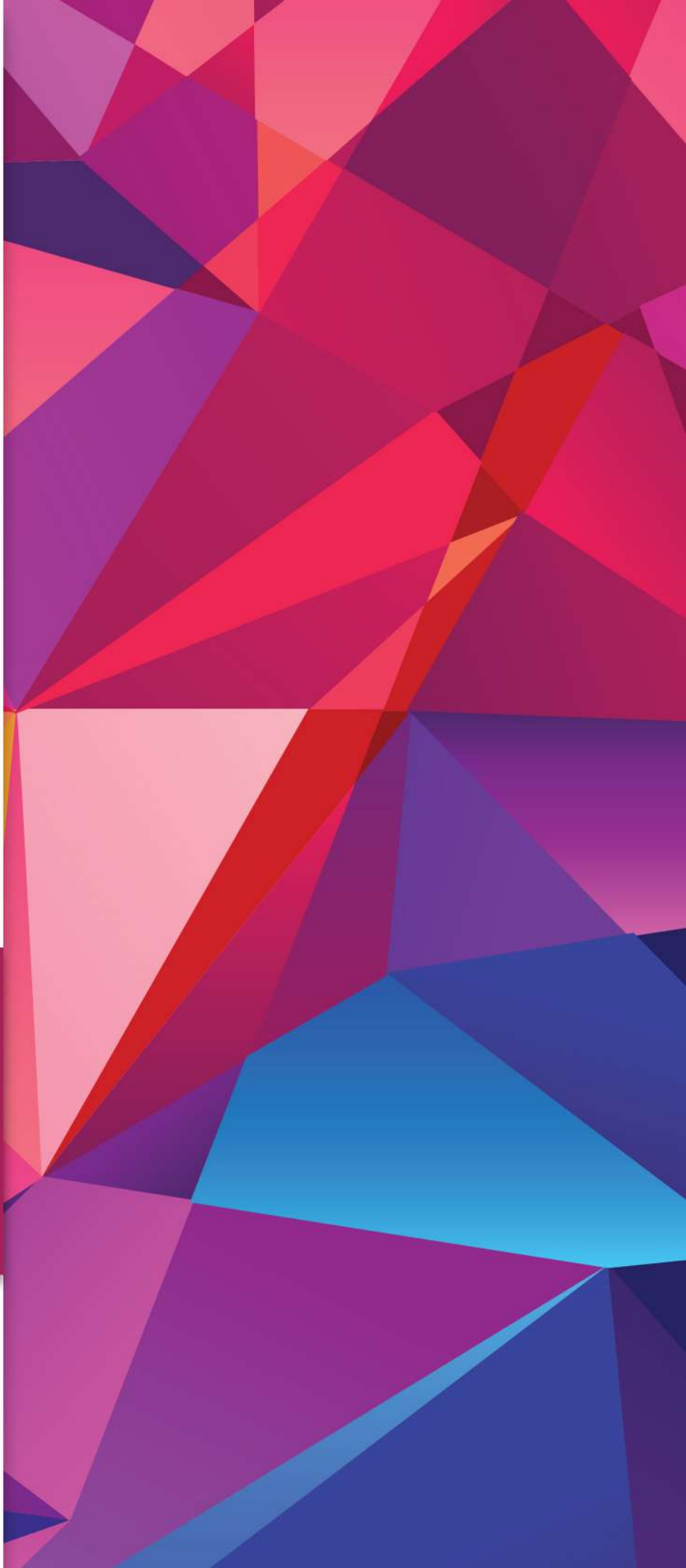Youth Engagement:

Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations

Toolkit

Introduction

Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©
Introduction

For more information, please contact us at:
Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
1319 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 2Z1
Business (306)-651-4300 Fax (306)-651-4301
skprevention.ca.

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Background

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (Prevention Institute) works to reduce the occurrence of disabling conditions in children. By taking a holistic view of health, the Prevention Institute focuses on children's physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being as well as their health before they are born (prenatal health), and during early childhood. One of the areas that the Prevention Institute focuses on is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

When alcohol is consumed during pregnancy, it can cause FASD.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a diagnostic term used to describe impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, and may need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and social skills to reach their full potential. Each individual with FASD is unique and has areas of strengths and challenges (Canada FASD Research Network, 2019).

Youth Action for Prevention Program

The Youth Action for Prevention (YAP) Program at the Prevention Institute focuses on the upstream prevention of FASD by engaging Saskatchewan youth (aged 14-24) to consider alcohol use, alcohol-related harms and harm reduction. Through the YAP Program, youth are supported to foster positive change in their communities by developing personal leadership and communication skills. These skills are used to lead, create, and participate in community, regional, or provincial projects that build awareness of alcohol-related harms, sexual and reproductive health, and related topics, such as mental health, and the promotion of healthy behaviours. Youth also have opportunities to explore how individual health and well-being are tied to community health and well-being.

To support youth and youth engagement throughout the province and in their communities, the YAP program builds the capacity of adult allies and provides tools and resources focused on youth engagement.

The Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©

The *Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit© (Youth Engagement Toolkit)* is designed to assist adult allies in promoting youth health by facilitating groups for youth of any gender identity between the ages of 13-18. The *Youth Engagement Toolkit's* primary focus is the upstream prevention of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and other alcohol-related harms.
The *Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©* is the combination of three toolkits previously created by the Prevention Institute, *At-Risk to Resilient©, The Way Forward©,* and *Just for Us©*. These toolkits were combined and adapted to support accessibility, adaptivity, and inclusiveness.

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The toolkits, *At-Risk to Resilient©* and *The Way Forward: Conversations with Young Men about Masculinity and Alcohol©* were developed in collaboration with partners in Nova Scotia. Many of the activities found in these toolkits were developed by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, its partners, and youth over the course of several years. The work began in 2003 with a focus on injury prevention and later was adapted to address alcohol-related harms experienced by youth and to promote comfort with seeking help. Both toolkits have been used in Saskatchewan since 2015 and 2016 respectively. A female-specific toolkit, *Just for Us©*, was developed by the Prevention Institute in 2020.

Evaluations conducted with adult allies and young people during the development of the *At-Risk to Resilient©* toolkit showed that the use of toolkit activities is a promising practice to transfer knowledge and change health behaviours in youth. The data collected from youth indicated that participation in the activities was effective at removing the stigma that asking for help is a sign of weakness. Anecdotal evidence showed that youth were more likely to seek health services following the programming. Youth appreciate the opportunity to have safer and non-judgemental spaces where they can connect with adults and learn information about their health and supports. The sessions help youth cope with challenges they are facing. This positive response from youth and adult allies spurred the development of the *Just For Us©* toolkit. The desire to merge the different toolkits into one that more fully addressed diversity led to the current toolkit, *Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©.*

Facilitator Information

Introduction to the Youth Engagement Toolkit

The *Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©* provides activities, tools, and information to help adult allies facilitate youth groups. Toolkit activities are designed to provide young people with reliable, accurate, and credible information to encourage them to reflect on their health, make informed decisions about conditions that influence their health, and promote the importance of seeking help when needed. Each activity provides adult allies with ways to open conversations with youth and facilitate discussions about their experiences with alcohol while providing education about alcohol use (their own, their friends, and their communities), alcohol-related harms, harm-reduction, and possible coping strategies. Activities help youth make links between substance use and an increased risk of unintended pregnancy (and subsequently, FASD), sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs), unhealthy relationships, impaired driving, violence, and injuries.

The contents of this toolkit can be used with youth of all sexual and gender expressions. The toolkit encourages facilitators to recognize the diversity of the youth in the group and seek ways to help all youth feel comfortable to participate in youth groups.

As you go through the toolkit and consider how you will use the activities provided, think about the youth you will be working with. You may want to develop certain activity sheets or information that is particularly relevant to the youth in your community. The information within these tools may also be altered to make sure it is appropriate for the age group and developmental level of participants. While it may be best for younger groups to stick to the basics, older groups may benefit from the provision of more in-depth and complex information about the different topics.

You may wish to make other adaptations to the activities so that they more effectively resonate with the youth in your group. We have provided some suggestions throughout the guide and links to other organizations that may help you make these adaptations. When making adaptations, ensure that changes remain in line with the five guiding principles discussed in the next section.

