

Real Talk from Agassiz Youth

A report from Valley Youth Partnership for Engagement and Respect (VYPER): July 2015



“Youth need to know that services exist, but they also need to know they have a safe place to give feedback – to share their experience, whether or not it was good or bad – to use their voices to help make it better. Youth would access it more if they felt their feedback would be heard. They would give feedback on their experiences in hopes to change how things are going.”

- Agassiz Youth

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Valley Youth Partnership for Engagement and Respect (VYPER)

In February 2014, Health Canada’s Drug Strategy Community Initiatives Fund (DSCIF) funded a 2.5 year project based in the Fraser Health Authority region of British Columbia, called Valley Youth Partnership for Engagement and Respect (VYPER).

A commitment, a belief, and a hope

Very briefly, the project can be described as emerging from the following commitment, belief and hope:

- **Commitment:** To a capabilities approach, which asks, "What are young people capable of doing or being in this environment?"
- **Belief:** That young people will be the most effective proponents and stewards of an evidence-informed approach to youth-related health promotion and prevention in their communities.
- **Hope:** That communities, with intentional supports from VYPER (staff and funding), will bring forward opportunities for young people to discover, explore and demonstrate their capabilities in ways that compellingly embolden and sustain community commitment to the capabilities approach to youth engagement and prevention.

Objectives

VYPER’s objectives are to support the implementation of evidence-informed prevention and health promotion practices through facilitation of linkages and exchanges among regional services and supports with the goal of:

1. Strengthening and expanding health-promoting and preventative social connectedness to offset or replace detrimental influences
2. Building skills, capacity and supportive environments that encourage adjustment of self-concepts that may be causing youth to identify with these detrimental agents or deficits – moving from socially-assigned identities (based on disadvantages) to self-assigned preferred identities (based on personal strengths and capabilities)
3. Providing a range of mechanisms, roles and responsibilities (especially the opportunity and responsibility to diffuse leadership throughout the cohort of VYPER participants – adults and youth alike) that support the development of a sense of self-efficacy (gaining more control over the decisions that affect their lives) and reduce fatalism (creating opportunities to discover a more positive outlook for the future)

Theory of change

“By supporting community entities to more consistently and intentionally collaborate with each other and with rural youth and youth who are disadvantaged by their living conditions on the initiation, development, delivery and evaluation of programs that affect and aim to engage youth, programs will be more effective, and youth will be more resilient, develop more strength-based identities, have increased self-efficacy and reduced fatalism, which will consequently prevent, delay and/or reduce youth substance use and abuse.”

This theory is supported by evidence compiled by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse in “Stronger Together: Canadian Standards for Community-based Youth Substance Abuse Prevention” (2010).

The standards state: “The potential rewards of community-based prevention activity are enormous, but preventing youth substance abuse isn’t easy. Research shows community-based initiatives can work but in real-world situations often don’t work. The reasons why this is so are not completely clear, but research and practice suggest two possibilities:”

1. “Mounting a community-based prevention initiative is not a trivial undertaking.” On this point CCSA identifies that, “Only by monitoring efforts to keep the initiative on track and evaluating activities to see if they work will a team know for sure whether its efforts are worthwhile. Standards can guide a team’s process, increase the likelihood that it reaches its destination and help the team demonstrate success.” (p. 12)
2. “Community-based teams often do not use all of the tools at their disposal.” On this point CCSA identifies that, “Too often, community-based teams or coalitions overlook the most powerful tool at their disposal—youth people themselves. Initiatives that ‘target’ youth or are ‘directed to’ youth, rather than ‘partnering with’ youth will likely have a muted effect. Committing to partner with youth is not necessarily the easiest route for a team to take, but it’s undoubtedly more likely to be a dynamic and effective initiative. It is this point that adult team members must come to fully appreciate—encouraging participation, leadership and decision-making among youth partners isn’t just good for the youth themselves (although it certainly is), it’s vitally important for the outcome of the initiative.” (p. 13).

