



#CanadaWeWant #leCanadaquenoussouhaitons

NATIONAL YOUTH MOVEMENT | MOUVEMENT NATIONAL DES JEUNES



Healthy Relationship Theme Team

Conference Report



The Students
Commission
Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement

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Executive Summary

The focus of this report is Healthy Relationships. Our theme team discussed the #CanadaWeWant as a place where no one's wellbeing and safety is compromised by their relationships. Our theme team also wants a place where individuals are able to distinguish a healthy relationship from an unhealthy relationship. Youth participants reported a need for higher quality resources to be made available within schools and communities across Canada that provide youth with the knowledge of how to build and foster healthy relationships.

Many youth participants relayed a need for better examples of healthy relationships within the media and social institutions, without perpetuating toxic masculinity and stereotypes. Additionally, youth want to see representation of healthy relationships within the LGBTQ2S+ community and displays of the diversity of relationships. Key findings from the conference were that many youth participants reported the importance of embedding the SCC's Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™ as the foundation for a healthy relationship. As well, opinions and stories were shared that reflect the intersectionality of the guiding lenses of the #CanadaWeWant youth movement: Rural, Remote and Northern Experience, Addressing Structural Racism, Truth Leading to Reconciliation and Children's Rights. These lenses help to focus the discussion on understanding, teaching, and maintaining healthy relationships.

The 2021 #CanadaWeWant Conference

This year's #CanadaWeWant Youth Conference was a virtual gathering that took place online from March 1-8 2021 (adapted for the social limitations of COVID-19). Over the week, youth participants and adult allies from coast to coast to coast came together online to share their experiences, concerns, ideas and hopes for the #CanadaWeWant and the #CanadaWeNeed.

At the beginning of the conference, youth participants were invited to choose a theme team that interested them. They then worked in small groups through the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's (CEYE) Young Decision Makers process. Some explored their topics quite broadly, discussing the issues and challenges that young people face and identifying possible solutions. Other teams were tasked with working directly on questions or deliverables that were brought to them by organizations or government departments. All theme teams created recommendations and a theme-team report, and then presented at a virtual showcase event to an audience of community stakeholders, policy makers and decision makers.

The Process

The theme team created a safe space by defining what a safe space means to each one of us, discussing how we can ensure that we are all comfortable and determining what measures need to be put in place to achieve this. Firstly, a safe space allows each one of us to know right away that we will feel comfortable, and the environment is a major factor contributing to this. Secondly, when taking part in online spaces, we have to be aware of the things we may subject ourselves to and how it can affect our mental health. This means we have to use online spaces with the intention of seeking knowledge and helping others understand what healthy relationships are and what they look like.

Key Findings

Discussion

It was clear from the start of the conference how important the topic of healthy relationships is to the youth participants in this group. The focus was to ensure that there's proper education in regards to healthy relationships, within our media and the shows that are available for us to watch. Youth participants discussed how we, as a society, must not stand for toxic and unhealthy relationships. We should always have open communication, be mindful of other people's feelings, be cautious of our choice of words, and treat people the way we'd like to be treated.

The key quotes from the conference are: "We need to promote healthy relationships in books, television and media, promoting better communication skills, and to stop glamorizing toxic, and dominant relationships", "bring awareness to toxic masculinity and how to break out of it and stop the cycle", and "bring awareness to different types of relationships and promote safety and solidarity."

The article, "The Happy, Healthy, Safe Relationships Continuum: Conceptualizing a Spectrum of Relationship Quality to Guide Community-Based Healthy Relationship Promotion Programming" mentions the importance of becoming aware of what healthy relationships really means and grasping the significance behind it (Murray et al., 2020). Additionally, it speaks on a healthy relationship initiative that was created for the community to essentially put actions behind their words and really try to better the community and help make progress with how people view healthy relationships. An example they mention in the article was bringing kids to a museum and unplugging from their cell phones for the entire day, helping them be mindful of the people around them and not be focused on social media (Murray et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the article "Supporting Healthy Relationships in Low Income, Violent Couples: Reducing Conflict and Strengthening Relationship Skills and Satisfaction" mentions that people who have a lower socioeconomic status are more at risk of violence and are more likely to be in unhealthy relationships (Bradley et al., 2011). The article points out that it is important to create programs and reach out to those living in low socioeconomic status as they need all of our support and education in understanding how harmful violent and unhealthy relationships are to our mental health (Bradley et al., 2011).