Five Guiding Principles

The *Youth Engagement: Opening the Door to Difficult Conversations Toolkit©* has been aligned with the Five Guiding Principles of the Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Prevention Program at the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute. These principles provide a positive framework and help reframe perceptions and attitudes about substance use. There are many aspects of these principles that are required to successfully facilitate conversations regarding alcohol use. The five guiding principles are: respect, hope, cooperation, compassion, and understanding. When considering these guiding principles in the context of youth engagement they can be framed as follows.

Respect includes learning and valuing the strengths and abilities of those in the group, regardless of their circumstances. Just like adults, all youth are unique and have experiences that differ based on a variety of factors such as where they live, their socioeconomic status, their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and their gender and sexual orientation. Everyone has a story and wants to be heard. Listening is a skill, and like all skills, requires practice. When listening, consider your body language, including eye contact and posture. Acknowledge what others have said by repeating what they have said, to show that you heard them, asking open-ended questions, and demonstrating empathy.

Hope is always present in the world we live in. By recognizing that we can make a difference with each thoughtful action we take, there is hope for change in the world. There is hope for the future of youth, for the events they have yet to experience in life, and for the impact they can have on the world around them.

Cooperation makes the dynamics of a youth group run smoother for everyone. As a facilitator, there are many ways that you can demonstrate cooperation:
• Encourage participation in creating the community standards for the group.
• Value the participants' feedback about sessions and ask what they would like to learn about.
• Acknowledge when you learn something from a group participant.
• Include some fun between the more serious sessions.

Compassion means having empathy and awareness of the sufferings or misfortune of others, along with a desire to help. Compassion includes being aware of others' different life experiences, personal strengths, struggles, as well as being open to all the experiences and ideas that youth share. It is important to approach the *Youth Engagement* toolkit through a trauma-informed lens. Please see page 16 for more information about being trauma-informed.

Understanding the factors that influence youth health, including mental health, is especially important as a facilitator. Staying up to date on relevant issues that affect youth health and the latest research on how to help address these issues can help you facilitate more comprehensive discussions and learning

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opportunities. While facilitating this toolkit, it is important to recognize youth as partners and challenge the unequal power dynamics between youth participants and yourself by reflecting on your own behaviours with youth (See adultism on page 9).

You are a resource for the youth as they address their needs and issues, but you may not be an expert in all areas. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the group that you will find out for them or bring a speaker in with more expertise in this area to help expand their knowledge. It is okay to admit that you do not know something. This is better than providing misinformation.

Why is it Important to Address Alcohol-Related Harms Among Youth?

Historically, substance use prevention focused on promoting abstinence by using scare tactics that can further stigmatize people who use drugs or alcohol. While abstinence is ideal, it is not the reality for many. To address alcohol-related harms, it is important to understand the context of alcohol use. During adolescence, youth achieve new developmental milestones and strive to make autonomous decisions. Exploration is a normal component of this time period and may be the onset of engagement in risk-taking behaviours.

Youth substance use does not happen in a vacuum. There are several reasons, often interplayed, that influence a youth's decision to drink or use substances. They may use substances because of peer pressure, social media and popular culture influence, their desired brain and body altering effects, or to cope with trauma and stress (Health Canada, 2023). While experimentation and risk-taking can be a normal part of being a youth, it is important not to overlook the potential harm associated with substance use. This toolkit's focus is alcohol, factors that contribute to its use, and its related harms, but the information presented can be applied to various substances.

Statistics of Alcohol Use in Canada

Drinking alcohol is common in Canada. In 2019, the Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey found that 3 in 4 Canadians aged 15 years or older reported drinking alcohol at least once. Although the legal drinking age is 19 in most Canadian provinces (including Saskatchewan), the reality is that many young people begin drinking before this age.

While alcohol use and heavy drinking rates have been on the decline among Canadian youth aged 15-19 years, rates have remained unchanged for young adults aged 20-24 years. In fact, young adults (20-24 years) were most likely of all age groups to report drinking alcohol and drinking at a risky level within the past year.

In the same survey, among individuals who reported drinking alcohol, youth aged 15-19 years and 20-24 years were most likely to report having experienced alcohol-related harms. Harms included "...being unable to stop drinking once started, failing to do what was normally expected from you because of drinking, needing a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session, being unable to remember what happened the night before because of your drinking, or having a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking."

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The Saskatchewan Alliance for Youth and Community Well-being (SAYCW) survey, completed by over 10,000 students across Saskatchewan in 2019, gives a window into the experiences of youth in Saskatchewan. It was noted that as youth transition from one grade to another, their rates of past-month and binge drinking increase. In fact, between grades 7 and 12, drinking in the past month increased from 8% to 55%, while binge drinking increased from 6% to 30% (SAYCW, 2019). Youth from smaller cities were nearly 50% more likely to report ever drinking than youth from large cities (SAYCW, 2019).

Effects of Youth Alcohol Use

The harmful links between binge drinking, pregnancy among youth, and FASD have been well established (Abdul-Rahman & Petrenko, 2023; British Medical Association, 2016; Carson et al., 2017; Maier & West, 2001; Poole, 2008). Binge drinking refers to drinking an excessive amount of alcohol over a short period of time.

Drinking alcohol can have a wide range of physical and mental health impacts, as well as social and legal consequences. Many impacts extend beyond the individual drinking. The effects of drinking can be short term (acute) or long term (chronic).

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Short-Term	Long-Term
• Alcohol poisoning	• Brain damage
• Hangover	• Cancers (colon, rectal, breast, throat, esophagus, and liver)
• Impaired judgement	
• Increased risk of fall and injury	• Cardiovascular disease
• Lapses in memory (blackout)	• Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
• Reduced coordination	• Liver disease
• Risk taking behaviour (e.g., unprotected sex, driving under the influence)	• Overweight and obesity
	• Worsening academic/professional performance
• Violent or aggressive behaviours	

(Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2023; Cochrane Canada, 2022; Paradis et al., 2022)

Early alcohol use is associated with increased likelihood of regular heavy use of alcohol, developing an alcohol dependence, and physical and social problems in young adulthood (Paradis et al., 2022). Since brains continue to develop into young adulthood, regular heavy alcohol use beginning in youth can interfere with brain development and cause memory loss and other cognitive deficits. In addition, drinking before skills are developed, such as coping strategies skills and forward planning, in combination with the fact that youth are prone to thrill-seeking, can result in risky behaviours that can be harmful to health and safety (Young, 2011).

Alcohol use in pregnancy can harm the fetus, increasing the risk of miscarriage or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) which involves lifelong disabilities and impacts (Paradis et al., 2022). Although no amount of alcohol during pregnancy is known to be safe, the link between binge drinking during pregnancy and FASD has been well established (British Medical Association, 2016; Carson et al., 2017; Maier & West, 2001; Poole, 2008).

Working with Youth
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
The UNCRC is a human rights treaty that provides guidance on the rights of all children and youth until the age of 18. By signing the Convention in 1991, Canada promises to protect and promote these rights.

The Convention guarantees children's right to participate in decision-making, have their opinions heard and valued, and be protected from discrimination. In addition, the Convention highlights children's right to knowledge that supports their informed decision-making.

These principles help guide all interactions with youth. To strengthen youth engagement, it is important to recognize that youth have rights and that facilitators have a duty to support them in exercising those rights.

Adult Allyship
Being an adult ally to youth means supporting youth to "have their voice heard through meaningful engagement, [and] involves a combination of positive attitude, skill and awareness to help in advocating for

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a youth leadership and empowerment agenda" (Khanna & McCart, 2007). Adult allyship is also about youth-adult partnerships that are without bias, open-minded, judgement free, and equal - where power, roles, and successes are shared.

An important role in being an adult ally is helping to reduce barriers and challenges to youth being engaged. For example, some adults may have negative or lesser opinions about youth and try to take over the work from them. Other times, as adults with good intentions, we take charge in a youth-led project in an attempt to help it be successful. However, it is important to avoid taking control of projects or activities to have them done "right" or more quickly. Learn how to share power with young people and not control activities. Think about what you can learn from young people, and not just what you can teach them (Khanna & McCart, 2007).