VYPER aims to address these two CCSA-identified possible impediments to successful community-based prevention activity by providing:

1. A multi-modal systems-based change management and monitoring framework (Outcome Mapping), designed and tested for addressing socially embedded issues such as problematic substance use. CCSA identifies the use of alcohol and other drugs among youth as, “complex [and] influenced by legislation, policy, media, corporate interests, societal structures and community values” (p. 12).
2. A focus on supporting youth-adult-partnership activities and behaviours. This strategy is aimed, not just at change in the present, but at creating a legacy of capability and competence at a community level.

VYPER in Agassiz

The Agassiz-Harrison Healthy Communities Committee was one of the dozens of organizations that provided letters of support for the original VYPER proposal to Health Canada in April 2013.

The Chilliwack-Agassiz-Harrison area was one of the first areas to hire its VYPER area facilitator, in early May, 2014. The area facilitator, like all VYPER area facilitators – and in line with the capabilities approach, was hired by a youth-adult-partnership hiring committee (with local youth developing and approving the job posting, reviewing all applications and selecting interviewees, coming up with interview questions and conducting interviews, deliberating and deciding to interview some candidates a second time before selecting the successful candidate).

While some youth from Agassiz were able to come to weekly meetings that started up immediately in Chilliwack, it was quickly determined that a separate meeting would be appropriate for Agassiz youth. The approximately 5 youth who initially joined VYPER meetings in Agassiz had been connected to the existing youth drop-in and the Youth Inclusion Program (YIP), or to other adults in the community (teachers, librarians, service providers).

It took several months for meetings to grow (almost exclusively through youth-to-youth word-of-mouth) from the first 5 youth, but Agassiz, with meetings that sometimes have as many as 20 youth in attendance, is now one of VYPER's most-active areas. Between June 2014 and July 2015, there have been:

- Meetings: 36
- Number of individual youth and young adults involved: 27
- Average number of youth per meeting: 9
- Age range: 12 to 22 years old
- Average age: 17 years old
- Number of youth in alternative high school: 12
- Number of youth in mainstream high school: 11
- Number of youth not in high school (graduated): 4

There were also dozens of one-to-one interactions with youth. Youth who may feel uncomfortable sharing in front of the group tend to take opportunities to share information they feel is important to the conversation with the Area Facilitator during breaks in the meetings or while being driven to or from meetings. The security of the one-to-one discussions gives youth the opportunity to share more personal stories that add to the data being collected, without having to 'out' themselves.

Youth have the opportunity to meet the VYPER area facilitator before attending any of the meetings. This provides youth the opportunity to build a connection and trust and to hear about the VYPER project without any commitment to join, or to continue participation once attending the meeting.

Specific meeting activities

Many of the youth-adult-partnership meetings that are run in association with VYPER, instead of following a linear agenda, collaboratively develop an "agenda map" at the start of each meeting – where anyone can throw up a potential topic for discussion (and additional topics can be added throughout the meeting). Like with a map, not every point needs to be visited during every trip/meeting, but instead the group can travel from place to place on the map by consensus and then fold up the map at the end of the meeting to follow up on unvisited points, revisit points that are appropriate, and subtract and add to the map at future meetings.

Interspersed within all the other topics youth brought forward were some main activities: an environmental scan, grant application development, responding to a community capacity building tool, and developing a "Real Talk" event.

Environmental scan (June 2014 to July 2015 and ongoing)

A common technology that VYPER utilizes is an environmental scan of youth-related programs and resources available in a community (conducted with adults and youth separately). Typically the scan identifies disconnects between what youth and adults identify as resources available in the community. Unfailingly, scans have identified resources that adults are aware of, but youth are not. However, with free flow of conversation, many other details emerge, particularly from youth – about why youth may or may not feel comfortable accessing those resources of which they are aware. Critically, simply having these conversations with adults and youth begins a process of inquiry for all, which always eventually leads from discussion *about* resources for youth, to discussion *between* resources and youth.