It's important to have outreach programs that serve the purpose of reaching out to people who don't have resources or education as without these resources in these communities, it can lead to very harmful outcomes. Additionally, what healthy relationships mean and how we can achieve them must be spoken about within our institutions and especially on social media. It's crucial to have talks about healthy relationships and examples of healthy environments on various social media platforms.

"The #CanadaWeWant is a place where youth are able to identify a healthy relationship from an unhealthy relationship, youth are able to foster healthy relationships."

Green Flag/ Red Flag Relationships

Green flags

- **Even when you disagree you know this person has your back!**
 - In a good relationship, you can disagree but you can still trust each other.
 - You're a team, even if you have different opinions.
 - They're mature enough to accept the diverse opinions in the relationship and will support you and your decisions unconditionally.
- **Your relationship helps you be the best version of yourself.**
- **After a fight, you both acknowledge you could have behaved differently.**
 - This means there is a level of maturity.
 - You may say things you don't mean.
 - If you can reflect and see the mistakes that you have made.
 - Both people are grown enough to admit that they were wrong.
 - Having a healthy relationship means that there will be disagreements, it doesn't feel fake or forced.
- **Someone disagrees with you, but you still feel respected by them.**
- **You are dating but you don't spend all your time together because you both have lots of friends and interests.**
 - Not always being with that person is okay.
 - There needs to be balance. Yes, it's important to be with each other to sustain the relationship and spend quality time together, but at the same time you were each your own person before entering the relationship and need time to yourselves.

Red/yellow flags

- **Calling and texting you ALL the time.**
 - Could hint at unhealthy obsession where somebody thinks they have full access to you.
 - It could affect your mental health.
 - It may end in dependency.
 - It could be a form of manipulation.
- **Someone (friend or partner) tells you to change your outfit.**
 - In some scenarios this might be appropriate, most of the time this is a yellow flag.
 - Telling vs suggesting.
 - Partners may think it's too revealing and do not want anyone to see them, some say they are begging for attention.
 - This is controlling and manipulative.
- **They want to spend all their time with only you.**
- **Your best friend doesn't like the person you are dating, or vice-versa.**
 - Sometimes it is normal for friends to not like the partner because they feel threatened. (yellow flag)
 - Are they looking out for you or are they jealous?
 - Where does the loyalty lay?
 - Depends on the reasons why they don't like your partner or friend.
 - It may be a danger sign that your friend can see what you are not able to.
- **They get jealous when you talk to other people.**
- **They want to know all of your social media passwords.**
 - This is very controlling.
 - It is an invasion of privacy.
 - This shows no trust.
 - There need to be boundaries.
- **Your partner does not want you to be friends with someone.**

Guiding Lenses

The #CanadaWeWant Conference uses four guiding lenses to explore conference topics and to frame recommendations. These lenses were selected based on recurring themes that emerged during previous youth conferences and encourage young people to take an intersectional approach to understanding and tackling their topic area. The four guiding lenses are:

- Rural, Remote and Northern Experience
- Addressing Structural Racism
- Truth Leading to Reconciliation
- Children's Rights

The following summarizes young people's experiences and reflections related to exploring their topic area through these lenses.

Rural, Remote and Northern Experience

Looking through the Rural, Remote and Northern Experience lens, the healthy relationships group discussed the implications of meeting people and having access to places to hangout in-person, both formally and informally. Due to the pandemic, people in relationships or those who desire to be in a relationship have had to be more creative through the limitations of social distancing and quarantining. For people in more rural and remote places, having regular meeting places is very difficult, even without the constraints of the pandemic. They discussed the privilege of having a car and how this may offer a solution to this restraint although it can be difficult to drive long distances to see people. Relationships have been correlated with positive mental health benefits as loneliness has shown to affect mental health in a negative way. In a rural or remote setting it can be more difficult to access certain support.

