



## Why do we invest in Promising Young People?

### **Emotional and social strengths are key to positive child and youth development**

The right set of skills, experiences and relationships enable children and youth to develop into successful and contributing adults. Research shows that when children and youth have *emotional* strengths – the ability to empathize with others and the ability to control desires, emotions and behaviours -- they are able to manage stress and adapt to changes. With *social* strengths -- such as self-esteem, respect for different viewpoints, and the ability to identify with their gender, culture or social group -- they can develop deep and healthy relationships. With *both* emotional and social strengths, they are aware of their feelings and can control their behaviour. They understand and appreciate who they are and the impact they have on others. <sup>1</sup>

Social and emotional strengths are one of the five areas measured by the Early and Middle Years Development Instruments used in Canadian schools to assess the development of children in Kindergarten, Grade 4 and Grade 7. These competencies ensure that children and youth can help themselves and are equipped to participate in all aspects of society, from school and work to family and community life.

### **Growing up can sometimes be challenging...**

This is an especially critical time when the foundations for lifelong wellbeing are laid. During the middle years especially (12 to 14), the number of risk factors to wellbeing (negative peer influence, peer rejection, alcohol/drug use, low school achievement) increases as more time is spent outside the home. Some youth face additional barriers, especially those who are:

- Aboriginal
- LGBTQ+
- Newcomer
- Racialized
- At-risk of dropping out, in conflict with the law, in and leaving care
- Living in low income situations

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<sup>1</sup> CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), (2015). *What is social and emotional learning?/SEL Outcomes.*

- Living with disabilities or special needs

For these youth, the journey to successful adulthood can be even harder, and they often benefit from help along the way.

### **... the right supports can make a big difference**

It takes a whole system to support children and youth from their early lives right through to adulthood, including family, teachers and community. Social and emotional strengths give children and youth the resilience to overcome many hurdles. These strengths do not always develop naturally. Caring and knowledgeable adults help build the strengths by modelling positive behaviours -- from communicating clearly and making good decisions, to learning from mistakes and sharing their unique cultures.

Young people who are supported by adult allies are more likely to get high grades, maintain good relationships, avoid risky behaviours, find better jobs, and have a stronger sense of identity, than those who are not.<sup>2</sup> They are also less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and stress.<sup>3</sup>

For children and youth who require support, or need more adults with the skills to provide it, evidenced-based parenting and peer group interventions can sometimes make a significant difference. An excellent example is the Child Development Institute's internationally recognized SNAP (Stop Now and Plan) program. Its research found that cognitive-behaviour skills training and self-control programming prevented later criminal offenses by participating boys, and saved between \$17.33 and \$31.77 for every dollar spent on programming.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, timing is everything: research shows that children aged 6-12 are good candidates for learning effective self-control strategies.<sup>5</sup>

### **Engaging youth helps them succeed**

Youth have a lot to offer, and our future depends on bringing out the best in all of them. Who they are, where they live and the experiences that define their lives are all factors that affect their ability to realize that potential.<sup>6</sup>

Youth who face barriers to participation or who feel there are not enough opportunities that relate to their interests can become, and sometimes remain, disengaged from their communities. However, meaningful, accessible youth engagement and youth-led initiatives can provide a proactive opportunity for youth to develop positive self-identities and confidence, and increase social and professional networks.

Youth can also respond to our changing workplace and economy by embracing new creative and social skills – as facilitators, organizers, mentors and members of advisory committees or

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Children and Youth Services, (2012). *Stepping Up: A strategic framework to help Ontario's youth succeed*. Toronto, Ontario: Government of Ontario.

<sup>3</sup> CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), (2015). *What is social and emotional learning?/SEL Outcomes*.

<sup>4</sup> Farrington, D.P. & Koegl, C, (2014). *Monetary Benefits and Costs of the Stop Now and Plan Program for Boys Aged 6–11, Based on the Prevention of Later Offending*. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*.