Initial discussions with youth revealed that youth had limited knowledge of resources available, aside from school counsellors and some services available at Agassiz Community Services. The youth identified many resources they thought should be in place to support youth with mental health (particularly suicidality, depression and anxiety) and substance use challenges, but they felt most of these were either not available or weren't approachable for various reasons. Specifically, youth provided the following estimates from a combination of their own experiences and those of other youth that they knew:

- How many youth do you know who have struggled significantly and not gotten the help they needed over the last year?
 - Average of 12 youth that fit that description (with likely overlap between the youth reporting)
- How many times are you aware of you or someone you know reaching out for help with a MHSU concern and not receiving a response that met the needs presented?
 - Average of 18
- How many times would you say that you or someone you know didn't reach out for help with a MHSU concern because you or they thought help would not be available?
 - Average of 17

Over the more recent months there has been a slight shift as youth have become more aware of resources and adult connections in the community, due to participation with VYPER and working on Youth-Adult Partnerships in Agassiz. It is important to note that although youth have identified being more aware of services, they still have hesitations seeking out resources, services and supports because of negative past experiences they have had or witnessed.

VYPER Mini Grant application (January 2015)

VYPER's mini-grants are designed to support the process of bringing together adults and youth/young-adults to develop the Youth-Adult-Partnership Grant applications, including such activities as:

- Participating youth and adults getting to know each other better and building trust
- Developing community agreements about how youth and adults will work together
- Developing and clarifying your project's vision, mission, possible activities and outcome markers (VYPER staff are available for free application development workshops that touch on these areas.)
- Producing and submitting your Youth-Adult-Partnership Grant application

Mini-grants will be for a maximum of \$500, generally to cover honoraria for youth participation, food, and transportation costs.

In January 2015, Agassiz-Harrison Community services submitted a mini-grant application with the following general description:

Agassiz-Harrison Community Services (AHCS) would like to improve youth services in the District of Kent and Harrison Hot Springs. Funding for previous youth programming (Youth Inclusion Program) ended earlier this year

which has left a gap in service delivery for the community. Because of this loss in programming, AHCS would like to develop new programs to include youth in the Agassiz-Harrison area. As part of this project development, AHCS plans to engage youth to determine the wants and needs of youth from all backgrounds, living our communities. AHCS wants these new programs to be meaningful and supportive to youth. This valuable knowledge will help guide the development of future youth programs that will be inclusive to all young people.

The application was reviewed and approved by the VYPER regional youth committee.

Community capacity building tool (February 2015)

In early February 2015, youth and adults in Agassiz were engaged separately in responding to the questions in a validated tool, the Community Capacity Building Tool (CCBT). For the purposes of the tool, respondents were asked to provide retrospective (from before VYPER started in Agassiz in June 2014) responses, viewing their “project” as “youth-adult-partnership behaviours”. The tool covers 9 domains and asks 35 specific questions answered with a 4 point scale (1- just started, 2 - on the road, 3 - nearly there, 4 - we’re there).

The CCBT will be conducted again in the middle of 2016 to assess for post-VYPER changes.

Youth Responses

Largely because the tool was not designed for youth, they engaged in a more-general conversation, and indicated all domains with a score of 1: “Just Started.”

Some key comments:

- We do not really have an opinion, but we would like to have more of one. No one has asked our opinions or supported us to develop and share them.
- We would like to be able to share our stories, and how people suffer with different things in different ways. We’d like to hear other people’s stories. You can learn things about yourself, or what you have (like depression) from hearing other people’s stories. If nobody talks about that stuff, then how am I supposed to bring it up?
- Sometimes we have Motivational speakers, but we only sit and listen to them. So maybe having workshops that get us talking in small groups or one to one, instead of in such a big group. Smaller groups get to the issues quicker, and are able to look at issues a lot closer than a bigger group. Bigger groups look just at the bigger picture.
- Adults generalize youth into being bad kids, like we are all bad. We get complaints about hanging out in front of the library, but we are just standing there hanging out. Where else are we supposed to go? Agassiz would feel like more of a community for us if they didn’t hate youth so much.
- I really like being part of this (CCBT discussion). I love it. I feel like I am being heard.

Adult responses

Adults responded specifically to each question, and responded with an average score (between the 9 domains) of 1.635: between “Just Started” and “On the Road.”

Some key comments:

- We need to find out if youth are interested in proving leadership, and if we are capable of supporting them into leadership.
- There is room for improvement in connection with youth and getting their feedback.
- We have given them a voice in the past, but there hasn’t been much follow-through from them or us.
- We’re not sure youth feel they can bring their concerns and ideas to adults.
- We know that when kids are in trouble they go to their friends. We have to work to make sure the kids know about available resources.