"Access to certain amenities and support facilities can shape people's experiences."

Addressing Structural Racism

When looking through the lens Addressing Structural Racism, the healthy relationships theme team found that education is key. They stressed the fact that if we are not aware and properly educated about the diversity around us, it can strongly influence relationships. Diversity includes our background, experiences and personalities, which shape who we are. In the conference, youth participants mentioned how one may not be willing to take the time to get to know someone because of where they live, or what social groups they belong to. Judgment prevents many people from creating connections, bonds and relationships with others. For example, one may be too scared to write their name on a resume as it could prevent them from getting a call back, depending on their name or ethnicity.

Truth Leading to Reconciliation

Looking through the Truth Leading to Reconciliation lens, the healthy relationship theme team adapted the SCC's Four Pillars to define a healthy relationship. Our Elders Council helped to map the Four Pillars for healthy relationships. Youth participants noted that the Four Pillars were in line with many Indigenous teachings on healthy relationships. The first pillar of a healthy relationship is respect. It begins with the importance of recognizing and respecting how people's past experiences shape them. Respect should be there so that when one person is talking the other is listening because whatever they are sharing is valued as important. This requires openness to others' perspectives and lived experiences.

The second pillar of a healthy relationship is to listen. Sometimes that means listening without the intent of answering and this requires you not to interrupt your partner when they are speaking. This connects well with respect as whatever they are sharing is important to them and this should be reflected in the way you listen intently because it matters more to them than you know. This also requires you to listen to yourself in a relationship in order to recognize how you are feeling.

The third pillar of a healthy relationship is understanding. This requires you to understand that everyone comes from different experiences and you should keep this in mind before you communicate. Empathy should be

mutual between partners. This also requires the effort to understand each other and to be receptive of each other.

The fourth and last pillar of a healthy relationship is communicating. This requires you to be accessible as there are many ways of communicating. This requires again an understanding that it is ok for people to communicate in different ways, whether this is privately, in chat or publicly. Before you can communicate you must have an understanding of what the other person is conveying.

A quote by Elder Kathy Brant fits nicely to sum up the importance of the four pillars in a relationship.

“Remember that everyone is doing the best they can with the trauma that they carry. If someone is telling you something you don’t like, you know that it is their trauma and pain that they are carrying and not yours.”

This goes to say that you cannot judge a person before you walk in their shoes and speaks of the importance of open communication and understanding in a relationship.

Each pillar works together to establish a healthy relationship that is equal for both partners. This is why the Four Pillars all fit together, since when you lack in one area you end up lacking in all four areas as they are so interconnected. Without respect and empathy of one another you will not be able to understand what your partner is feeling or needs. With this understanding comes communication, which requires one to understand both sides of the story. You need to carry that mutual respect between each other to secure your relationship. It is important that you listen because whatever they are saying is important enough to them that they want to share it with you. The Four Pillars are an accessible tool to use as a framework for a healthy relationship.

On Day 6 of the conference, youth participants further discussed the lens of Truth Leading to Reconciliation by looking at the history of European colonization and the heavy toll it has taken on Indigenous culture and relationships. In relation to healthy relationships, you see a trend of toxic and abusive traits that are rooted in colonial violence carried on through intergenerational trauma that has not been properly addressed. Indigenous people experienced mistreatment that was particularly seen in residential schools where they faced cruel tactics in an attempt to assimilate their culture. A paper by Hoffart & Jones (2017) examines how intimate partner violence in the Indigenous communities is a serious problem. In residential schools, it was recorded that a lot of physical, sexual and emotional abuse took place. Many children were described to be used as victims of staff members to appease their sexual appetites. Today Indigenous women continue to experience intimate partner violence at higher rates than non-Indigenous women.

