

Building a Better Ontario and the Ontario Stepping Stones Resource

The Building a Better Ontario project, funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and led by the Students Commission (lead of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement), is piloting evaluation tools to assess how youth-targeted programs are supporting young people's positive development. These evaluation tools will provide results on an ongoing basis to inform programs, improving positive youth development outcomes as well as providing an evidence base for their effectiveness. The evaluation framework is based upon the Centre's youth engagement conceptual framework, which identifies key qualities of youth engagement experiences, initiating factors, sustaining factors and outcomes. These factors and outcomes occur at 3 levels – individual, social and systems. The individual and social levels align strongly with the Stepping Stones framework, focusing on individual development (cognitive, physical and emotional) and social development (relationships, interpersonal). Therefore, many of the evaluation tools are directly based upon the most current literature about positive youth development as outlined in the Stepping Stones document.

Similarly to Stepping Stones, the Building a Better Ontario evaluation framework is rooted in a model of youth engagement that involves various aspects of youth development: cognitive, social, emotional, physical and spiritual. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines engagement as having Head (cognitive), Heart (emotional), Feet (physical) and Spirit (spiritual or connection beyond the self) aspects. These form one of the core qualitative evaluation tools, the Head, Heart, Feet and Spirit sheets for youth to share their experiences and outcomes from youth-targeted programs. Full engagement involves all of these aspects, and the HHFS tool is used to monitor and inform programming to ensure that these are all present and effective in programs for youth.

Another of the central tools is the academically validated Youth Experiences Survey (YES), designed by Drs. Hansen, Larsen and Dworkin (2003). This survey directly parallels the Stepping Stones document, providing strong and tested measures for assessing and understanding young people's self-reported developmental experiences, including:

- Personal development (including identity development, motivation, emotional, physical and cognitive skills), and
- Interpersonal development (including social skills and peer relationship development, as well as developing connections with adults).

Our evaluation tools also include measures to better understand program characteristics that support positive youth development. Drs. Eccles and Gootman (2002) have identified eight program characteristics that are widely accepted as the most critical for positive youth development - these are the basis for a core set of our measures regarding safety, opportunities to learn, support for efficacy and mattering, sense of belonging, synergy with community efforts, appropriate structure, positive peer norms, as well as caring and support. By assessing these characteristics, programs can become more effective at providing the necessary settings for positive youth development.

Due to the changing relationships of young people and their parents/guardians as outlined in Stepping Stones, many of our tools also focus on relationships with non-parental adults. These relationships are crucial at a time when young people are spending less time with their parents/guardians, and gain a lot from other supportive adults in their community. One of the evaluation tools is the Interaction and Involvement scale developed by Drs. Perkins and Jones (2005; 2006) to assess the perceptions and experiences of youth and adults interacting together within youth development programs. This scale can help determine strengths and weaknesses of youth-adult relationships, and inform programs in order to improve social development and overall positive youth development, as well as organizational and community development outcomes.

Our tools also highlight diversity of experience and perspectives, which is a key ingredient for emotional development related to empathy, and social development related to understanding others' perspectives.

Several tools also focus on cognitive development in terms of complex function regarding decision-making – these assess the ways in which young people are involved in decision-making at various levels in programs. These evaluation tools assess young people's perceptions of their involvement in decision-making as well as the positive outcomes of involving young people in decision-making.

The Building a Better Ontario evaluation framework and tools will assess and inform positive youth development programs and will also identify key aspects, characteristics, and effective practices that lead to positive youth development outcomes.