Adultism

When working with youth, it is important to remember that existing societal systems and processes are traditionally established by and in favour of adults. For example, traditional education settings still favour lecture formats that often reinforce the stereotype that the adult's role is to teach youth whose only duty is to learn passively. This does not uphold youth as knowledge holders and innovators with valued opinions and perspectives. Young people respond to the conditions around them that, for the most part, they did not create.

Adultism is a form of discrimination against young people. It is based on the ideology that adults are superior, and that youth, by virtue of their age, are unable to effectively contribute to decision-making. Youth are exposed to frequent messages about how they should act. These messages can be both verbal, e.g., "sit still and listen", or non-verbal, e.g., a stern look. Adultism can make youth feel unvalued, dismissed, and disrespected.

Sometimes adults fall into the traps of adultism when interacting with youth. Discriminatory perceptions and stereotypes of youth assume the superiority of adults and break down communication between adults and youth. Poor communication can create negative relationships and atmospheres for both youth and adults (Kennedy, 2019).

It is helpful to discuss adultism with youth, and how it can negatively impact youth-adult relationships. Before engaging with youth, it is your responsibility as an adult ally to reflect on how adultism affects the way you may consciously or unconsciously act, think, and feel towards the youth in your life. Reflect on how adultism affects the world around you and how you as an adult ally can take steps towards addressing adultism and supporting youth.

Meaningfully Engaging Youth

Youth engagement, which acknowledges the independence and agency of youth, is increasingly being considered best practice when working with young people, particularly those who live in challenging circumstances (Zinck et al., 2013). When engaging with youth, it is important to not just focus on what you

can teach young people, but also what you can learn from them. Youth groups provide an opportunity to listen to young people and better understand the world they are living in. We need more research in this area, but in our conversations with youth, they tell us that adults can be quick to stigmatize youth for their behaviour and make them feel bad for the things they say and do. Remember, one young person does not speak for all young people but only for themselves (Khanna & McCart, 2007).

While facilitating youth groups, it is important that you are prepared and familiar with the topic being discussed. However, it is also important that you remain aware of, and work to counteract, the existing unequal power dynamics between adults and youth. Do not portray yourself as an expert, but as a resource and a support for the youth.

Engaged youth are those who (Khanna & McCart, 2007):
- participate in the activity
- initiate the activity themselves without being persuaded by others
- help lead or organize the activity
- talk to others about the activity
- advocate enthusiastically on behalf of the organization/activity

It is important to note that not all youth are engaged in the same way or to the same extent. Leadership, involvement, advocacy, and participation can be shown in several ways and can all be meaningful. One youth may attend and participate by paying close attention to the things that are going on and listening to what others say without necessarily saying anything themselves, while another young person may lead the group and help organize activities. It is important for youth to connect to activities and find meaning in a way that is comfortable for them (Khanna & McCart, 2007).

The Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts Network proposed the following factors as important when engaging youth (Zinck et al., 2013):
- **Youth voice**: the unique ideas and concerns of youth are respected, youth feel free to express them within an organization or program, and youth voices are seen as equally important to adult voices.
- **Positive relationships**: having positive, supportive relationships with peers and adults is fundamental to Positive Youth Development; relationships can be fostered through adult-youth mentorships, youth-adult partnerships, and peer mentoring.
- **Civic engagement**: when youth are engaged in their community, they can become agents of change; youth see that they can positively influence situations, which can improve their self-concept.
- **Culture and context**: recognizing that there are many important differences between youth based on factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The Role of the Facilitator
A facilitator increases a groups' effectiveness by improving the process and structures of a group (Schwarz, 2017). For each group session, it is the facilitator's role to create a space for conversation about that week's topic. Facilitators need to be mindful of the group climate (how is everyone feeling?) and the group dynamic

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(how is everyone interacting?). Be ready to modify the suggested activities to create the best conditions for learning based on the climate and dynamic of the group.

Facilitators play a vital role in creating a positive group dynamic by:
- listening without interrupting
- being honest and authentic
- helping the group dig deeper and get more serious, but also helping the group lighten up and have fun when needed
- helping to create opportunities for everyone to participate
- asking questions and probing for opinions
- answering questions and sharing their own opinions if youth ask
- helping youth to articulate their thoughts; offering to summarize; and checking responses or questions for accuracy
- working to summarize conversations and opinions for common understanding
- refraining from lecturing and remaining mindful that they are there to serve the youth
- maintaining a group space that is safer and focused on learning and growth
- learning alongside youth
- encouraging youth to be authentic with their responses, and not saying things to please facilitators
- knowing the group participants and understanding their unique needs
- using language that is inclusive (i.e., gender neutral language), and not assuming aspects of a person's identity
- recognizing that people come from many different backgrounds and a variety of lived experiences
- understanding that attitudes and behaviours come from the conditions that surround youth and may not represent who the youth really are, or who they want to be
- encouraging people to share their thoughts and opinions, and regularly acknowledging participation with positive feedback
- being mindful of their own lived experience and privilege, and how that can influence their perspective

Creating a Positive Group Environment

Good facilitation combined with engaging activities creates effective spaces for learning. Creating a positive group environment can take some time. Each group is different, and your group may need more time and work to build relationships within the circle. If your group brings together young people from different grades, cultures, religions, ethnicities, ages, groups, schools, or social statuses, you may need more time to build a comfortable atmosphere.

When setting up for groups, it is important to put chairs into a circle instead of having chairs lined up like in a traditional classroom. This set up helps youth to feel that they are on equal ground to each other and the facilitator.

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There are many resources for ice breakers and games that help build positive spaces. Look for icebreakers that are fun and build familiarity but be cautious not to ask youth who don't know each other to take big social risks. You may want to use games that fit in with the selected session for the day, teach new concepts, or are physically engaging and use a process called *experiential learning*. Experiential learning is a concept that helps to engage individuals in the material through multiple modes of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Self Reflection

By virtue of your position, whether you are a teacher, group facilitator, or youth worker, you are in a position of power. Your education, culture, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and gender can also impact your real or perceived power and privilege. It is important to think about how this position can impact your reactions to youth and their reactions to you.

It is equally important to spend some time considering your own thoughts, values, and beliefs regarding topics and issues related to inclusion. These are shaped by our experiences, the society and communities we are a part of, and our own individual identity. We are not unbiased by nature, but we can take the time to understand our biases, examine them, and mitigate their impact on our work and interactions.

Identity and Culture

Identity refers to all the aspects that define who a person is. Identity is shaped by factors such as race, age, immigrant or refugee status, class, socio-economic factors, ability, sexual orientation, and gender-identity (Jandt, 2021). Many of these aspects continue to change throughout a person's life. Identity is complex and is shaped and developed by the experiences and challenges faced in life.

Culture is the shared language, attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs of a group with a shared identity. Because of the complexity of identity, people often identify with multiple cultures. Within a single society, there are often multiple subcultures. For example, within the larger society, individuals of one age group, social status, or profession often have their own subculture represented through a common language or accepted beliefs and behaviours. It is important to understand culture since it can function as a protective factor against negative life events such as bullying (Freechild Institute for Youth Engagement, 2022).

The various identity aspects are factors that work together to structure people in different positions of power and privilege or disadvantage and oppression (Cooper, 2015). This can greatly influence a person's life experiences through the way they are treated or the systemic barriers (unequal access to services due to identity) they may face.

In Canada, people who are Indigenous, ethno-cultural, 2SLGBTQ+, non-binary, non-status, refugee/newcomer, northern/rural/remote, and/or live with a disability face barriers when trying to access services and are more likely to experience violence due to the intersection of gender, race, class, and age discrimination (Jaffray, 2020). Experiencing multiple types of discrimination intensifies their impact. This is often explained through the *intersectionality framework* which takes into consideration the historical, social,

and political factors that make up a person's identity and suggests that there are systems of oppression that work together to produce inequality (Cooper, 2015).

It is important to promote health and diversity among youth you work with by using an intersectional approach that considers gender, race, socio-economic status, and disability, as well as the unique needs of 2SLGBTQ+ youth. To competently do so, you will need to understand the power dynamics among the various factors of identity of the youth in your group that may place them at a position of disadvantage. Reading can help you understand the historical and political context of inequality. However, it is even more important to listen to youth with lived experiences to learn how to better support them.

