

Evidence Brief

Challenges & Strategies for Programs Engaging Rural Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "rural youth," "youth programs," "best practices," "retaining youth," "activities for rural youth," and "rural challenges."

Definitions of Key Terms

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health defines youth engagement as "a whole community approach to mental health care and an active and ongoing process that embeds youth voice at all levels. It is a set of practices that offer youth opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults, learn skills, work on issues they're passionate about, and contribute to social change" (2016; see Definition section of online toolkit).

Youth engagement has multiple levels, ranging from *manipulation* – in which adults give youth direction on what to do without informing youth why they are doing it – to *youth-adult partnerships* – in which there is equal decision-making power and influence, with youth and adults working together towards a common goal (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

Summary of Evidence

Youth-serving programs in rural areas share many of the same challenges that programs in other areas face, such as dealing with limited funding, recruiting appropriate staff, and retaining program participants (Collins et al., 2008; Cross & Lauzon, 2015). However, studies point out that these programs also face a number of challenges that are unique to rural communities. These challenges contribute to the difficulty of retaining youth in programs. These challenges, along with promising practices to help minimize them, are listed below:

1. Geographic distance between homes and facilities.

Long distances between homes and service providers in rural areas can make it difficult for youth-serving programs to retain participants (Leyshon, 2011; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Collins et al., 2008; Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Youth in rural areas often spend a significant amount of time travelling to and from school, making it difficult to travel to

another area to participate in programs (Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Youth may not own or have access to vehicles, and public transport in rural areas can be sparse (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Ontario Rural Council, 2007).

Promising Practices:

- a) Whenever possible, move activities closer to where youth live or spend time** (Ontario Rural Council, 2007; Collins et al., 2008).
- b) Consider building coalitions to help with transportation** (Ontario Rural Council, 2007; Collins et al., 2008). This can include reaching out to drivers in the community to see if these services may be extended to youth (Ontario Rural Council, 2007). It may also be helpful to partner with other community organizations that need transportation services, such as childcare providers, elderly service centres, and religious institutions (Collins et al., 2008).
- c) Consider costs of transportation and whether this can be built into the budget of your program** (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Ontario Rural Council, 2007; Collins et al., 2008). Reach out to the school district to inquire about adding an additional route to transport youth from school to the program site (Collins et al., 2008).
- d) Use technology to communicate with youth.** Technology can be an important asset when working in rural communities. It can be used to connect with youth about upcoming activities, and to check in if they are unable to make it to the program (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).

2. Small and dispersed populations.

Rural areas have small and dispersed populations, which can make social interaction more challenging (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Evans, 2007). The small populations in rural areas also create anxiety around privacy concerns for young people who do not want their personal lives to be outed (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

Promising Practices:

- a) Be mindful of privacy concerns.** Youth need to know that you are aware they may have concerns around privacy, and it is important to think about and plan how you will navigate these concerns before engaging youth (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). In order for youth to be comfortable attending programs, they need

to know that staff will do their best to maintain their privacy.

- b) Create opportunities for youth to interact with one another.** Providing a space for youth to relax and hang out will give youth a chance to connect with peers in their communities, something that may be challenging for them to do.

3. Overall health and wellbeing of rural youth.

Youth in rural areas are more likely to have poorer health and overall wellbeing than their urban counterparts (DesMeules & Pong, 2006). A number of studies have pointed out that the poorer health and wellbeing of rural youth can be attributed to limited health facilities, a lack of access to these facilities, and high rates of poverty in rural areas (DesMeules & Pong, 2006; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Correiro & Walker, 2004; YouthREX, 2017).

Promising Practices:

- a) Incorporate time for discussions about the importance of mental and physical health.** This is particularly important for rural areas that have limited facilities dedicated to providing mental health care. Youth are likely to benefit from having a safe space where they can discuss issues surrounding their physical and mental health (YouthREX, 2017; Cross & Lauzon, 2015).
- b) Plan to have more than one activity happening at a time.** Whenever possible, it is ideal to have a number of activities happening at one time (Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Not all activities have to be structured, and can even involve down time, computer time, or time to watch a movie (Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Having more than one activity at a time allows youth to decide what they feel like participating in, and reduces feelings of pressure among youth (Cross & Lauzon, 2015).
- c) Incorporate time for activities that involve learning new skills.** Learning new skills that may be transferred to the workforce is an important program aspect for youth (YouthREX, 2017; Cross & Lauzon, 2015; Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- d) Understand youth in terms of their strengths and assets.** Programs working with youth should avoid taking the deficit-based approach that many organizations adopt. Instead, they should strive to develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths and assets, and acknowledge that the 'problems' they face are connected to broader social issues (Baldrige, 2014).

