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# A Strategy to Promote Healthy Youth Relationships in Alberta to Prevent Domestic Violence

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence was initiated by the Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence, in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary. Shift is aimed at significantly reducing domestic violence in Alberta using a primary prevention approach to stop first-time victimization and perpetration. In short, primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and prevent problems before they occur. The purpose of Shift is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large, to significantly reduce the rates of domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts, through the perspective of primary prevention.

Over the past three years, Shift has worked to understand promising levers for change, and identify programs, practices, policies and initiatives that have been proven effective in preventing and reducing domestic violence. Much research points to children, youth and young adults as a key lever for primary prevention. Most of the precursors of domestic violence occur in childhood and adolescence. Children and youth learn relationship skills and social behaviours from their parents and other family members. A high proportion of children who witness or experience violent relationships in childhood go on to perpetuate these patterns in adulthood with their own children and partners. This strategy is aimed at building and promoting healthy relationships with youth populations across Alberta.

### **1.1 The Issue**

In addition to experiencing negative physical, behavioural, psychological and cognitive effects<sup>1</sup>, children who have been exposed to domestic violence often learn destructive patterns about the use of violence and power in relationships. Children may learn that it is acceptable to exert control or relieve stress by using violence, or that violence is in some way linked to expressions of intimacy and affection. These lessons can have a powerful and negative effect in social situations and relationships in both childhood and adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

A growing body of research shows that domestic violence is often preceded by dating violence in adolescence, which is often preceded by bullying and aggression in childhood and early adolescence, and that both bullying and dating violence are associated with the experience of child abuse and/or witnessing domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> (This is especially true for girls<sup>4</sup>). Canadian researchers describe bullying “as a warm-up for long-term relationship problems. The lessons of power and aggression learned in

playground bullying can transfer to sexual harassment and dating aggression, and may extend to workplace harassment, as well as marital, child and elder abuse.”<sup>5</sup>

Police-reported rates of dating violence in Canada appear to be on the rise, with almost 23,000 incidents of dating violence reported to police in 2008.<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada reports that, in 2012, dating violence was more prevalent than spousal violence, with a rate that was higher than all other relationship categories, including friends and acquaintances. Common assault was the most frequently occurring offence in dating relationships and girls were the victim 10 times more often than boys among 15 to 19 year-olds.<sup>7</sup>

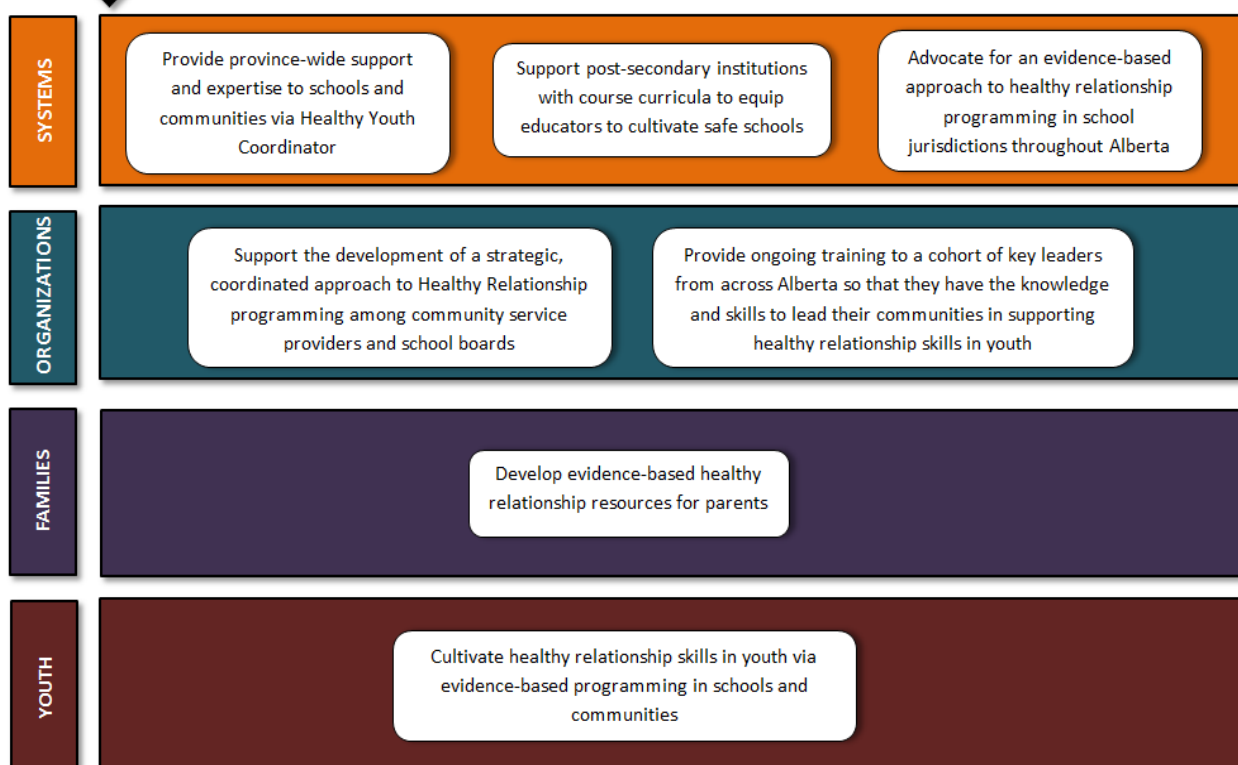
## **1.2 The Solution: A Multi-Dimensional Approach**