Understanding Marginalized Groups

Research demonstrated that many groups who face discrimination by virtue of their identity disproportionately experience mental health issues and addictions. As an adult ally to youth, it is your responsibility to understand how discrimination affects the youth you support. Remember, each individual is unique, and not everyone experiences discrimination in the same way.

The following table provides a brief overview of various marginalized groups in Canada. The list is not comprehensive and can vary over time. If you identify a topic that you are not familiar with, it may be beneficial to supplement your preparation with in-depth research.

Individuals in your youth group may belong to one or more marginalized groups. Remember that the effects of discrimination can add up. This is a crucial consideration when creating safer spaces for everyone you support.

Marginalized Group	Who are they?	What are some of the key challenges they may experience?
Visible Minority	Individuals who are South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, and/or Japanese. "Persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." – *Employment Equity Act*	• Xenophobia (prejudice against strangers or people from a different country) • Cultural biases • Disproportionate rates of violence • Limited access to resources • Racial profiling • Unequal opportunities (employment, education, participation)
Indigenous Peoples	Indigenous peoples is a term used to collectively refer to three distinct groups with ancestral ties to the land (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis).	• Challenges to cultural preservation • Child welfare system • Disproportionate rates of violence and abuse • Historical, intergenerational trauma • Socioeconomic disadvantages • Systemic inequalities
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged People	Individuals experiencing poverty	• Classism (prejudice against people of a specific socioeconomic class) • Disproportionate rates of violence • Housing Instability • Lack of or limited access to education, healthcare, and support. • Social exclusion
People with Disabilities	Individuals with visible and/or invisible disabilities: • behavioural or emotional disability • developmental disability • physical disability • sensory impairments	• Disablism (prejudice against people with disabilities) • Accessibility barriers (e.g., lack of sign language interpretation, wheelchair inaccessible areas) • Disproportionate rates of violence and abuse • Social exclusion
Gender and Sexual Minorities	Individuals who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (*see "More information on 2SLGBTQ+ identities" for definitions and*	• Homophobia (prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender identity) • Disproportionate rates of violence • Healthcare access barriers

Marginalized Group	Who are they?	What are some of the key challenges they may experience?
	more information)	• Disproportionate rates of violence and abuse • Social/family rejection and bullying • Stigma
Immigrants and Refugees	Individuals who have permanently moved to Canada. *Note: Immigrants willingly move, but refugees are forced to flee unstable situations in their country of origin.*	• Xenophobia (prejudice against strangers or people from a different country) • Cultural discrimination • Healthcare access barriers • Language barriers

Sources: (Adams et al., 2016; Blais et al., 2015, 2015; Durand-Moreau et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2018; Heberle & Carter, 2020; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Peter et al., 2017; Roulstone & Mason-Bish, 2013; Shankar et al., 2013)

More information on 2SLGBTQ+ Identities:
The 2SLBTQ+ acronym refers to individuals who identify as Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning. The + refers to other sexual orientations and gender identities that are not represented in the acronym.

Regardless of the term used to self-identify, everyone has four components that define their identity: gender identity, gender expression, attraction, and assigned sex. The below infographic by Egale explains the various aspects of gender and sexuality. For more information, visit: https://egale.ca/awareness/the-genderbread-person/

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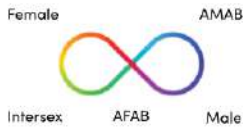our goal is **healthy** children

Components of Human Identity

This is a friendly infographic that visually represents four components of human identity. The terms associated with each category are ever evolving. Here are just a few:

ASSIGNED SEX

The biological classification of a person as female, male or intersex. It is usually assigned at birth based on a visual assessment of external anatomy.

Female   AMAB

Intersex   AFAB   Male

GENDER IDENTITY

A person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is not necessarily visible to others and it may or may not align with what society expects based on assigned sex.

Genderqueer   Nonbinary

Woman   Man

Pangender   Agender

Trans   Genderfluid

Cisgender

GENDER EXPRESSION

The way gender is presented and communicated to the world through clothing, speech, body language, hairstyle, voice and/or the emphasis or de-emphasis of body characteristics and behaviours.
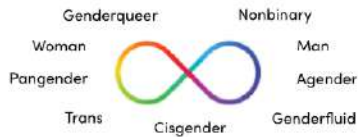
Genderfluid   Feminine

Androgynous   Masculine

ATTRACTION

Often referred to as a sexual orientation, attraction describes a person's potential for emotional, spiritual, intellectual, intimate, romantic and/or sexual interest in other people and may form the basis for aspects of one's identity and/or behaviour.

Bisexual   Aromantic

Lesbian   Asexual

Gay   Pansexual

Heterosexual   Demisexual

UMBRELLA TERMS

Many terms related to 2SLGBTQI identities fall into more than one category.

Two Spirit   Questioning

Queer
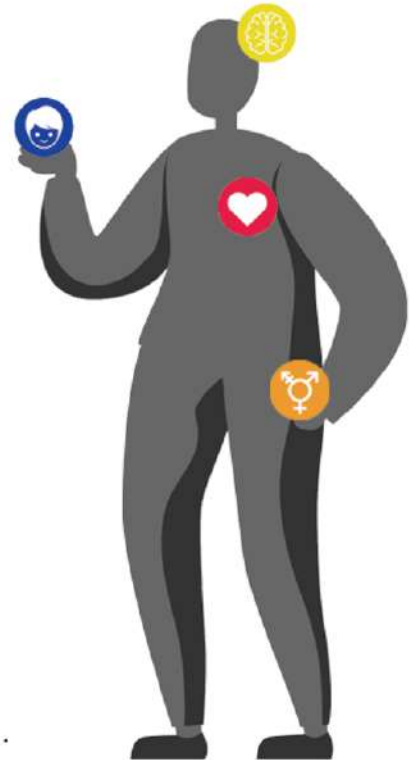
Egale

Youth Health

Mental Health

Mental health is the state of psychological, emotional, and social well-being (Health Canada, 2017). Many factors interact to influence mental health outcomes including life experiences, relationships, life and work environments, and physical health. A person's mental health influences their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Just like physical health, mental health is essential for an individual's overall well-being. In fact, mental health status can influence physical health outcomes (Ohrnberger et al., 2017).

Adolescence is a critical period of development, change, and unique challenges. The pressures of school, relationships, social circles, increasing responsibility, and physical body changes can be overwhelming. Some youth face additional circumstances by virtue of their identity (*see Understanding Marginalized Groups*), or because of their experiences of traumatic events such as abuse, neglect, and/or household dysfunction. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2017), 70% of people experiencing mental illness experienced their first symptoms before the age of 18.

As an adult ally, it is important that you understand the various factors influencing youth's mental health as well as the common mental health challenges they may face. Because you are facilitating the youth group, youth may come to you when they are experiencing mental health issues. However, because of ongoing stigma surrounding mental health, some youth may suffer in silence. For this reason, it is important that you learn to recognize the various manifestations of poor mental health.

Each individual experiences poor mental health differently, but some common indicators are (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023; Health Canada, 2022):
• social withdrawal (decreased interest in social participation)
• social aggression or hostility
• academic decline (getting lower grades in school)
• risky behaviours (e.g., substance use, self-harm)
• changes in appetite or eating habits
• excessive self-criticism

When someone is in crisis, this requires immediate action. Signs of mental health crisis include (Health Canada, 2022):
• expression of hopelessness
• direct or indirect expressions about wanting to die, feeling trapped, or helplessness (e.g., giving away possessions)
• intense emotional distress
• actively researching ways to die

If you notice these signs, follow your school or organization's crisis response protocol if available. It is important that you communicate with the student about your concern and show them that they are not alone and are cared for. Connect them with a crisis line, a counsellor, or a trusted person (e.g., friend, family member, Elder)

Trauma and Trauma-Informed Work
Trauma refers to the lasting adverse impacts that result from "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening" (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2018). Trauma can impact a person in many ways including their feelings of safety, self-concept, relationships, ability to achieve developmental milestones, and mental and physical health.