- At one point there was a huge counselling day for 300 kids. Big things came up – getting to identifying a lot of root causes. But was done a while ago. It was a tough day and emotional to participate in. But youth aren't afraid to talk about these things.
- We're the managers/thinkers. You can have the best ideas in the world, but without people, it won't get done. So VYPER suggests that youth can help with this work. Those kids will be successful if they are given tasks that they can handle and that build their confidence to handle more tasks.
- We have done some strategic planning, but it's nice to get more perspectives (during this CCBT process), and to get motivated again.

The 9 domains

Participation: Participation is the active involvement of people in improving their own and their community's health and well-being. Participating in a project means the target population, community members, and other stakeholders are involved in project activities, such as making decisions and evaluation

Leadership: Leadership includes developing and nurturing both formal and informal local leaders during a project. Effective leaders support, direct, deal with conflict, acknowledge and encourage community members' voices, share leadership, and facilitate networks to build on community resources. Leaders bring people with diverse skill sets together and may have both interpersonal and technical skills. Finally, an effective leader has a strategic vision for the future.

Community Structures: Community structures refers to smaller or less formal groups and committees that foster belonging and give the community a chance to express views and exchange information. Examples of community structures include church groups, youth groups, and self-help groups.

External Supports: External supports (funding bodies) such as government departments, foundations, and regional health authorities can link communities and external resources. At the beginning of a project, early external support may nurture community momentum.

Asking Why: Asking why refers to a community process that uncovers the root causes of community health issues and promotes solutions. The community comes together to critically assess the social, political and economic influences that result in differing health standards and conditions. Explorations through "asking why" helps refine a project to reflect the community needs.

Obtaining Resources: Obtaining resources includes finding time, money (other than from funding bodies), leadership, volunteers, information and facilities both from inside and outside the community.

Skills, Knowledge and Learning: Skills, Knowledge, and Learning are qualities in the project team, the target population, and the community that the project team uses and develops.

Linking with Others: Linking with others refers to linking your project with individuals and organizations. These project links help the community deal with its issues. Examples include creating partnerships or linking with networks and coalitions.

Sense of Community: Sense of community, within the context of a project, is fostered through building trust with others. Community projects can strengthen a sense of community when people come together to work on shared community problems. Collaborations give community members confidence to act and courage to feel hopeful about change.

VYPER Youth-Adult-Partnership grant application development (May 2015)

In May 2015, Agassiz-Harrison Community services submitted a VYPER Youth-Adult-Partnership grant application, which they described as being developed in the following way:

We held 5 youth-adult partnership meetings. VYPER staff person, Stacy Wood attended the first 2 meetings. During the youth-adult partnership meetings, we brainstormed ideas and completed the grant proposal document. We divided the funding application into manageable sections and discussed one section during each 2 hour meeting. Youth took on various roles including developing community agreements, leading the meeting, taking notes, actively participating in the brainstorming process and assisting with food preparation and cleanup. This process differed from previous/other organizational funding application development as in the past, funding applications were completed by management and staff of Agassiz-Harrison Community Services with very little or no involvement of youth.

The application identified the vision and mission for the project as:

Our vision: A community that is inclusive, safe, supportive and fun for youth in the District of Kent (Agassiz) and Harrison Hot Springs.

Our mission: Creating opportunities for youth voices to be heard, guide services and engage in development and implementation of youth programming.




The application identified the project partners as:

- District of Kent- Parks and Recreation
- Agassiz Elementary Secondary School
- Agassiz Centre for Education
- Agassiz-Harrison Healthy Communities Committee
Ministry of Children and Family Development

The application identified possible activities arising from the grant as:

- Develop a youth advisory committee to guide project activities
- Develop a survey tool and conduct research to determine the needs of the youth living in the community
- Advocate and raise awareness about youth issues and needs in the community
- Seek out funding sources and additional resources to maintain sustainable programming in the future
- Develop and deliver promotional/advertising campaign
- Plan and get youth to participate in Youth Centre activities

The application identified the following outcome markers for the project:

<p>Expect to See: You're pretty sure at least some of these things will happen when you carry out your activities.</p> 	<p>Like to See: If these things happened when you carry out your activities, it would be pretty great!</p> 	<p>Love to See: You would be over the moon if these things happened when you carry out your activities!</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More youth involved with the Youth Centre - Structure- more scheduled activities planned by youth for youth - Youth participation to ensure sustainable programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More involvement and collaboration between youth and adults - Youth will be less socially isolated which leads to an increase in mental wellness - A diverse range of youth participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction in youth substance use - Youth Board member on the Agassiz-Harrison Community Services Board of Directors - Youth influencing political decisions at the municipal government level

The application was reviewed and approved by the VYPER regional youth committee.

