

# Youth Mental Health and Wellness Summer Program – Evaluation Report

Submitted to: The Rotary Club of Winnipeg

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## Executive Summary

With the generous support of the Rotary Club of Winnipeg, Adventist Community Services (ACS) successfully implemented the Youth Mental Health and Wellness Program during the summer of 2025. This 6-week pilot program served youth in the Elmwood/Chalmers neighbourhood, equipping them with practical coping strategies, creative outlets for expression, and opportunities to connect with trusted adults and peers.

Through pre- and post-program evaluations, we observed measurable improvements in participants' ability to identify emotions, apply coping skills, and openly acknowledge their mental health needs. Youth reported increased confidence, stronger peer connections, and positive lifestyle changes. The program provided not only skills but also a safe and supportive environment that many youths identified as a place of belonging.

## Program Implementation

- **Duration:** 6 weeks, July–August 2025
- **Format:** Weekly workshops combining education, creative expression (art, music, journaling), peer connection, and resilience-building activities
- **Participants:** Local youth from Elmwood/Chalmers, a community with high rates of poverty and limited access to mental health resources. We had students from 4 different schools in attendance.
- **Facilitators:** A team of culturally diverse leaders with professional and lived experience in youth support, addictions, and trauma-informed care

### Workshops addressed:

- ✓ Mental health awareness and destigmatization
- ✓ Coping strategies (grounding, breathing, journaling, movement)
- ✓ Confidence and communication skills
- ✓ Building healthy relationships and trust
- ✓ Creative arts (painting, steel drums, drawing) as outlets for self-expression

## Evaluation and Findings

The program engaged **15 youth registrants and 3 dedicated volunteers**, with **12 youth attending at least one session** and an average of **7 youth participating regularly** throughout the 6 weeks. This level of engagement is consistent with community-based programming, where family circumstances such as extended summer travel, often limit attendance. In fact, several families who were unable to participate due to pre-booked trips to the Caribbean expressed strong interest in the program and asked if it could be offered during the school year, when participation would be easier to sustain. This feedback highlights both the demand for mental health and wellness programming and the opportunity to expand beyond summer into a year-round model that better supports families.

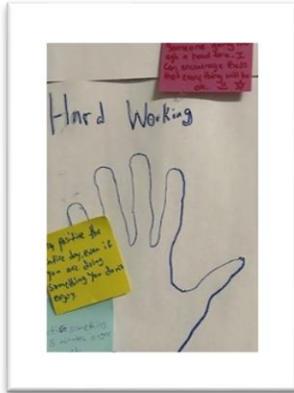
The program successfully met and exceeded its intended goals, creating measurable impact in the lives of participating youth. Before the program, youth expressed a desire to better manage stress, build confidence, make friends, and find a safe place of belonging. By the conclusion, 100% of participants reported learning new skills and strategies, with over 70% making at least one positive lifestyle change such as exercising more, journaling, practicing grounding techniques, or opening up to a trusted adult about mental health.

Youth highlighted growth in confidence, emotional regulation, and creative expression, rediscovering joy in activities like art and music while gaining tools to support their well-being.

Evaluations revealed increased honesty and self-awareness, stronger resilience skills applied outside the sessions, and a consistent sense of safety and belonging in the program environment. These outcomes demonstrate that the program not only achieved its goals but also fostered lasting skills, healthier choices, and deeper connections to peers, mentors, and the wider community.

The program incorporated hands-on, meaningful activities that engaged youth while teaching valuable life skills. One session that stood out involved youth preparing sandwiches for community members in need, while also making a healthy snack for themselves. Through this activity, participants experienced the rewards of giving and learned how small acts of kindness can positively impact others. In another session, youth explored the concepts of fixed and growth mindsets and applied their learning by creating cards with kind messages for seniors in local care homes, reinforcing empathy and community connection.



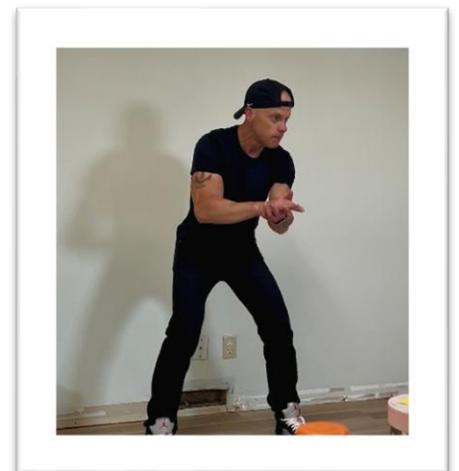


A unique feature of the program was the “who you are becoming WORD” practice, where each youth selected a personal word to guide their actions—such as “loyal”, “hard-working”, “encourager”, “disciplined”, “committed”, “role model”, and “problem solver”. Each session, participants “high-fived” their word as a reminder of their commitment and demonstrated it through intentional actions, such as encouraging someone going through a hard time, promptly recycling, or offering help to others. This practice strengthened accountability, self-reflection, and the consistent application of positive values in daily life.

One of the facilitators led a Gratitude Tree activity, where youth wrote what they were thankful for on stickers shaped as leaves and attached them to a tree display. This exercise encouraged reflection, mindfulness, and a focus on positive aspects of their lives, helping participants build emotional awareness and appreciation.



Additionally, the program hosted a national youth speaker, whose interactive presentation had all participants engaged—clapping, responding, and actively participating. Youth consistently cited this session as one of their favorite experiences, noting that it inspired motivation, confidence, and a sense of connection. Both activities reinforced self-expression, resilience, and social-emotional growth, providing meaningful opportunities for youth to explore gratitude, inspiration, and engagement in a supportive environment.



