



Promising Practices:

Conducting meaningful and effective evaluation

Fourth R Overview

The Fourth R includes a range of healthy relationships programming that have been shown to promote positive peer interactions and reduce dating and peer violence. There are many different programming components for different grades, as well as community-based versions. Some of the recent program components have a particular emphasis on promoting positive mental health. In addition, we have developed strengths-based programming that is uniquely designed to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, LGBT2Q+ youth, and vulnerable youth. Between 2010 and 2018 we were funded through the Innovation Strategy of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Across three project phases we developed new programming components, evaluated programs, made regional adaptations, and scaled up nationally. By 2018 Fourth R programs were implemented in more than 5000 schools and community organizations nationally.

Evaluation

We undertook ongoing evaluation of our Fourth R and other Healthy Relationships Programs across all three phases of Innovation Strategy funding. For our well established classroom-based Fourth R, we conducted a large randomized controlled trial of the grade 7 and 8 program in Saskatchewan. For newer programs we conducted small feasibility and pilot studies with a focus on refining the programs. Our evaluations included a focus on both process and outcome.

Our major evaluation articles across the three phases of PHAC funding included:

- A 57 school randomized controlled trial of the grade 7/8 program in Saskatchewan
- A follow up study from our original RCT to look at the protective impact for maltreated youth
- Both a case study and a longitudinal mixed methods outcome study of our Indigenous mentoring programs
- A within group evaluation of the HRP in the context of a national implementation
- A pilot evaluation of our HRP for LGBT2Q+ youth
- A health economics evaluation of the costs associated with the Fourth R as well as potential economic benefits

The purpose of this summary is to identify promising practices for conducting meaningful and effective evaluation. It is one of eight issue-specific summaries designed to share actionable, positive strategies to improve the effectiveness of mental health promotion and violence prevention efforts.



Promising Practices

Undertake evaluation across the program development, pilot, and implementation cycles.

Building evaluation into all of our program activities from the outset has provided important information about every stage of development and implementation. It is particularly important to evaluate new iterations of programs that have been adapted for specific contexts. In the case of our HRP for LGBT2Q+ Youth program, our first version had some significant flaws. Without several avenues for participants to provide feedback, we might not have realized the extent of revisions that were required. It is also important to measure uptake of programs and sustainability. Measuring these has helped us realize the high degree of turnover among educators (even if they are still at the same school they may have a different assignment) and that a significant minority of educators who are trained in the Fourth R do not even have the opportunity to implement it once.

Be aware of the demands that evaluation places on your partners.

As researchers, we can develop tunnel vision for the evaluation processes that we want to undertake. It is critical to remember that your partners have different mandates! Educators, for example, are expected to prioritize literacy and numeracy achievement, and anything that takes away from their time to do that needs to create value for them and their students. In some cases we have provided resources to our partners to assist with the evaluation processes. Other times we have contracted educators as research assistants and paid them an honorarium to recognize that the research work is over and above their job requirements. We also work hard to remove as many barriers as possible by ensuring that we provide adequate copies of consent forms and measures and include pre-paid mailing envelopes if documents need to be returned by mail. We record very brief webinars and create checklists to make any research processes as clear as possible. Finally, our whole team expresses ongoing appreciation for the assistance our partners provide.

Ensure that your outcomes are meaningful to your partners.

Our most successful evaluations have emerged when we co-created the outcomes and process with our partners from the beginning. For our longitudinal evaluation of our Indigenous mentoring program, it was very important to our partners that we take a strengths-based approach and that we assess the impact of the programming on cultural connectedness. Because we could not find a good measure of cultural connectedness, we spent two years developing one for that purpose. The resulting measure has now been used by other researchers. Co-creating the process or at least the outcomes provides a strong foundation for knowledge mobilization in that there is already interest in the findings. Engaging partners at the outset of the research process ensures that we are answering the questions that they want answered.

Mixed methods approaches provide important information for different audiences.

Over the past 5-10 years, we have moved to using mixed methods approaches in all of our work. There is an important place for rigorous quantitative work and standards for what constitutes evidence-based practice still relies heavily on quantitative methods. At the same time, qualitative data provides context and story to the numbers and speaks to different audiences than statistics alone. By utilizing mixed methods, we can use different parts of our data to tell different stories to different audiences.

Provide timely and accessible feedback to partners.

As researchers, we are expected to publish our findings in academic journals. The publishing process can take a lot of time – even years. There is a high level of rigour required, preparing a manuscript takes time, and the review and revision process can be lengthy. These timelines do not meet the needs of our partners, who may be in the process of making decisions based on how a program went. We prepare plain language summaries of our findings for our partners every year, and strive to do it in a timely manner. In particular, we prioritize having reports to school boards *before* the start of the next school year. We use lots of figures and quotes in these reports to build a picture of how the program went in a way that is more accessible than listing statistical findings. Preparing these reports requires significant time and resources, but we see them as an ethical responsibility. Furthermore, they provide relevant information to partners and increase buy-in for the research and evaluation process.