- e) **Create safe spaces for youth to hang out.** Rural youth have reported that they feel as though they are not welcome to hang out in public spaces, or that their age confers a ‘bad reputation’ (Leyshon, 2011; Evans, 2007; Christie & Lauzon, 2014). Youth may be looking for spaces where they can hang out with other youth and feel comfortable fully expressing themselves, without fear of being excluded or mocked. A good way to minimize these fears is to constantly interrupt hurtful and inappropriate comments. Spaces that are inclusive of youth should strive to offer hours dedicated for use by youth only (Maxwell, 2015).

4. Lack of feelings of belonging among youth.

Much of the research on the topic of belonging suggests that people are more likely to feel drawn to groups or situations in which they have a sense of power or influence (Evans, 2007; Corriero & Walker, 2004). Unfortunately, many youth find themselves in contexts where they have little to no power or influence (Evans, 2007). This is among the top reasons that youth often feel they do not belong in their communities (Kitchen et al., 2012; Corriero & Walker, 2004; Christie & Lauzon, 2014). Creating a sense of belonging among youth is key to making sure they will return and benefit from the program.

Promising Practices:

- a) **Create space for youth voice, and opportunities to integrate direction from young people.** This is a key component of meaningful youth engagement. A number of studies have pointed out that youth in rural areas often feel they are excluded from decision-making processes about issues that will affect them, resulting in feelings of powerlessness (Leyshon, 2011; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Corriero & Walker, 2004). Youth are more likely to be attracted to situations where they feel they have some power or influence (Evans, 2007). Youth should be a part of the process of planning program sessions and activities – they will be more invested in attending and activities will reflect their interests.
- b) **Communicate with youth.** If you seek out youth perspectives, you need to incorporate these perspectives (YouthREX, 2018). If it is not possible to do so, you need to let youth know about these limitations so that young people don’t feel as though they are being ignored (YouthREX, 2018).
- c) **Collaborate with other community organizations.** Partnering with other community organizations, such as schools and local organizations, is also key to creating a sense of

belonging for youth (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, 2014). These partnerships, when they are about moving towards a common goal, will help youth feel they are actively participating in, and contributing to, the wider community (Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, 2014; Cross & Lauzon, 2015).

Examples of services and activities for youth in rural areas:

The Community Bicycle Center (in Biddeford, Maine, United States) exists to provide youth enrichment opportunities for personal growth through bicycling-related activities. The centre has a number of programs for youth that involve using, fixing, and learning about bicycles.

<http://communitybike.net/youth-programs/>

Fusion Youth Centre (in Ingersoll, Ontario) is a centre for youth between the ages of 10 and 18. The centre can be used to hang out with friends, or to participate in one of their many activities, including skateboarding, cooking, drumming, drawing, and help with job searching.

<https://fusionyouthcentre.ca/>

The Game Loft (in Belfast, Maine, United States) is a community-based organization of the Maine Youth Alliance. The organization embraces the theory of Positive Youth Development. Their organization aims to promote positive youth development through the use of non-electronic games and community involvement.

<https://www.thegameloft.org/about-the-game-loft>

The RAFT (in St. Catherines, Ontario) is a youth hostel and drop-in resource centre. The RAFT provides a number of programs for youth, including a hostel, a Steps to Independent Living program, a Regional Transportation program, a Community-based Youth Reconnection Program, and a number of after-school programs. After-school programs include activities such as gym games, drama activities, dance classes, cooking lessons, scrapbooking sessions, special outings, homework help, self-esteem and empowerment workshops, and leadership groups.

<http://307.cmsintelligence.com/site/home>

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