Complex and intractable social problems cannot be solved by focusing solely on interventions at the individual level; the social environments within which individuals are embedded (i.e., families, communities, organizations, and institutions or systems) must also support changes to attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and behaviors if those changes are to last. This is why most models for creating social change emphasize the need for a multi-dimensional approach. For example *The Spectrum of Prevention*, a key primary prevention model, focuses on activities at multiple levels, including: strengthening individual knowledge and skills; promoting community education; educating service providers and practitioners; fostering coalitions and networks; changing organizational practices; and influencing policy and legislation.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with the *Spectrum of Prevention*, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence is collaborating with multiple groups, including the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health – Center for Prevention Science (CAMH-CPS), on the implementation and evaluation of a multi-dimensional approach. The Healthy Youth Relationships Framework (below) includes strategies aimed at addressing key barriers and enablers to healthy relationships at multiple levels, including individual, family, organizational, and systemic.

## Healthy Youth Relationship Framework

In partnership with CAMH, Shift is working  
to increase capacity at multiple levels...



To ensure that young people have the skills to develop and maintain healthy relationships, so that...

The next generation can live a life free from domestic violence

## 2.0 Strategies

The seven strategies in Shift's *Healthy Youth Relationships Framework* are targeted to youth, parents, teachers, community organizations, volunteers, as well as to systems, including school boards, advanced education, and government (Ministry of Education and Human Services). In essence, the framework is tailored to anyone with the potential to play a key role in supporting youth to be in healthy relationships and reduce the incidences of bullying, dating and intimate partner violence. Key strategies include the following:

1. Cultivate healthy relationship skills in youth via evidence-based programming in schools and community based programs.
2. Develop evidence-based healthy relationship resources for parents.
3. Support the development of a strategic and coordinated approach to violence prevention programming for children and youth from K -12.
4. Provide ongoing training to a cohort of key leaders from across Alberta so that they have the knowledge and skills to lead their communities in promoting and building healthy youth relationship skills.
5. Provide province-wide support and expertise to schools and communities via Healthy Youth Coordinator.
6. Support post-secondary institutions with course curricula to equip educators to cultivate safe schools.
7. Advocate for an evidence-based approach to healthy relationship programming in school jurisdictions throughout Alberta.

Each of these strategies is briefly outlined below.

## ■ Strategy 1: Cultivate healthy relationship skills in youth via evidence-based programming in schools and community based programs

In partnership with CAMH Centre for Prevention Science and the Ministry of Human Services, Shift is scaling up the Fourth R (Relationship) program across Alberta. The Fourth R is an evidence-based, school-based universal prevention resource that targets peer and dating violence and related risk behaviors. The contention is that relationship skills can be taught in much the same way as the other “three R’s” (Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic). Intervention components at the classroom level are targeted to students in Grades 7, 8 and 9. The Fourth R is comprised of three units (21 sessions) to address violence, substance use, and healthy sexuality/sexual behavior. Together, these three units address the triad of adolescent risk behaviors that are connected to each other in terms of co-occurrence. Each unit contains strategies for values clarification, decision-making, provision of accurate information and an extensive skill development component. Connections among the units are emphasized to promote the integrated development of *Communication* and *Well-being* competencies. Youth participate in ample roleplays to practice assertive communication techniques both as direct and indirect (i.e., bystanders) participants in conflict and pressure situations. Furthermore, they have the opportunity to apply the skills in personalized scenarios in each of the three areas. In Alberta, the Fourth R resources and strategies are aligned to the Alberta Education Health and Life Skills Program of Studies outcomes and very much aligned with *Inspiring Education*. (See Appendix B for a breakdown of the number of schools and school divisions participating in the Fourth R, along with the number of teachers trained and students who have taken part in the program in the past two years).

