

Connections first: Policy and program recommendations for community based programs to improve life skills for children and youth

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Background

- Children exposed to adversity are at increased risk of negative outcomes, including poorer physical and mental health^[1].
- Organizations in Alberta have been working to mitigate the effects of adversity by promoting children's life skills, which have been defined as psychosocial abilities for adaptive behaviors that allow people to deal effectively with everyday demands and challenges^[2].

Research Question

To examine if the evidence on interventions that work to develop life skills in children and youth align with Alberta Government Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) priorities.

Methods

Evidence Scan

- Online databases were searched for relevant studies on existing community initiatives aiming to improve life skills in children between the ages of 6 and 16, including self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping, conflict management, resiliency, and leadership skills
- Intervention characteristics were recorded using a data extraction template.
- Effectiveness of interventions was determined by whether or not the program significantly improved at least one life skill.
- Quality of interventions was assessed using the Effective Public Health Practice Project Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies^[3].

Framework Identification and Synthesis

- FCSS 2014 Provincial Priorities Measures outlines outcomes and indicators that evaluate how the FCSS is impacting individual, family, and community well-being (see Table 1.)^[4].
- The model provided a relevant pre-existing framework and themes against which to map the data extracted from the evidence scan.

Table 1. FCSS 2014 Provincial Priorities Measures ^[4].

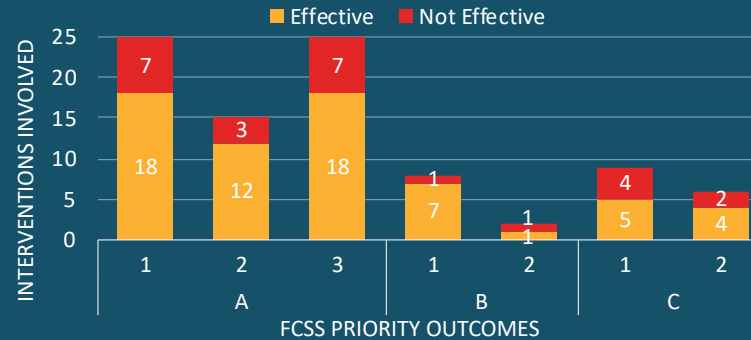
FCSS Focus Area	FCSS Priority Outcome
A) Improved Social Well-being of Individuals	1. Individuals experience personal well-being 2. Individuals are connected with others 3. Children and youth develop positively
B) Improved Social Well-being of Families	1. Healthy functioning within families 2. Families have social supports
C) Improved Social Well-being of Community	1. The community is connected and engaged 2. Community social issues are identified and addressed

Analyses

- Interventions included in the evidence scan were mapped onto FCSS priority outcomes to identify which outcomes were being addressed by empirically supported programs.
- Frequencies of effective and non effective interventions were compared to determine which program features (type, duration, target population etc.) were most successful in promoting children's life skills.

Results

Framework Synthesis



Intervention Characteristics

- 9 of the 10 programs targeting a specific vulnerable group were successful in improving life skills, while only 2 of the 5 programs targeting a general population were.
- Almost all (80%) of the multifaceted programs (n = 5) were found to be effective.
- 93% of programs that were 9 weeks to 6 months long (n = 14) were successful, compared to only 60% of those that were up to 8 weeks (n = 5) and 40% of those over 6 months (n = 5).

Conclusion

- Interventions consisting of multiple components (e.g. art activities and educational sessions) specifically targeting vulnerable children and youth may have a greater impact than programs consisting of only one component that have a universal target audience
- Further research is needed to examine what duration/intensity of programs work best to improve life skills in children.
- There may be opportunity to promote initiatives that work to improve social well-being of families, specifically, healthy family functioning.
- Findings from this project will inform community planning and policy by identifying areas of opportunity for investment in programs with proven effectiveness.



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