<sup>5</sup> Piquero, A. R., Jennings, W., & Farrington, D. P. (2010). *On the malleability of self-control: Theoretical and policy implications regarding a general theory of crime*. *Justice Quarterly*, 27 (803-834).

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Children and Youth Services, (2012). *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development*. Toronto, Ontario: Government of Ontario.

boards -- that match needs now and set them up well for the future. This is important, since today's youth are more likely to work many jobs in their lifetime and even have multiple careers.

Many studies have drawn connections between civic engagement, leadership skills and wellbeing for youth. In the United States, Boys and Girls Clubs of America has conducted research on the health benefits of civic engagement and leadership.<sup>7</sup> In Canada, *Me to We* has developed excellent resources.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ontario's *Stepping Up* report, youth are embracing engagement enthusiastically.

- Youth in Ontario participate in community life at a higher level than elsewhere; 77% of them report a sense of belonging in their community.
- When it comes to volunteering, Ontario youth give more than four times the required number of volunteer hours to graduate, an average of 167 hours. Almost 18% of them started volunteering to help a cause they personally believe in.

## So what's our strategy?

OTF is interested in building up the assets of Ontario's children and youth in a holistic way so that they have better chances of success. In its efforts to foster the positive development of all children and youth, OTF takes its cue from the strategic priorities of, and research conducted by, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

The Promising Young People action area supports the opportunities, knowledge and skills that can help enable young people to become more healthy and productive adults. Our goal is to use the Positive Youth Development approach, which builds on young people's strengths and recognizes their unique contributions. We define children and youth as:

- Children up to 12 years of age
- Early Adolescents aged 12-14
- Adolescents aged 15-18
- Early Adults aged 19-25
- Early Adults with Disabilities, aged 19-29

## Priority Outcome: More children and youth have emotional and social strengths

OTF seeks to fund initiatives that achieve the following results:

### **1. Parents, caregivers and adult allies have the skills to support children and youth who are facing barriers**

*A wealth of research provides evidence-based ways in which parents and other adults can help vulnerable children and youth to build the skills that allow them to succeed. Environment,*

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<sup>7</sup> Arbreton, A., Sheldon, J. and Herrera, C., (2005). *Beyond Safe Havens: A Synthesis of 20 Years of Research on the Boys & Girls Clubs*. New York, New York: Public/Private Ventures.

<sup>8</sup> Me to We, (2015). *Leadership Programs*.

*history, life events and identity all affect the challenges young people face, the supports and opportunities they have access to, and the choices they make. Understanding these realities is the key to creating strategies that will support Positive Youth Development.*

Project or Grant Examples:

- A Somali women's support network creates and delivers a program for newcomer parents to tackle together the issues that lead to damaging behaviours among teens in the community
- Aboriginal families and young children reclaim the spiritual and cultural beliefs that are core to the ways of traditional Aboriginal parenting

## **2. Children and youth who are facing barriers develop strong emotional and social skills**

*The success rate of programming aimed at helping children and youth develop emotional and social skills greatly improves when an asset-based approach is used, and when families, schools and communities are engaged as well. If the children and youth are also facing barriers – because they identify as Aboriginal, LGBTTTQ+, newcomer, racialized, at-risk of dropping out, in conflict with the law, in and leaving care, living in low income situations, living with disabilities or special needs – then the programming must also be highly responsive and relevant to their particular situation.*

Project or Grant Examples:

- An evidence-based classroom program that reduces levels of aggression among young children in conflict with the law by teaching them to manage their anger and problem-solve with others
- Children across Northern Ontario learn to empathize with, and become the allies of, peers who are being bullied

**Priority Outcome: More youth are meaningfully engaged in the community**

OTF seeks to fund initiatives that achieve the following results:

### **1. Youth facing barriers volunteer and are in leadership roles**

*By being involved in decisions that affect them, youth can take charge of their own lives and positively affect the world around them. When they are given ownership they can build confidence in their own ability to provide direction and be independent. With a platform to influence, they can gain the respect of others, which motivates them to move forward and inspires their peers to follow in their footsteps. Perhaps most importantly, when the skills, ideas and passions of youth are engaged in decision-making, efforts can be more successful.*

Project or Grant Examples:

- Youth at risk of dropping out of school gain the hands-on skills and know-how to take action on a neighbourhood issue for change
- Youth in remote northern communities learn the basics of governance and are matched with volunteer board members seeking youth representation/engagement in their organizations

### **2. Youth are involved in creating solutions for challenges facing their community**

*The challenges communities face today are complex and sometimes intractable. Tried and true approaches and the knowledge and experiences of existing actors may not have been sufficient*

*to the task. We can tap the potential that our youth offer to find new and creative ways of tackling issues and moving forward for the betterment of the community.*

Project or Grant Examples:

- Young people are supported to lead the design and development of a bike and skate park that will provide their community with space for unstructured recreation.
- High school students implement a community radio program in order to lend their voice to local events in their community.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. How do you define “children and youth?”

We follow the guidelines of the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, using the following age ranges:

- Children up to 12 years of age
- Early Adolescents aged 12-14
- Adolescents aged 15-18
- Early Adults aged 19-25
- Early Adults with Disabilities, aged 19-29

### 2. Are you focusing on all youth or specific population of youth?

Both. For the Grant Result: *Youth are involved in creating solutions for challenges facing their community*, the focus is on all youth. The remaining grant results, the focus is on children and youth facing barriers.

### 3. What makes a child or youth-related program effective?

Programs that are more effective engage families, schools, and communities as well as children and youth; use an asset-based approach; and respond to the unique characteristics of the audience, e.g. culturally or physically accessible.

### 4. Do all youth-related initiatives fall under the Promising Young People Action Area?

Not necessarily. When deciding which Action Area is best for your initiative, think about the outcome you want to achieve. For example, a youth-led initiative designed to increase physical activity of children is better aligned with the **Active People** Action Area. However, if the initiative aims to use arts and sports to engage young people in decisions that impact them or to use arts and sports as a mechanism for young people to take on leadership roles, then it would be a better fit for **Promising Young People**.

### 5. Is mental health of children and youth covered under this action area?

No, not directly. The focus of this Action Area is on the development of emotional and social competencies of children and youth. However, research indicates that increasing the emotional and social competencies of children and youth plays a critical role in their overall wellbeing and mental health. Children and youth with high self-esteem and the ability to regulate their emotions, for example, can sometimes be less vulnerable to mental health issues.

### 6. What do you mean by “emotional and social strengths”?

Emotional and social strengths help children and youth make responsible decisions. Children and youth with good emotional and social competencies are aware of their feelings, motivations and abilities, as well as those of others. They are able to manage their thoughts and behaviours effectively in different situations. They have the ability to understand others and the world around them.

Emotional strengths equip children and youth with skills and abilities to manage stress and adapt to changes. These competencies include the ability to regulate desires, emotions and behaviours as well as to empathize with others. Social strengths are the skills and abilities to develop deep and healthy relationships, self-identity, and moral capacity. Self-esteem, self-

efficacy, ability to understand and respect different viewpoints, and identification with gender, culture or social groups, are examples of social competencies.

**7. What do you mean by “meaningfully engaged”?**

Meaningfully engaged refers to both the degree/breadth and intensity of participation (i.e. feedback vs. being involved in design and delivery of a program) and the quality of the engagement (recognizing and accessing the skills, knowledge and ideas youth have to inform decision-making that affects them).

**8. What do you mean by 'children and youth facing barriers'?**

Youth identifying as Aboriginal, LGBTTTQ+, newcomer, racialized, at-risk of dropping out, in conflict with the law, in and leaving care, living in low income situations, living with disabilities or special needs.

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