In addition to schools, community programs are a key site for healthy relationships programming. The Fourth R includes a community-delivered program called Healthy Relationships Plus (HRP). The HRP includes 15 sessions designed for youth age 13- 18 to learn a variety of healthy relationship skills such as active listening, assertive communication, and apologizing. It also helps youth recognize the differences between unhealthy and healthy relationships and what factors influence decision-making. Shift is working with youth-serving agencies to deliver HRP in community settings throughout Alberta. (This is also linked to Strategy 4 as the cohort of community leaders that we are working with is being trained to on HRP so that they can bring the program to their communities).



## ■ Strategy 2: Develop evidence-based healthy relationship resources for parents

Although parents continue to play an important role in their adolescents' lives, the role of parent engagement in prevention is often overlooked with this age group (adolescents). The purpose of the Fourth R parent-level intervention is to increase parents' understanding of the Fourth R and develop a consistent vocabulary and skills for discussing healthy relationships with their children. In the first year (2013-4), all program components will be developed and piloted, including homework assignments, online modules, and face-to-face workshops (See Diagram Below). A preliminary feasibility, implementation, and satisfaction evaluation will also be conducted to inform the next phase of the research.

### Pilot Resources and Supports for Parents

| Intervention A:<br>Homework<br>Assignments   | Intervention B:<br>Online Modules   | Intervention C:<br>Face-to-Face<br>Workshops  |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides opportunity for topics and skills taught in class to be reinforced with a trusted adult</li> <li>• Maximum of 2 assignments per unit at grade 7 and grade 8</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides parents with more information about the Fourth R</li> <li>• Offers suggestions and scenarios for communication with their teen</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extends the online modules to an in-person environment</li> <li>• Opportunity for greater skill development with guidance of a Fourth R trainer</li> </ul> |

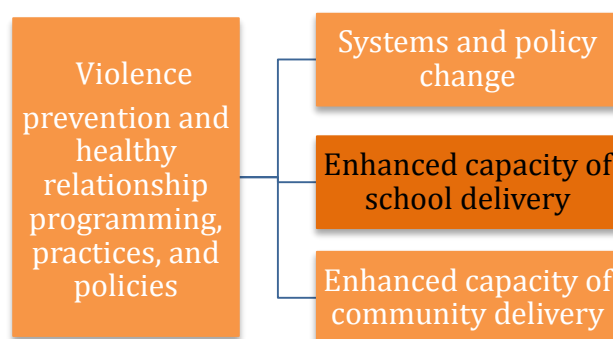
## ■ Strategy 3: Support the development of a strategic, coordinated approach to Healthy Relationship (violence prevention) policies and programming among community service providers, school boards, and funders at the local level

In 2012, Shift conducted research to: 1) Identify, collect and analyze violence prevention programs for children and youth (K to 12) currently offered in Calgary by not for profit organizations; and (2) Review best and promising practices in the area of violence prevention programming for children and youth (K to 12). The final report "Developing a strategic and coordinated community approach to violence prevention programming for children and youth in Calgary Phase One: Best and Promising Practices and Program Scan"<sup>9</sup> was shared with many stakeholders in the Calgary community. Two funders (City of Calgary FCSS and United Way of Calgary and Area), two school jurisdictions (Calgary Board of Education and Calgary Catholic School District) and 24 agencies with 14 delivering programs (for a list of partners please see Attachment B) that more work

needed to be done, and subsequently committed to the next phase of development.

In 2013, City of Calgary FCSS and United Way of Calgary and Area supported Phase Two, which includes: (1) Development of a strategic, coordinated approach to violence prevention programming for children and youth, and; (2) Research into appropriate and effective models of violence prevention for diverse children and youth. In early 2014, the partners endorsed a Framework for Action (below) and have agreed to focus their work on component number two: *Enhancing the Capacity of School-Based Delivery of Violence Prevention and Healthy Relationship programming*.