Trauma is not limited to directly experiencing violence, and can include the trauma associated with experiences of stigmatization due to racism, poverty, sexual orientation, and incarceration (Covington, 2007). Trauma can also come from witnessing violence (British Columbia of Excellence for Women's Health, 2009); life-threatening injuries; serious, frightening, or painful medical procedures; natural or man-made disasters; being a refugee; discrimination; participation in armed combat; and the sudden unexpected death of a loved one (Van Ameringen et al., 2008). In addition to violence in the home, research shows that
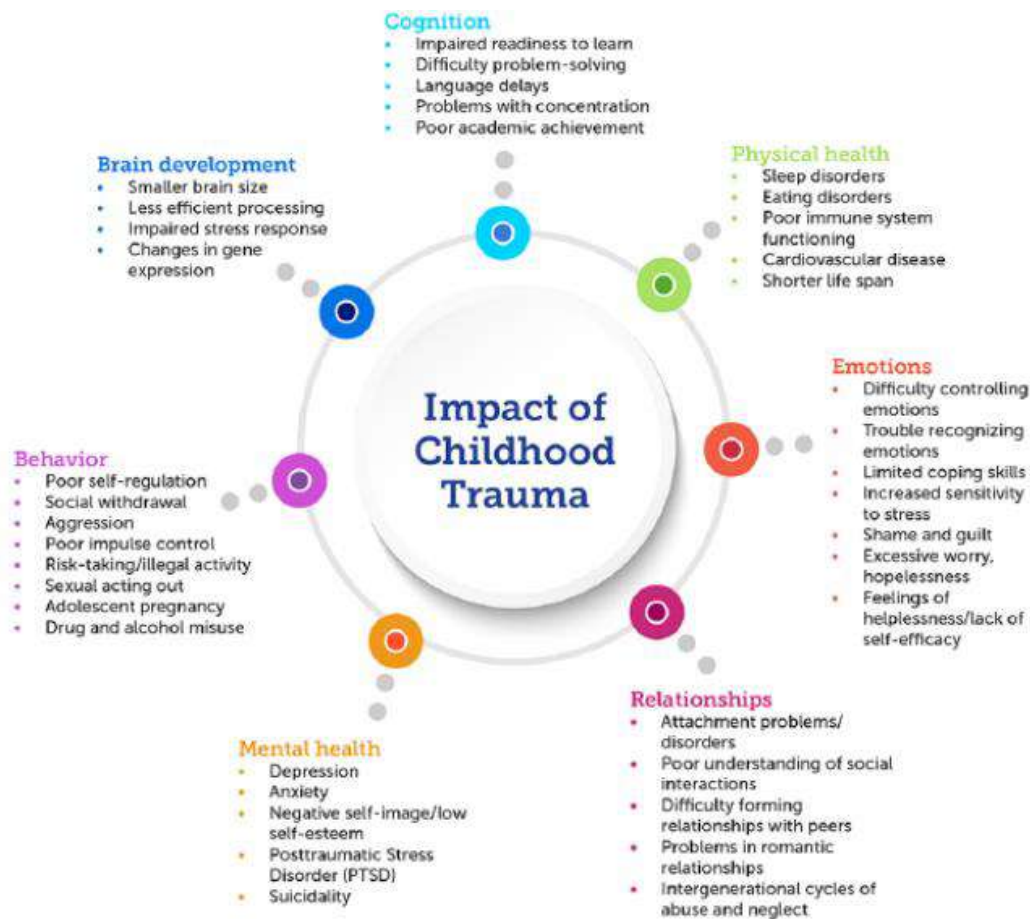
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repetitive exposure to community violence can cause trauma-related symptoms in children (Margolin & Vickerman, 2007).

Childhood victimization was more common among Indigenous people and sexual minority youth. People can experience trauma at any age. Adverse childhood events (ACEs) are "potentially traumatic events in childhood from 0 to 17 years, such as enduring assault, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or commit suicide" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Additionally, ACEs can include growing up in a household with substance abuse, mental health issues, or instability due to parental separation or the incarceration of a household member (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Research has shown that ACEs can contribute to toxic stress (i.e., prolonged activation of the stress-response system; CDC, 2019). Toxic stress can harm physical health as well as mental health in childhood and adulthood if not properly addressed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The image below shows the common developmental short-term effects of trauma in children as depicted by (Bartlett & Steber, 2019).

There is no "typical" trauma reaction. Effects may vary widely between individuals based on genetic, epigenetics (how genes are expressed), biological, psychological, social, familial, community, societal, and historical factors (Bartlett & Steber, 2019; Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019). For example, females may be at higher risk of post-trauma anxiety and depression, dissociation (disconnection from thoughts, feelings, or surroundings), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than males (Garza & Jovanovic, 2017; Tolin & Foa, 2006; Wamser-Nanney & Cherry, 2018). This difference may be influenced by a variety of factors such as the fact that females are more likely to seek health care and that there are brain differences between males and females (Garza & Jovanovic, 2017; Kimerling et al., 2018; Wamser-Nanney & Cherry, 2018).

In turn, childhood trauma can impact a variety of domains including cognitive, behavioural, and emotional development, physical growth (including brain development), relationships, and mental health (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). See the image below for detailed examples within each of these domains.

Additionally, the areas trauma can impact may be mapped onto medicine wheels and tipi teachings used in Indigenous cultures (S. Acoose, personal communication, February 5, 2023). Medicine wheels typically represent physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health while tipi teachings will vary based on local culture, but many teachings include hope, happiness, kinship and strength to have patience and understanding during difficult times (National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education, 2023)

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Cognition
- Impaired readiness to learn
- Difficulty problem-solving
- Language delays
- Problems with concentration
- Poor academic achievement

Brain development
- Smaller brain size
- Less efficient processing
- Impaired stress response
- Changes in gene expression

Physical health
- Sleep disorders
- Eating disorders
- Poor immune system functioning
- Cardiovascular disease
- Shorter life span

Impact of Childhood Trauma

Emotions
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Trouble recognizing emotions
- Limited coping skills
- Increased sensitivity to stress
- Shame and guilt
- Excessive worry, hopelessness
- Feelings of helplessness/lack of self-efficacy

Behavior
- Poor self-regulation
- Social withdrawal
- Aggression
- Poor impulse control
- Risk-taking/illegal activity
- Sexual acting out
- Adolescent pregnancy
- Drug and alcohol misuse

Relationships
- Attachment problems/disorders
- Poor understanding of social interactions
- Difficulty forming relationships with peers
- Problems in romantic relationships
- Intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect

Mental health
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Negative self-image/low self-esteem
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Suicidality

The fact that youth can be impacted by trauma is often overlooked. The reality, though, is that many young people have experienced trauma. Research tells us the following:

- In 2014, nearly 1 in 3 Canadians (30%) over the age of 15 reported being victims of childhood abuse by an adult. Of those, 26% reported experiencing physical abuse and 8% suffered sexual abuse (Burczucka & Conroy, 2018).
- 22% of females reported experiencing physical abuse, while 12% reported experiencing sexual abuse (Burczucka & Conroy, 2018).
- Research suggests that, even more than coming out as LGBTQ, being gender non-conforming may contribute to a youth's experiences of abuse and strain within their families (Robinson, 2018).
- 1 in 10 Canadians (10%) stated that before age 15, they had witnessed violence by a parent or guardian against another adult in the home (Burczucka & Conroy, 2017).

Trauma can also be experienced collectively by members of groups who have experienced colonization or genocide, as is the case in Indigenous communities across Canada. Historical or transgenerational trauma is

complex, involves multiple traumatic events that occur over time, can lead to psychological, physical, and social consequences, and can affect multiple generations (Gone, 2013).

It is important to remember that what may be traumatizing to one person, may not be for another. The acknowledgement of trauma and your reaction to it are important to focus on as a facilitator, particularly when dealing with activities that may be more sensitive in subject matter. While not everyone will disclose their trauma experience, it is important to treat all youth with care and create a safe, trauma-informed space (See *Creating Safe Spaces).*

It is important to create a safe space for participants in youth groups where they feel comfortable. As a facilitator, it is important to be aware of signs that a youth is having a traumatic reaction so that you can provide support to participants. If a youth gets overwhelmed during a session, you may need to debrief as a group about what is happening (if it's safe to do so). However, it is important not to single this person out or make that person feel different.