Real Talk (July 2015)

On July 7, 2015 the youth of Agassiz who had been involved with VYPER invited adult community members, leaders and service providers to a “Real Talk” event.

Real Talk is a VYPER-developed technology, adapted from the “Capacity Café,” run by the School Age Children and Youth [SACY] program in Vancouver. The SACY “Capacity Café” involves parents submitting questions about youth life and culture – which are then answered by young people from the community. “Real Talk” involves not just parents, but all adults in the community – particularly leaders and service providers.

What is the objective?

- Gain a better understanding of youth through hearing youth talk about what they observe going on with youth in the community.
- Appreciate that youth have diverse perspectives and are exposed to and make sense of different experiences in different ways.
- Encourage youth to feel respected, valued, and heard.

What is happening?

- Real Talk brings together community members and youth for an event where youth respond to questions that community members have asked prior to the event.
- Youth share their observations, viewpoints and hopes around the issues community members ask about – talking about youth life in general, not necessarily about their own lives.

What do I need to know going in?

- This is an opportunity to provide the gift of listening to youth and to gain insight through reflecting on what you hear.
- The questions youth respond to will be pre-set and presented by facilitators; community members may ask follow up questions for clarification through the facilitators.
- Community members will have the opportunity to debrief with facilitators at the end of the event.

Why would I participate?

- Gain insight into the diverse experiences, thoughts, perspectives and hopes of youth.
- Support youth and their voice in the community.
- Help to build greater capacity for trust and discussion between youth and community members.

What might make this challenging?

- Being hesitant to hear about the realities of the life of today’s youth.
- Not having the opportunity to directly or immediately respond with your own perspectives, opinions, ideas or experiences.

Though community members formally and informally submitted questions on a wide range of issues and programs in the community, youth responses to these questions continually circled back to three main issues:

1. Mental health
2. Substance use
3. Suicide

In response to the focus on these three issues, follow up questions from adults asked youth to respond to:

1. What they feel is available already in the community to address these issues
2. What they feel is missing
3. What they feel would be helpful

Youth responses to the Real Talk event could be generalized to these three statements:

- Even though we went in thinking we would talk about youth programming, MHSU and suicide were the main topics that were brought up.
- It felt good to be able to talk and have adults listen to us. It was one of the biggest things they could do, because being able to sit and listen to someone share from their perspective, without being interrupted, felt like we were finally listened to.
- There wasn't anything that was talked about that hadn't already been talked about at VYPER meetings. We have all talked about MHSU and briefly on suicide, at weekly meetings. Especially when we got the grant for Youth Programming, it felt like it was more acceptable to talk about these issues.

The following section summarizes what was discussed at the two-hour Real Talk event, with additional information added that had been collected in the VYPER meetings throughout the last year.

Major topics of discussion

Reaching out to services (or not)

- Many discussions focused on youth not feeling comfortable with an adult, or even walking into more 'adult spaces'. They are unsure where to go, and do not feel comfortable asking an adult.
- Youth have noted that being a part of VYPER meetings allows them important flexibility to come and go as they like, provides them with food and makes them feel as though they are giving back to the community and helping other youth. They identify giving back and helping other youth as the underlying reason many of them keep coming back. They feel safe because they know there are community agreements and that they get to choose most of the items that are talked about.
- They have stressed 'choice' as being a large part of their continued involvement in VYPER, and feel that carrying over this 'choice' into the broader community would be positive. They would like to hire staff alongside adults, to make sure they connect. Many youth have identified going to meet a professional, whether by choice or by referral, as a negative experience. If they had someone who they or other youth identify as a safe ally to support the process of these initial meetings, they think this would be helpful. They would also like to know that there wasn't going to be an adult pushing a mandate or specific outcomes on them immediately during their time together – that they would have time to get know each other first. If they don't end up being the right connection, fine, refer forward – but make it about relationship-building first – person to person.
- If not given in introduction to an adult by someone they already trust prior to an appointment, youth are less likely to go to the appointment and to share information openly.
- Youth identified that the few trusted adults that they can identify have limited roles. What this has meant is that if youth just go to see them, other youth and community members will know they are seeking help for a specific problem (e.g. suicide prevention worker, drug and alcohol counsellor).
- Youth identify that change in outreach workers could have been handled differently in the past. Nothing was done to ease the transfer from one outreach worker to the next – the new worker only knew their names, not their faces or who they are. The history with their youth worker feels like it no longer exists.

