



## Results of the Youth Emotional Safety Study

### Emotional Safety

**Emotional safety** has not been universally defined, but can comprise of a combination of inclusion, belonging, security, acceptance, trust, care, connection, and the absence of bullying. (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Halpern et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2009; Strobel et al., 2008)

### What We Learned

The afterschool program spaces can influence youth relationships and feelings of freedom, which can subsequently affect youth's feelings of emotional safety.

### The Purpose

To explore how youth feelings of emotional safety are influenced by their interactions with their peers and the afterschool program spaces.

### The Study

- Qualitative case study
- Two sites
- Interviews to hear program youth and staff perspectives on how the afterschool program contributes to youth feelings of emotional safety
- Participants:
  - Ten 11-15-year-old youth
  - Ten 20-28-year-old program staff

**Contact:** Janet Wong, MSc. [jbgwong@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jbgwong@ucalgary.ca)  
**Principal Investigator:** Meghan McDonough, PhD. [meghan.mcdonough@ucalgary.ca](mailto:meghan.mcdonough@ucalgary.ca)

*"There's not much of an opportunity to get away from what's going on, other than to leave. And then it's also hard too, because if a kid's out there and you can tell that they're upset, usually a leader will try and go talk to them, but all the other people are right there, and it's like 'no you guys need to stay over there' but it's an inch away, they can still hear you from right there. So there really isn't great space for that privacy and time you need with a kid."*  
(Staff, Female)



**Emotional safety** as defined by a youth participant:

*"Um, just like being able to go into a place and not feel like you have to hide. ... Um. It makes you feel like you don't have to like, be somebody that you're not. ... It makes you like, feel open and like, accepted."*

(Youth, Female, 15)

# Results

*"If you're in the gym like you'd walk past and you'd get commented on, or there would be little fights or people would like say things all the time and it just made me feel like really bad about myself and like, oh should I be coming here all the time? Because I'm trying to get away from this since I have to deal with it at school. And so it's like, do I wanna come and have a good time? Or am I gonna come and have a terrible day and just let myself feel worse?"* (Youth, Female, 14)

## Themes

### Being understood and not having to hide

Youth felt emotionally safe when they and their problems were understood, not attacked, bullied, or have to hide. They felt emotionally unsafe when they were attacked or bullied and not defended. Many expressed discomfort sharing personal issues for fear of being shamed, bullied, or gossiped about.

### Protecting and trusting relationships

Youth felt emotionally safe when they were defended by friends and staff members and felt like they could trust them. Negative comments, bullying, members of the public, older youth in the program, and some sports-based groups made youth feel emotionally unsafe.

### Freedom to choose and separate

Youth felt emotionally safe when they felt free to make choices and separate themselves from others when needed. The drop-in policy helped youth to feel able to come and go. However, several participants felt frustrated that it was difficult to get away due to staff supervision and the lack of private spaces, and that made them feel emotionally unsafe.

### Comfortable spaces

Larger, open, welcoming, diverse, consistent, home-like, bright, and colourful spaces helped youth feel free and fostered peer interaction and memories. In contrast, unfamiliar spaces and markings reminded youth of previous violent events and were described as unsafe, frustrating, intimidating, and uncomfortable.

### Spoken or displayed words

Words that are spoken or displayed can encourage feelings of emotional safety and freedom, and show and help to build trust among individuals. Signage with words such as "we belong" and "staff" written on staff uniforms helped youth feel emotionally safe and were documented in many of the photos.

## Recommendations

Communicating using **trusting language** to help youth know they are emotionally safe

- Letting youth know that they are able to talk to staff if needed
- Encouraging staff to share some details from their lives
- Validating and conveying that you understand the youth
- Empowering youth by giving them choices
- Allowing youth space to work conflict out, while stepping in when necessary to defend them

Accommodating **breaks in programs** so youth can feel free

- Continuing to let youth "drop-in" to program
- Providing spaces for youth to take time out or separate from others when needed

Utilizing/designing **multi-purpose program spaces** can help youth to find their niche

- Playing some non-sports games in spaces that are more traditionally sports-based

Incorporating **large group cooperative play** to encourage friendships and trust among youth

- Try starting with a big group activity before breaking into smaller groups

*"Like some people don't really understand, and then some people, come with open arms. ... if like, if they kind of like just say 'you can talk to us if you want,' it just kind of puts up that thing like that you can trust them."* (Youth, Female, 15)