If a youth has a traumatic reaction during the youth group, the safest thing you can do is approach this individual outside of the group and ask how the group is going for them, and if you can help to arrange any follow-up supports. If a group member needs support, referrals can be made to trauma-specific agencies or a one-on-one counsellor, which can aid in the healing of trauma. Please see the Kids Help Phone (https://kidshelpphone.ca/) for resources to share with youth. You may also want to find out the local services that are offered in your school or community for victims of violence.

It is very important that you understand your limits of confidentiality and your duty to report child abuse. You should also discuss this as a group at the beginning of sessions. Please see https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/child-protection/child-abuse-and-neglect for more information about child abuse and professional obligations to report suspected child abuse.

Why is it important for adult allies to understand trauma?
Decades of research have demonstrated that a history of trauma increases the risk of mental health issues as well as substance use disorders (Hirsch, 2020). The links between experiencing traumatic events and substance use and mental health are important to understand when facilitating the *Youth Engagement* toolkit, especially when discussing alcohol-related harms, for example, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). For many youth, substances and alcohol are used as means to cope with traumatic experiences, including racial discrimination and intergenerational trauma among Indigenous youth (Dariotis & Chen, 2022; Gerrard et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2022) As an alternative, youth groups are designed to build positive relationships, be a safe space, and provide opportunities to develop new skills (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015). They are also intended to reinforce the importance of seeking help from adult allies and supports in their school and the greater community.

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Resilience and Youth Health

Resilience is commonly identified as a protective factor for addressing problematic substance use among youth (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018a). Resilience is defined as a "dynamic process that enables an individual to develop, maintain, or regain their health and well-being despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018b). The environment that youth live in can affect their resilience. With a range of personal and communal or environmental factors, resilience can be developed and is able to help people positively adapt to difficult life circumstances (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018b). Many factors may play a role in the development of resilience, but strong social support is a big part of maintaining resiliency and reducing health risk factors (Viner et al., 2012).

When thinking about youth health, it is important to identify that not everyone has the same opportunities to lead a healthy life and these opportunities may be more accessible to some youth than to others. For example, there are clear gaps in Canada in terms of girls' access to healthcare services, particularly for Indigenous and racial minority girls (Halseth, 2013) . This is a major factor that can negatively influence resiliency.

Research reveals that there are key factors linked with promoting youth health and can lead youth to thrive throughout life, despite childhood disadvantage (Benson & C. Scales, 2009). Different theoretical approaches have found that some factors may reduce the long-term impact of adversity in childhood.

The following resilience-building factors have been identified:
- promoting healthy attachment
- emotional regulation
- self-awareness, and a sense of future and motivation
- safe environments
- building trust
- positive listening and responding
- opportunities for success
- raising awareness across sectors
- individual capacities
- relationship with a caregiver
- protective community

Certain individuals experience post-traumatic growth and resilience, despite experiences of oppression (Anderson et al., 2019). A key finding across studies shows the importance of social supports for helping individuals thrive despite disadvantages (Anderson et al., 2019). Youth groups offer supportive environments to help address the social challenges faced by young people (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015).

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In youth health promotion, an approach referred to as positive youth development (PYD) has been recognized (Catalano et al., 2002). Within PYD, a widely used framework is the Developmental Assets, created by the Search Institute (Scales et al., 2006).

The Search Institute's Developmental Assets (commonly referred to as "assets") are supported by evidence that shows that assets can prevent negative behaviours and outcomes, as well as promote healthy behaviours and outcomes (Soares et al., 2019). External developmental assets provided by adults in young people's lives and internal assets promoted and encouraged by adults provide the building blocks young people need in order to be successful (Benson & C. Scales, 2009). The Developmental Assets include relationships, skills, values, and opportunities. These are all things that assist children and adolescents to grow up as caring, healthy, and responsible citizens (Scales et al., 2006).

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Table 1: Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets

External Assets	Internal Assets
Support	**Commitment to Learning**
1. Family support	21. Achievement motivation
2. Positive family communication	22. School engagement
3. Other adult relationships	23. Homework
4. Caring neighbourhood	24. Bonding to school
5. Caring school climate	25. Reading for pleasure
6. Parent involvement in schooling	**Positive values**
Empowerment	26. Caring
7. Community values youth	27. Equality and social justice
8. Youth as resources	28. Integrity
9. Service to others	29. Honesty
10. Safety	30. Responsibility
Boundaries and Expectations	31. Restraint
11. Family boundaries	**Social Competencies**
12. School boundaries	32. Planning and decision making
13. Neighbourhood boundaries	33. Interpersonal competencies
14. Adult role models	34. Cultural competence
15. Positive peer influence	35. Resistance skills
16. High expectations	36. Peaceful conflict resolution
Constructive Use of Time	**Positive Identity**
17. Creative activities	37. Personal power
18. Youth programs	38. Self-esteem
19. Religious community	39. Sense of purpose
20. Time at home	40. Positive view of personal future

Source: (Scales et al., 2006)

The Developmental Assets Framework is organized into two types of assets. External assets refer to the support and opportunities that are provided by one's family, friends, organizations, and communities (Scales et al., 2006). The internal assets focus on the capacities, skills, and values that young people need to internalize as part of developing their character, identity, and life skills (Scales et al., 2006).

The Developmental Assets Framework model is based on identifying key "building blocks" for youth that contribute to the following key outcomes:
- Prevention of high-risk behaviours (such as violence, substance use, early sexual intercourse, and school dropout)
- Resilience, and the capacity to thrive in the face of adversity
- Promoting healthy behaviours and thriving (such as proactive approach to nutrition, exercise, school success, affirmation of diversity)

Research indicates that the more assets young people possess, the more likely they are to engage in thriving behaviours and the less likely they are to engage in a variety of high-risk behaviours (Scales et al., 2006).

Programs designed to promote and build Developmental Assets among young people can contribute to promoting resilience behaviours and preventing high-risk behaviours (Scales et al., 2006). Youth groups should be designed to promote Developmental Assets and offer support networks. The asset model demonstrates the importance of relationships: between young people and adults, among youth and their peers, as well as in their communities and social environments.

Creating Safer Space for Youth Engagement
Creating safe spaces for youth engagement is important for the promotion of their well-being, safety, and empowerment. Safe spaces provide a sense of belonging that create a nonjudgmental environment free of harassment or discrimination. As discussed in the previous sections, one of the most important things you can do as an adult ally to begin and continue to foster safe spaces for youth engagement is continuous learning and self-reflection towards your own biases and preconceptions towards youth and various identities, such as sexual and gender minorities, those with differing abilities, and cultural minorities. When you actively seek knowledge, you can increase your understanding of the experiences of the youth in your group.

There are many other things that can be done to foster a safe environment. The acronym 'S.A.F.E.S.P.A.C.E.' can help you remember what you as an adult ally can do to ensure that everyone in your youth group feels valued, heard, and respected.

Set clear guidelines: Start by establishing a clear set of guidelines that highlights the importance of the safe space for everyone. This includes the set of expected boundaries for everyone involved. As you move forward, you and the group may review and adapt these guidelines as needed. Remember that while everyone is invited to share their opinion, bullying and hate speech should not be tolerated: be proactive in addressing all forms of discrimination that may occur.

Amplify marginalized voices: Youth belonging to marginalized groups often face discrimination and social rejection that limits their ability to participate in discussions. When having discussions with your youth group, ensure that you provide everyone with equal opportunities to share their personal experiences if they wish to do so, and create space for discussions that explore the unique experiences of marginalized youth.

Foster inclusivity: Consider the needs of the different identities in your youth group. When speaking to the group, utilise terminology that does not reinforces stereotypes or stigma that further marginalizes individuals. Remember not to make assumptions about someone's identity – ask for youth's preferred pronouns when addressing them.

Engage youth's cultures in programming: Cultural beliefs can shape dynamics between youth and adults and provide pathways for support and guidance. Cultural engagement can foster a sense of belonging within

the group. Cultural engagement has been found to increase Saskatchewan youth's well-being (SAYCW, 2019). Examples of activities from an Indigenous cultural perspective include land-based harm-reduction programming (Martin et al., 2019), or utilizing a sharing circle with Elders to create a positive environment for youth to feel safe to share and express themselves (S. Acoose, personal communication, February 5, 2023). You can encourage the incorporation of various cultural aspects within programming and activities by encouraging youth to express their own cultural views on topics. You may also find it helpful to engage community leaders and organizations to provide their guidance on certain topics. Remember, while you may be knowledgeable on cultural topics, you are not the expert on someone else's culture. Always provide people with an opportunity to speak to their own cultures.