Youth programming

- Youth want a space that is open and available to them, that they have an investment in.
- For a drop-in space, youth want a space with community agreements, where they can go and hang out (during and outside of school hours), where they can access help if needed (with homework or personal issues, as examples).
- Youth would like to have the opportunity to have presenters (that they would choose) brought in to present on issues such as life skills (to work on resumes), money management (budgeting, taxes, information on credit cards), healthy relationships, and sexual health - where they can get information and also ask someone who

does not work or reside in Agassiz to discuss a topic with them. They would also like to have classes about things like cooking and everyday activities that they don't feel prepared for.

- Youth would like to plan fundraisers and use that money for items for the drop-in space, or for a trip for youth.
- Since being a part of VYPER, youth have had the opportunity to make connections with adults in a way that is comfortable for them. Youth identify this as a bridge that allows them to become familiar with resources and service providers/community members – making them more likely to seek out those services than before.

Mental health and substance use

- What is available needs to be more accessible and better-publicized. Hours should be more youth-friendly and regular, so youth know that on these days at these times, help is available.
- Most services youth have only learned about since and because they have been involved with VYPER – which doesn't mean that just because they have learned about them, that they won't now forget. Youth have to have ongoing opportunities to be aware of services.
- Youth don't have ongoing opportunities to learn about mental health and substance use, and how it affects people. Generally, it's not talked about, making it hard for youth to even consider learning about it. If adults talk about it more, youth may want to learn more, or may reach out for support because they are going through something.
- Being told to see someone makes youth feel singled out, tells youth that they have a problem or issue that needs to be fixed. Whereas if the youth are informed through respectful education and discussion about these issues, it is their own choice to get help that they do want and need, even though they may be scared.
- In school we get basic information about dangers related to sexual health, mental health and substance use, but we aren't really told how to be safe. We may be told about options, but not about how to use them. Instead youth are learning about these other options through the internet or through friends.
- Youth have commented that they do not feel supported bringing an issue up to an adult, and that they do not have enough information to be able to support their friends who may be struggling with mental health issues (depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation).
- Youth have mentioned marijuana and alcohol use as being the top used substances among youth in Agassiz – but that there isn't much opportunity for facilitated critical, unbiased discussion about alcohol and marijuana – and they would welcome that.
- Youth have commented that they would like to have more information available (via youth drop-in or youth-identified trusted adult) - more along the lines of helping them to support friends and family, rather than necessarily for themselves.

LGBTQ+ issues

- Youth that identify as pansexual or asexual feel they don't really have adults that understand the differences in youth sexual orientation.
- There is no education around gender and sexual diversity that could help youth who may be questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Suicide

- Some youth don't know about available services, or if they do, they have the impression that some workers may be judgmental or aren't helpful.
- Youth don't feel comfortable talking to adults they don't know.
- The year after a friend completed suicide, there wasn't any ongoing discussion in the school. Discussion only occurred when the suicide happened. It should have continued to be talked about, other than just a poster hanging up in counselling office that not many youth in the high school would actually see.

Healthy relationships

- This has been a big topics for youth – the conversation has been around wanting to have information and discussions both individual and as a group regarding healthy relationships with partners, parents, friends, and other individuals.
- Although sexual health was identified by many youth as something that is lacking, the youth felt that focusing on healthy relationships would include topics such as safety, consent and sexual health, but also talk about communication, interpersonal communication skills, healthy lifestyle choices, and ultimately cover any topics that they have questions about.

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada.