

Connections First: A Rapid Review of Understanding the Role of Natural Supports in Advancing Life Skills for Children and Youth

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BACKGROUND: Twenty percent of adults in Alberta have experienced three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as trauma, abuse or family dysfunction. ACEs can pose an immediate threat on the stress response system, which can lead to long-term health consequences. However, this can be mitigated by protective factors, through relationships or positive skill development, commonly known as resilience. Interventions that help individuals to navigate stressful situations through the development of life skills can be an effective approach to diminish the long-term effects of ACEs.

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this rapid review is to identify community-based natural supports, such as mentoring, after-school programs or recreation activities, which advance life skills for children and youth (aged 6-16 years). For the purpose of this review, life skills include leadership, conflict management, coping, resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

METHODS: A systematic search of MEDLINE (Ovid), PsycINFO (Ovid), and SocINDEX (EBSCOhost) electronic databases was conducted for literature from 2008 to 2018. Randomized control trials, comparative studies and reviews were all evaluated for natural support initiatives that build life skills. Only peer-reviewed journals that were published in the English language with quantitative results were included in the review. The Effective Public Health Practice Project quality assessment tool for quantitative studies and the Template for Intervention Description and Replication guidelines were used to extract information and assess included articles.

RESULTS: A total of 3,008 articles were retrieved, with 32 articles meeting the inclusion criteria for the final review. The majority of the interventions took place in the participant's leisure time, and in a group setting. Informational sessions and multifaceted programs were common initiatives, with self-esteem and self-efficacy being the most commonly measured outcomes. The results will be shared with policy makers and community-based organizations who will use the information to promote natural supports in Alberta.