Share decision-making: Create a participatory culture within your youth group. Ensure that youth feel that their input is valued, and their feedback is appreciated and collaborate on choosing topics of interest for discussion.

Promote active listening: Youth are the experts on their own experiences. Ask questions and let youth know that their input is valuable and appreciated. Whenever possible, use examples or narratives mentioned by youth to demonstrate active listening.

Appreciate youth's strength and resilience: While some youth in your group may have experienced marginalization in their life, it is important to highlight their skills and strength. Using a strength-based approach, you can support youth's resilience in addressing and overcoming the challenges in their lives.

Connect individuals to external resources as necessary: Some activities or topics may be triggering to some youth. Be ready to refer and connect any youth in your group with available community supports if they are experiencing distress. In addition, if you suspect that a youth in your group under the age of 18 has and/or is experiencing any form of abuse, *The Child and Family Services Act (Section 12, Subsection 1 and 4)* states that it is every person's duty to report the suspicions to a child protection worker. Refer to Appendix C for a list available support resources in Saskatchewan. You may also want to find out the local services that are offered in your school or community for survivors of violence.

Empower choice: When facilitating potentially triggering topics, remind youth that their participation is not mandatory. Promote youth's autonomy by offering them examples of alternative activities to engage in while they sit out of the exercise or discussion or engage with them to develop their own alternative activity.

Remember that fostering safe spaces is an ongoing process that requires openness, communication, continuous learning, and willingness to adapt.

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Preparing for the Sessions

Take Time to Learn about the Community

Before facilitating the toolkit with youth, it is strongly recommended you take the time to learn about the community in which they live. If you are also from the same community, it is still beneficial to ensure you are current on the following type of information.

1. Are there any recent events that may have or are currently affecting youth?

   Recent and current events can significantly impact youth's lives. By staying informed, you can ensure that your training is relevant to current challenges and concerns that youth may have. It can also present an opportunity for action and constructive dialogue.

   Being familiar with recent or ongoing events is also particularly important in helping you recognize topics that may be triggering.

   Some examples of potentially triggering events are: a recent loss of a peer to an overdose, suicide, or car crash involving alcohol.

2. What are the community supports available for youth in the community? How can they be accessed?

   When facilitating trainings, the safety and well-being of youth in your group is the top priority. Identifying available community supports will assist you in being prepared to adequately respond to any mental health or emotional crisis that may arise throughout the facilitation. This can also help you identify potential collaborations for topics that may require an expert's participation in facilitation. Make sure that you learn their contact information, services provided, and how to refer youth to them. *Some examples of community supports are*: local school social workers, counselling centres, helplines, and community organizations.

3. What are the specific traditional and cultural considerations within the community?

   Each culture is unique in its values, beliefs, customs, and practices. Understanding and respecting a community's culture ensures that you are actively creating a safe space for youth engagement by being inclusive and avoiding the perpetuation of stereotypes and biases. It is equally important to look for ways to incorporate culture into programming to make it relatable and relevant. Remember to always engage experts from the community such as youth, community workers, and Elders that can support you in ensuring a culturally sensitive environment.

   Some examples of culturally aware actions include offering tobacco to signal respect and acknowledgement of help, being aware of the interpretation of body language, learning and using community-specific greeting gestures, working with translators to facilitate engagement of community members who speak a different language.

Consider Co-Facilitation

Co-facilitation of toolkit activities and youth groups is preferred. Co-facilitators can divide up responsibilities during a session and provide a more engaging experience for the group. Co-facilitators can provide critical feedback to each other after sessions end, helping to improve each other's skills and debrief any concerns

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that come up during a session. The co-facilitator who is not leading a piece can keep an eye on body language and level of engagement, adapting the session to help improve the climate and dynamic in the circle. Finally, a co-facilitator can leave the circle if a youth participant becomes emotional and needs some support away from the group.

Prepare to Facilitate & Support Youth Groups

Many of the toolkit activities create a challenging atmosphere that encourages youth to step out of their comfort zone. Some amazing learning experiences can happen when youth and facilitators take chances but be mindful that even the act of participating in this group with both peers and facilitators can be stressful. Although there are opportunities for growth and learning when we step outside of our comfort zone, we want youth to do this when they feel ready and not when they are pressured by facilitators. This can be a judgement call. Does a facilitator carefully nudge a youth to do or say something, or do they leave them be? This is something that comes from experience.

One suggestion is to explain to youth that they should only share what they feel comfortable sharing and that they also are participating in the circle by listening to others, even if they're not sharing their own experiences with the group. It's important to validate those who are listening, while creating the space for them to share when they feel comfortable.

What about Arguments?
Facilitators may wonder if it's okay for arguments or debates to happen inside the circle. Learning how to argue and debate in a respectful manner is an important skill. Facilitators should be mindful of how they present themselves during a debate or argument, and to model the kind of behaviour they want to see from everyone else if a conversation turns into a debate.

Emotional Moments
It is normal for the sessions to trigger emotions for some youth. For example, a youth participant during a session started crying when thinking about a family member who was impacted by alcohol misuse. Several of their peers reached out right away to comfort them, and facilitators followed up afterward to make sure the youth knew they were available for support. In another group, several participants stated that it was valuable to feel vulnerable in a safer space and experience feelings with peers and trusted adults. Many had never had this experience before.

It is recommended for facilitators to learn in advance if a session may get intense because of trauma or an incident in the community. For example, a community recently had a fatal car crash and youth knew a victim. If you do learn of recent trauma in the community, it is strongly recommended to ask local mental health support staff to attend your sessions.

Sometimes facilitators will still not be pre-warned of trauma or incidents in a community, thus, it is important to be prepared for youth to become emotional during any of the sessions. The co-facilitation

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model allows a facilitator to take a youth out of the session if they need extra support or a break from the group. Facilitators should also always follow up and check in with youth after an emotional session.

If a youth participant leaves during an intense session, and you are co-facilitating, ensure one of you goes and checks in with that youth. If you are not co-facilitating, have a plan in place in case one of the youth in your session leaves because they become upset, for example, have an adult ally from the community in the session with you who can leave and check in on any youth who needs to step away from the session due to intense emotions.

Supporting Youth Who Reach Out for Help

A goal of this work is to normalize help-seeking behaviour among youth. You can expect some youth to reach out to you for help because they are part of a youth group that you are facilitating. The Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia experiences so far have taught facilitators that some youth want support with a health issue but are reluctant to disclose a problem to a parent or family member, or even a family doctor for fear that their secret may get out.

One of the lessons provided in this toolkit focuses on help-seeking. This provides an opportunity to do some local "asset mapping" so that youth are aware of the formal, and sometimes informal, supports available in their school, neighbourhood, or larger community. It's a simple technique that can be done on flipchart paper or with pieces of paper on the floor. Youth and facilitators come up with a list of all the places where people can go to for help with a variety of issues. In an urban area, this may include a school health nurse, a walk-in clinic, a helpline, and other "go-to" adults. In rural areas and more isolated areas, the task can be more difficult.

Remember that while your facilitation needs to be trauma-informed, only a mental health professional can effectively respond to a mental health crisis. Always go through the recommended referral process within the community you are working in to ensure the safety and well-being of youth in your group.
Please refer to Appendix A for a list of resources that you can recommend to participants. Additionally, refer to Appendix C for a list available support resources in Saskatchewan.

Logistics

Materials, Set Up, and Attendees

The accompanying lesson plans will go into detail about how each session should unfold. The lessons require very little preparation in advance because there is no audio-visual equipment required and few, if any, props. In most cases, facilitators will only need to copy activities from the accompanying appendices. For some lessons, it is helpful to have them printed and slipped into plastic sleeves or laminated so they can be easily used over again. For other lessons, the activity slides are meant to be marked up and recycled afterward.

The room and chairs can impact the sessions. A cozy and quiet room works well. A gymnasium, for example, can prove to be distracting and make it hard to hear participants speak. Chairs should be easy to move

around and not have wheels. Desks with built-in chairs don't work very well for the sessions. The temperature of a room can make a difference too. Schools can be very warm in September and can heat up in May. A warm and humid room is not a great environment for conversation.

