in-person Annual Grantee Meetings** had a detrimental impact on the ability of the network to become a formal body capable of making change at the sector level.
- **Lower participation in the networking activities by grantee Executive Directors** (or other leadership) may have constrained the capacity of the network to achieve sector-wide change, as those in more strategic roles and with an eye on "the bigger picture" were not sufficiently influencing the process.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FOUNDATION'S FUTURE TEEN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WORK

A number of notable overarching strengths of the Foundation's Teen Healthy Relationships Program emerged as a result of the evaluation. These are:

- **Funding diverse grantees/projects** – this supported everyone involved (Foundation staff, grantees, and evaluators) to develop a deeper understanding about the effects of certain approaches to delivering teen healthy relationships programming to various groups and in different community contexts.
- **Providing four years of funding** – this provided security and continuity for the grantee organizations and the capacity to engage in learning and program refinement.
- **Holding in-person grantee meetings** – these allowed project staff to form strong connections, to share and learn from their peers across the country, and explore promising practices.
- **Supporting a comprehensive and collaborative evaluation of the Program** – this fostered collaboration and mutual learning and resulted in findings that (it is anticipated) will meet the needs of grantees and the Foundation with respect to their future work.

These strengths represent critical components of a robust program funding and capacity building initiative.

The evaluation has also identified the following opportunities for strengthening the Foundation's approach to funding and supporting its grantees:

- **Provide additional support for grantees to engage in program evaluation** – this might be achieved by providing evaluation training to potential grantees and/or by allocating more funds to grantees to undertake evaluation-related learning and practice.
- **Give more attention to the pay and working conditions of project facilitators** – the benefits of the Foundation's multi-year funding did not always extend to frontline staff, most of whom reported being on temporary/short-term contracts, with low rates of pay and no additional benefits. Action is needed by the Foundation to ensure that people working in Foundation-supported projects enjoy good working conditions.
- **Engage Executive Directors in the process of creating sector-level change** – the participation of agency leadership in a network that is seeking to effect change across the sector is crucial; these are the people who are best positioned to contribute to strategic planning and implementation.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCREASING IMPACT AND BUILDING THE FIELD

The following considerations are possibilities for the Foundation's future involvement in strengthening the field of teen healthy relationships. (They are informed by an analysis of the current evidence base with respect to teen violence prevention in combination with the data generated by the evaluation.)

- **Lead/participate in the development of a comprehensive national teen violence prevention strategy** – real reductions in the levels of teen violence require the involvement (and resources) of a number of organizations and entities, including governments.
- **Invest in programming for younger children** – there is a gap in the provision of healthy relationships programming for children in elementary school and evidence suggests that the emergence of risks associated with violence tends to begin during early childhood.
- **Work with teaching training programs to develop a healthy relationships course for new teachers** – that will build teachers' awareness of the importance of healthy relationships to teens' school engagement and give them the skills to develop respectful relationships with their students.
- **Work with a group of grantees to test effective ways to involve parents/families in teen healthy relationships programming** – research suggests that involving parents (and other family members) in teen healthy relationships work is associated with better outcomes for vulnerable teens. However, few of the funded projects were formally working with parents and families and most seemed reluctant or unsure about how to do this effectively.

To read the full National Evaluation report on the Canadian Women's Foundation Teen Healthy Relationships Program 2013-2017, visit [www.canadianwomen.org](http://www.canadianwomen.org).

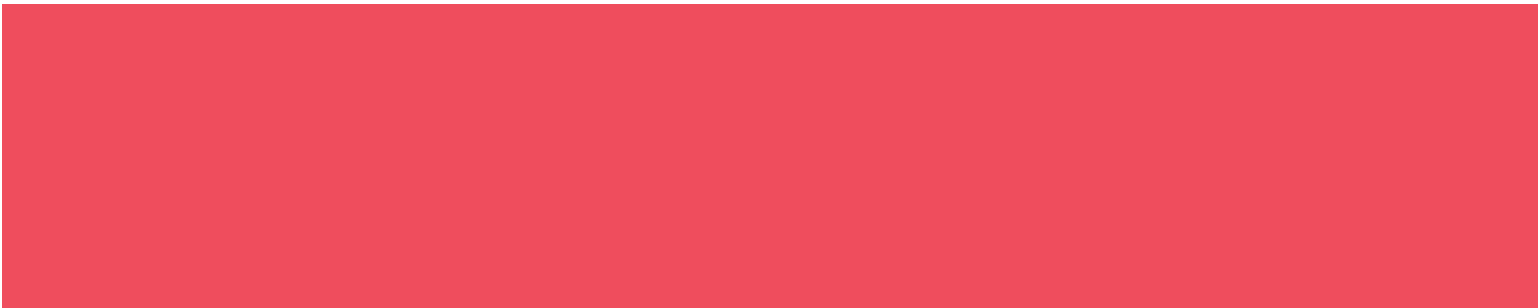


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“It has changed me in a positive way. It makes me feel connected to other youth and my community.”

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Project Participant



For more information about the Canadian Women's Foundation's *Teen Healthy Relationships Programming*, please visit [canadianwomen.org](https://canadianwomen.org)