### Calgary Case Study: Violence Prevention Programming: Framework for Action



Enhanced Capacity of School-Based Delivery of Violence Prevention and Healthy Relationship means: (1) Enhancement of evidence-based practices (EBP) across community based organizations and school boards (2) Better coordination between Not-For-Profit (NFP) service providers, (3) System coordination between funders, schools and NFP service providers to ensure consistency across Calgary, and (4) Collectively working to influence policy and legislative changes that support violence prevention and healthy relationships. Shift is the process of designing and implementation strategy for 2014 – 2017.

#### ■ Strategy 4: Provide ongoing training to a cohort of key leaders from across Alberta so that they have the knowledge and skills to lead their communities in promoting and building healthy youth relationship skills

Adult leaders play a critical role in socializing youth. It is important that all professionals and volunteers who work with youth have the knowledge, confidence and skills to create healthy social climates and prevent bullying. To this end, Shift is working with partners like PREVnet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) and CAMH to train 10 senior leaders from each region in Alberta on evidence based

practices over three years. The goal of this project is to bring the knowledge and resources to Alberta at the local level in order to support local expertise and capacity. The group of ten trainers have become a *Community of Purpose/Practice* working towards becoming Master Trainers in a variety of evidence based training modules. The cohort is brought together twice a year for two-day training sessions. Members are also supported by the Coordinator through coaching, sharing resources and participating in an online forum to support real time learning.

Developing a cascading network of leaders who are able to provide training and support to individuals within their community/ region who work directly with youth is an important piece of the puzzle in a comprehensive, coordinated approach to promoting healthy youth relationships. We know enhancing the knowledge, confidence and skills of the leaders, volunteers and professionals who work with youth to promote healthy relationships will translate into enhanced social-emotional development and long term well-being for children and youth.

**■ Strategy 5: Provide province-wide support and expertise to schools and communities via a Healthy Youth Coordinator**

The literature on implementing best practices clearly shows that extensive supports are required in order to ensure buy-in, organizational capacity, appropriate adaptation, fidelity, and ongoing improvement. Without a system in place to support delivery, best practices are unlikely to be faithfully implemented and sustained.<sup>10</sup> Anticipating the need for ongoing technical assistance and support, Shift sought funding for a Healthy Youth Relationships Coordinator position. Initiated in 2012, the Healthy Youth Relationships Coordinator position is designed to support the development and implementation of a strategic, coordinated and comprehensive approach to promoting and building healthy youth relationships across Alberta. The Coordinator offers technical expertise, problem-solving, coaching and mentoring to the various stakeholders involved in implementing any of the HYR strategies. She also works with educators, community service providers, school boards, evaluators, policy makers and funders to provide ongoing learning opportunities; increase awareness of evidence-based practices related to healthy youth relationships; manage ongoing data collection and stakeholder feedback; and support coordination and collaboration across the province.

**■ Strategy 6: Support post-secondary institutions with course curricula to equip educators to cultivate safe schools**

Increasing the capacity of those who are in the caring professions to help youth develop healthy relationships and positive social-emotional skills is a key factor for reducing rates of bullying, dating violence and ultimately domestic violence. This includes building the knowledge and skills of teachers in relation to: social and emotional learning, child

development, trauma informed practice, an understanding of violence in all its manifestations (home, school, community, societal), brain development, developmental trajectory, violence prevention, healthy relationships, evidence based practices, resources and programs, policy and legislation, and tools and techniques to better manage classrooms is a domestic violence prevention strategy. As a result, Shift collaborated with the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary to develop a graduate-level, four course interdisciplinary certificate program *Safe Schools, Safe Communities*. The objective of this program is to equip educators, social workers, health care providers, and other community service workers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to develop safe and caring learning environments inside and outside of formal school settings for all young people. The pilot program will start in 2015.

■ **Strategy 7: Advocate for an evidence-based approach to healthy relationship programming in school jurisdictions throughout Alberta**

Using a ‘bottom-up’ approach by working with individual schools and school boards to implement evidence-based healthy relationship programming is critical; however, it is equally important to cultivate the readiness, understanding, and political will at a systems level. Ideally, this would involve supporting the provincial government to develop an integrated approach to healthy relationships skills so that socio-emotional learning is integrated into the Alberta curriculum. Shift will produce issue briefs for the Ministry of Education and work with Researchers and key decision-makers in an effort to develop a system-level commitment to supporting healthy relationships programming in schools throughout Alberta.