Children’s Rights

Every child is worthy of certain rights that allow them to foster and build healthy relationships. As well, every child deserves the right to be taught the knowledge of how to handle unhealthy relationships. Children and youth, no matter their background, gender, and culture, have a right to quality support systems, resources, and services, while learning how to foster healthy relationships. In regard to the fourth conference lens discussing children’s rights, the healthy relationships theme team discussed concepts such as intergenerational trauma, positive role models, parent-child relationships, and asking for help. All of which serve as examples of children’s rights that they are required to utilize when understanding healthy relationships. Unfortunately, these rights are taken away from children too often, resources are unavailable and insufficient, and there is a lack of

representation, transparency, and clarity when discussing healthy relationships compared to unhealthy relationships. Looking through the lens of children's rights, the #CanadaWeWant healthy relationships theme team examined various necessities required for children and youth to obtain the knowledge and resources to foster healthy relationships.

The first set of children's rights described by the healthy relationships theme team are having positive role models and healthy parent-child relationships. Positive role models in one's life and maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship are simple and necessary rights children have that are too often taken away. These are two extremely important concepts for allowing children and youth to foster and build healthy relationships. Another discussion about children's rights was concerning a child's ability to ask for help. Asking for help is something that each child should be able to do and needs to do from time to time, especially when seeking advice, resources, or assistance with fostering new healthy relationships. Unfortunately, not many children are able to ask for help due to fear, inadequate support to assist with help, discrimination, and more. When navigating healthy and unhealthy relationships, children and youth need to be given resources and opportunities to be able to ask for support.

Intergenerational trauma is another factor that can significantly inhibit children and youth from fostering healthy relationships. Intergenerational trauma, defined as trauma passed through generations of peoples, families, or communities, severely impacts children's ability to form healthy relationships. Additionally, this specific trauma immediately takes away many rights of children, including access to resources, support, and help, which are crucial rights children must utilize to build healthy relationships. For children and youth facing this horrific trauma, access to quality resources and support will allow them to continue to foster healthy relationships and obtain the knowledge to navigate leaving unhealthy relationships.

Additionally, the group discussed child services. Each child has the right to request assistance and support from child services, especially in times of danger, or toxicity. During the conference, many youth participants touched on the controversies and lack of adequate support provided for them by child services, stating, "there certainly needs a change in these 'social services' that are not beneficial for children at all and just further the damages into the child's upbringing" (Youth participant, 2021). Some youth participants reported strong feelings of resentment towards child services due to their constant perpetuation of discriminatory and racist ideology, stating, "child services are racist" (Youth participant, 2021). Child services is a necessary right, and children need quality support and access to this assistance, especially when leaving unhealthy relationships.

Adults ignoring children, not listening to them, and needing concrete proof to believe them, were very important topics brought up in the healthy relationships theme team when using a lens of children's rights. Adults ignoring or dismissing children takes away a child's right to be heard, loved, and cared for; giving a child insecurities and feelings of loneliness and abandonment, which compromises their ability to build and foster healthy relationships. Due to their age, race, gender, or other factors, children and youth are consistently ignored when trying to seek help from an adult for problems at home, relationships with friends, and relationships with peers. One youth participant supported this claim by stating, "I'm seeing an ongoing theme of lack of accountability from adults when they are supposed to be not only allies, but responsible for the protection of minors" (Youth participant, 2021). Children and youth deserve to be heard, supported, and listened to when seeking help from adults with their current relationships.

It is crucial for children to know their rights and understand how they should be treated, particularly when thinking about navigating relationships. Underestimating their self-worth and what they deserve can trap

children and youth in very unhealthy relationships. Without understanding their rights, children and youth aren't able to fight for the rights taken from them, and for the services they require. The #CanadaWeWant Conference healthy relationships theme team stressed the need for children and youth to be aware of their rights and how they deserve to be treated, allowing them to foster healthy, fulfilling relationships and leave toxic, harmful relationships. During Day 6, youth participants engaged in a red/green/yellow flag icebreaker related to relationship scenarios. One participant listed a situation of a controlling partner dictating their dress code, making inappropriate and manipulative comments to control their appearance. This icebreaker allows for the participants to understand what is not healthy in a relationship, and what they deserve, such as wearing what they want. Children and youth becoming aware of their rights and comprehending how they deserve to be treated in a relationship are very important aspects of fostering healthy relationships.