There is no strict or set amount of time for each lesson to unfold. The amount of time you choose to spend on a lesson really depends on the energy and engagement of the group. The 16 lessons accompanying the facilitator guide may require 16 one-hour sessions, but more or less time may be needed.

The optimal number in each group varies. So far, for the groups in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, the size of the groups has ranged from 6 youth to as many as 27. For many facilitators, the ideal number of youth has been said to be around 12-15, but that can change depending on the dynamic of the group. As the size of the group increases, the opportunities for participating decrease for individual group members.

If the sessions are running in a school during class time, it's helpful to keep in touch with what is going on in the school and be prepared for anything that may prove disruptive for the lessons (e.g., picture day, ski trip, early dismissal, or a day when lots of youth may be involved in another school activity). It may also be helpful for other school staff to know if a session is planned that may trigger strong emotions, so more adults can be aware of signs of distress among youth after the lessons are over.

In Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, the bulk of the work is done in grade 9, but grade 9 youth (14-15 years old) are not a homogenous group. There can be great variability in physical and emotional development. The more you know your group, the better you will be able to gauge how ready they are for any given topic, and if you should be moving the work to a younger group or an older group.

Sometimes assumptions are made that an individual or certain group of youth are "okay" and do not need a youth group. Experience has taught us that we never know what is going on inside a young person and being able to run these sessions with an entire youth group or class can be beneficial and bring issues to the surface that were never known. That is not to dismiss the value of working with a targeted group of young people. If a group of young people are selected or hand picked, facilitators should be mindful that they may wonder why they have been picked. There is a risk of marginalizing a group that may already be feeling marginalized.

Inside or Outside of School

There are different ways of running groups for youth. The primary model in both Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia has been school-based, using dedicated class time. In Saskatchewan, youth were pulled into a group during class time, and where they were given approved absences to attend the sessions. In Nova Scotia, the group ran as part of a health class. Some communities have expressed interest in using the tools outside of school, in an existing club or organization.

Beginning and Closing the Session

Meeting in a Circle

Gathering a group in a circle may be new for facilitators and youth. Activities with youth groups are conversation-based, with the circle creating a natural space for talking to each other. Youth appreciate being able to see each other during conversations. Youth with vision issues have said the circle allows them to hear and participate easier than a conventional classroom with rows of chairs. Youth have also recognized that the circle creates an atmosphere of shared authority. While the facilitator may still be in charge, there is no authority figure at the front of the class standing over the youth. Every lesson in this toolkit is a circle-based activity. Module 1 of this toolkit, *Move Into the Circle,* can be used as an icebreaker activity at the start of the session, or to change the pace of the session, or start a conversation.

Community Standards

Youth groups are unique spaces where there can be freedom not typical in conventional classrooms. Youth and facilitators work together to create community standards. These standards are established to guide the group around how they are going to work together and function as a small community. These are not rules imposed by the facilitator; rather they are standards suggested by and agreed upon by the group. Module 2 of the toolkit, Trust and Community Standards, will help you and the youth create these rules and standards together.

What ends up on a list of community standards is up to the group. To help youth build their list, it often helps to ask the question: What do you need to have in place to make you feel comfortable in this group? A very long list may be impractical, so be mindful of how exhaustive the list becomes.

Facilitators may suggest some community standards that have worked well in the past for other youth groups. Some examples are listed below.

- One voice at a time. Everyone's voice is important and we must protect each other's voice so we can hear one another.
- A respectful atmosphere. We may have different opinions, but we don't judge each other. We listen and hear each other's thoughts and views to better understand one another.
- No cell phones. Youth may decide to have cell phones placed in a basket at the front of the room to keep themselves from getting distracted, or cell phones placed on 'silent' mode.
- Confidentiality. We will often say "what is said in the circle stays in the circle,", because that allows the group to have deeper conversations without worrying that personal stories will leave the circle. Youth may share a session topic with people outside of the group, but not any personal stories that were told. There is a qualification to this community standard in a school-based session (and other settings). If facilitators hear things from youth that make them think the young person may be at risk of harming themselves, or harming someone else, there is a legal obligation to break confidentiality and seek support. This is something that should be made clear to all participants.
- Being able to leave the room without permission if needed.
- Don't take all the "airtime." In other words, remember that your comfort in talking may inhibit others in the circle from participating.
- Never say, "You're too old to understand this," or "You're too young to understand this."

- Youth can articulate their thoughts and opinions in a way that is comfortable and authentic for them. Their language will not be censored, but everyone should still be mindful of their choice of words.
- You can pass if you do not want to contribute to a conversation, but please stay and listen.

Community standards will help build a trust and safety in the group. Once the list is complete, ask everyone in the circle to commit to the standards. Check in regularly with the group to see how everyone is doing in meeting the standards. The community standards are dynamic and can be revisited and revised at any time.

Check In

Each module starts with a check-in question and ends with a check out question. We use a check-in question for several reasons. It is a way to ground the group and have participants focus, taking them away from the last place they have been and into a new space. It's a way to take the temperature of the group. During check in, the youth may be tired, distracted, or even upset. There may be clues during the check in for the facilitators that the planned lesson may not be appropriate given the mood of the youth. It might be wise to play a game or energizer, or simply ask what is going on in their lives that has created the dynamic in the room. Sometimes a check-in question is tied to the topic of the lesson and prepares the group for the upcoming activity. A check-in question can be silly or serious, and after several sessions you may want to ask the circle if anyone wants to lead a check in with their own question. For example, "If you could have one superpower, what would it be?"

Consider some cultural check-in activities that may be relevant to youth in your group. You can identify these by communicating with community members prior to engaging with youth.

Check Out

After facilitating the module's activities, a check-out question is usually used to gauge how everyone is feeling afterwards. It can be a simple open-ended question, "How are you feeling now that you've been through this exercise?" or "What is on your mind after today's experience?"

It is natural to have some louder voices in each group, so a check-out question is an opportunity for everyone to have space to say something. It is useful to use a talking piece during check in, check out, and conversations. The talking piece is an object that is passed around the circle and whoever has the talking piece is the only person who can speak. A check out can continue if the group decides there is more to say, with the talking piece continuing around the circle for more comments. When it is your turn to have the talking piece, you may choose to pass, or you may ask that it comes back to you when you have had more time to think about the question. Try to choose a talking piece that is unique and easy to toss back and forth inside the circle during an animated conversation.

An additional idea for closing the session is for facilitators to share their take aways from the session and reflect common themes expressed by the youth. You can then ask: "Is there anything else you want to add before we end today's time together?" This can be a useful tool to help the youth feel heard and provide structure for your closing.

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Consider some cultural check-out activities that may be relevant to youth in your group. You can identify these by communicating with community members prior to engaging with youth.

Building in Time for Facilitator Reflection and Personal Development

It is strongly recommended that facilitators create a community of practice with others who are using the toolkit to troubleshoot, learn new things, get new ideas, and debrief. In Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute's Youth Action for Prevention (YAP) Program and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Program have partnered to develop a Google Group called *Promoting Youth Health*.

This group is a place for facilitators to share information and resources regarding youth health in Saskatchewan. It is a place for those interested in facilitating groups, or in developing youth groups in their community to connect and work together. For more information, please contact the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute at 306-651-4300 or info@skprevention.ca.

The sessions accompanying this facilitator guide continue to evolve based on ongoing assessment and continuing feedback from youth and facilitators. As a new facilitator, you are part of that evolution and can assist by observing, noting, and sharing what is working and not working in your groups.
The sessions become more meaningful when trust increases, relationships develop, and community standards are honoured. Facilitators will get to know their youth, including their interests, passions, experiences, and skills, while youth get to know facilitators in the same way.

Your skills as a facilitator will improve with more experience, by working with diverse groups, with self-reflection, and by opening yourself up to feedback from co-facilitators and youth. With experience, you will also get to know when a group is ready for this work.

We make assumptions that our language as facilitators is accessible to all, and that the language we use when talking about health is easily understood by everyone. It's important for facilitators to check in frequently to make sure that terms, phrases, concepts, and other content is accessible and understood by all.

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