### **3.0 Ongoing Framework Development**

The *Healthy Youth Relationships Framework* represents Shift’s best thinking to this point. However, as we continue to develop our understanding of the individual, family, organizational, and systemic factors that support or constrain the development of healthy relationship skills in children and youth, we will continue to refine current strategies and develop new ones. Thus, the framework is a living document, one that is intended to reflect our ongoing learning about the best ways to support healthy youth relationships in Alberta.

## Appendix A: Six Levels of the Spectrum of Prevention<sup>11</sup>

| Levels of the Spectrum                        | Description*   |
|---|--|
| Strengthening individual knowledge and skills | Enhancing an individual's capability and skills in non-violent means of resolving interpersonal conflict and preventing injury, crime and violence.  |
| Promoting community education                 | Reaching groups of people with information and resources in order to promote healthy relationships and equitable gender norms.   |
| Educating service providers and practitioners | Informing providers who will transmit skills and knowledge to others to disrupt and stop the violence.   |
| Fostering coalitions and networks             | Bringing together groups and individuals for broader goals and greater impact and to influence healthy social and community norms.   |
| Changing organizational practices             | Adopting regulations and norms to improve health and safety and provide leadership in diverse settings to support healthy relationships.   |
| Influencing policy and legislation            | Developing strategies to change laws and policies in order to influence outcomes in social services, health, education and justice that support gender equity, reduce poverty and provide a strong social safety net for those who are vulnerable. |

\*Please note for the purposes of this framework the description section is customized to align with family violence.

## **Appendix B: List of Partners**

1. Alberta Health Services
2. Antyx Community Arts
3. Awo Taan Healing Lodge Society
4. Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary
5. Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth
6. Calgary Board of Education
7. Calgary Catholic School District
8. Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse
9. Calgary Counselling Centre
10. Calgary Chinese Community Service Association
11. Calgary Domestic Violence Collective
12. Calgary Family Services Society
13. Calgary Sexual Health Centre
14. Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter
15. Calgary Police Services
16. Canadian Red Cross Society, Southern Alberta Region
17. Catholic Family Service
18. Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary
19. Ghost River Discovery Society
20. Hull Services
21. McMan Youth Family and Community Services
22. Red Cross
23. Woods Homes
24. United Way
25. YWCA of Calgary

## Appendix C: Implementation of the Fourth R in Alberta

*Number of Schools, Teachers, and Students impacted by implementing Fourth R resources and instructional strategies, September 2012 – January 2014.*

| School Division                  | # of Schools       | # of Teachers Trained | Estimated # of Students Impacted |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Elk Island Public Schools (EPIS) | 8                  | 12                    | 997                              |
| Edmonton Catholic (ECSD)         | 16                 | 82                    | 3608                             |
| Edmonton Public (EPSB)           | 17                 | 20                    | 1725                             |
| Rocky View (RVSD)                | 4                  | 10                    | 100                              |
| Calgary Board of Education (CBE) | 16                 | 63                    | 2980                             |
| Calgary Catholic (CCSD)          | 7                  | 13                    | 1450                             |
| Golden Hills (GHSD)              | 6                  | 7                     | 100                              |
| Grande Prairie Public (GPPSD)    | 6                  | 27                    | 570                              |
| Holy Family (HFRCD)              | 5                  | 21                    | 115                              |
| Peace Wapiti (PWSD)              | 8                  | 23                    | 235                              |
| Prairie Land (PLRD)              | 8 (whole Division) | 13                    | 130                              |
| <b>Totals</b>                    | <b>101</b>         | <b>291</b>            | <b>12 010</b>                    |

Our goal is to have 50,000 grade 7, 8, and 9 students engage in The Fourth R program by 2016.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> Wells, L.; Claussen, C.; Abboud, R.; Pauls, M. 2012. "Developing a strategic and coordinated approach to violence prevention programming for children and youth in Calgary. Phase one: Best and promising practices and program scan." (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence), <http://preventdomesticviolence.ca/research/violence-prevention-programming-children-and-youth-calgary>.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example: Duncan C. Meyers, Joseph A. Durlak, Abraham Wandersman 2012. "The Quality Implementation Framework: A Synthesis of Critical Steps in the Implementation Process. *Am J Community Psychol*, DOI 10.1007/s10464-012-9522-x.
- <sup>11</sup> Fujie Parks, L.; Cohen, L.; Kravitz-Wirtz, N. 2007. "Poised for Prevention: Advancing Promising Approaches to Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence (Oakland, CA: Prevention Institute), <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-32/127.html>.