In conclusion, every young individual is worthy of various rights that allow them to foster healthy relationships. During the #CanadaWeWant Conference, the healthy relationships theme team discussed various rights required for youth to build healthy, fulfilling relationships, and to receive the education, knowledge, and resources to avoid maintaining unhealthy relationships. Rights such as having positive role models, maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship, understanding rights and deserved treatment, having access to quality assistance from child services and to resources to aid in intergenerational trauma. Looking through the lens of children's rights, the #CanadaWeWant healthy relationships theme team examined various necessities required for children and youth to obtain the knowledge and resources to foster healthy relationships.

"We want curriculums that have been updated to include conversations around social injustices and human rights issues. Students, especially Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and LGBTQ2S+ shouldn't have to feel left out of the conversation."

- Youth Participant, 2021

Dream Tree

The Dream Tree is a tool that is used to synthesize young people's ideas into a youth-friendly logic model for a given topic. When building a Dream Tree, the roots represent the foundation: the inputs, resources and values that are needed to work towards a goal. The trunk of the tree represents the activities that are needed, while the leaves are the outputs and indicators highlighting what we will see as a result of the activities. The fruit represents the desired outcomes (the dream!). The visual below represents the Dream Tree that the theme team worked on.

#CANADA WE WANT

Fruit: the change we want to see (our dream)

- Youth knowing how to build healthy relationships and identify unhealthy relationships.
- Youth being able to foster healthy relationships.
- Youth's background (culture, past experiences, ethnicity, etc.) not inhibiting youth to build and foster healthy relationships.
- People working together to find solutions to problems.

Leaves: outputs & indicators (how we know it's working)

- Better examples, and models of healthy relationships.
- Better representation of relationships within the LGBTQ2S+ community.
- Diverse relationships being represented and blossoming.
- People being themselves.
 - Youth breaking stereotypes.

Trunk: activities (what we need to do)

- Promote healthy relationships in books, TV, and media.
- Teach better communication skills.
- "Stop glamourizing toxic and dominant relationships in the media where youth are highly influenced off of it."
- Build an awareness of toxic masculinity and how to break out of it/stop the cycle.
- Build awareness about different types of relationships.
- Promote safety and solidarity.

Leaves: outputs & indicators (how we know it's working)

- Youth looking out for each other and speaking up when identifying unhealthy relationships.
- People respecting their differences and the variety that exists in relationships.
- Those who have had difficult pasts or have trauma building new healthy relationships.

ROOTS: INPUTS (RESOURCES) AND VALUES

- Education resources
- Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™
- Social media platforms
- Workshops that discuss the issues of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Different resources for different age groups
- Guide teachers

Vision for Change – Theme Team Recommendations

The #CanadaWeWant healthy relationships theme team discussed several recommendations and hopes for the future of supporting and educating children and youth on healthy relationships:

1. The promotion of healthy relationships in the media (i.e., film, tv, books).
2. Promoting better communication skills.
3. Putting a stop to the glamourization of toxic and dominant relationships in the media that youth are consistently exposed to and easily influenced by.
4. Explicit awareness of toxic masculinity (what it looks like, what it entails), and how to break out of it.
5. Building awareness of different types of relationships.
6. Promoting safety and solidarity.
7. Implementation of education resources addressing healthy relationships (different resources available for different age groups).
8. Social media platform discussing and promoting healthy relationships.
9. Other resources available to promote healthy relationships (i.e., texting, guest speakers).
10. Workshops made available that discuss the issues of healthy and unhealthy relationships.
11. Including the four pillars of respect, listening, understanding, and communication, when teaching children and youth about healthy relationships.
12. Better definition of what a healthy relationship is.

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