An international artist joined the program to lead sessions that combined creative art with therapeutic practices. Youth were highly engaged and enthusiastic, exploring self-expression through painting while reflecting on their emotions and experiences.



This hands-on approach provided a safe outlet for processing feelings, building confidence, and fostering resilience. Participants reported enjoying the opportunity to create while learning strategies to manage stress and express themselves constructively, highlighting the benefits of integrating art-based activities into youth mental health programming.

The program concluded with a graduation ceremony that celebrated the achievements of both youth and volunteers. Youth participants received graduation certificates recognizing their growth and commitment, while volunteers were presented with official letters documenting their hours and contributions for school records. Families joined in the celebration, enjoying Caribbean steel drum music and a cultural lesson, as well as multicultural food and snacks.

Weekly prize draws created excitement throughout the program, culminating in a grand prize winner at graduation.

A particularly memorable moment came when a newcomer family from Jamaica, whose children had been supported with weekly transportation by a facilitator, started a lively conga line, embodying the joy and sense of belonging fostered by the program. Their mother expressed deep gratitude for the support her family received, underscoring the importance of providing safe, welcoming spaces for newcomer families.



An additional highlight was the generous gift from the Sea Bears basketball team, who provided families with free tickets to attend a playoff game along with a complimentary basketball for each youth. For many, this was their first professional sporting event—a once-in-a-lifetime experience that promoted physical activity, teamwork, and community pride. This opportunity not only reduced barriers of cost and access but also demonstrated how partnerships can enhance programming and extend impact beyond the workshop sessions.

### **Pre-Program Goals (Youth Voice)**

When asked *“What do you hope to learn from this program?”* youth responded with aspirations such as:

- Manage stress and emotions
- Grow in confidence and communication
- Build friendships and trust
- Practice kindness
- Deepen faith and values
- Find a safe, calm place to belong



## Post-Program Outcomes

When asked “*What are you most proud of or have learned during this program?*” youth reported:

- ✓ **New skills:** painting, steel drums, drawing, positive mindset practices
- ✓ **Improved emotional regulation:** “*I learned how to manage stress and anger*”
- ✓ **Confidence and self-expression:** “*I learned to talk more confidently*”

On positive life changes:

- ✓ Exercising more and focusing on health
- ✓ Journaling to process feelings
- ✓ Practicing grounding and breathing techniques
- ✓ Talking to a trusted adult about mental health
- ✓ Setting personal wellness goals
- ✓ Getting more sleep and feeling more hopeful
- ✓ Rediscovering joy in creative outlets (“*I learned to have fun doing art again*”)

## Key Observations

- **Honesty & Self-Awareness:** Youth were more open and honest in their post-evaluations, showing growth in self-awareness and trust in the program space.
- **Resilience Skills:** Participants reported applying coping strategies outside of sessions (exercise, journaling, grounding).
- **Belonging:** Youth consistently described the program as a safe and positive place they could look forward to attending.

## Impact Summary

- ✓ **100%** of participants reported learning new skills or strategies
- ✓ **Over 70%** made at least one positive lifestyle change (exercise, journaling, grounding, or talking to a trusted adult)
- ✓ **Increased engagement** in healthy, creative outlets (art, music)
- ✓ **Improved confidence** in communication and relationships
- ✓ **Enhanced community ties**, with youth connecting to peers and mentors

## Lessons Learned

- Youth benefit from creative, hands-on activities (painting, music) that reduce stress and build confidence.
- A safe and relational environment is as important as the skills taught, youth showed greater honesty and openness as trust developed.
- Future programming should continue to combine practical coping tools with creative expression and peer support.
- Summer programming is most effective when it emphasizes fun and engaging activities, while school-year sessions can incorporate more structured learning and reflection, as youth are generally more receptive to these approaches during the academic year. Participants noted that summer experiences should feel distinct from school.
- Older youth expressed that certain incentive items (e.g., art supplies, journals, toys, or candy) were more appealing to younger participants. This highlights the importance of tailoring rewards to be age-appropriate and meaningful across different age groups, as well as the need for additional donations and funding to expand options that better meet the interests of older youth.
- Access to an outdoor space was identified as a valuable enhancement, offering opportunities for physical activity, creative programming, and a change of environment that supports overall well-being.

## Next Steps

Based on strong participation and positive outcomes, ACS plans to:

1. Expand the program into a **year-round initiative** with school-year sessions.
2. Develop **parent workshops** to strengthen family support for youth mental health.
3. Continue building partnerships with community organizations to broaden reach and avoid duplication of services.
4. Explore opportunities for peer leadership, engaging youth participants as volunteers or mentors in future sessions.

## Conclusion

The Youth Mental Health and Wellness Program not only met but exceeded the goals outlined in our original proposal. Thanks to the generous support of the Rotary Club of Winnipeg, youth in Elmwood/Chalmers gained valuable coping skills, resilience, and confidence, while experiencing a safe and supportive space where they could belong. Families felt strengthened and supported, volunteers enhanced their leadership skills, and the broader community came together in celebration of youth achievements. The program's success has created a strong foundation for continued investment in youth mental health, and the enthusiastic interest from

families in year-round programming underscores the demand and potential for expansion. By fostering meaningful connections, promoting well-being, and engaging youth in creative and purposeful activities, this initiative demonstrates clear, measurable impact. With continued support, we are confident that the program can grow sustainably, reaching more youth, building stronger community ties, and creating lasting positive outcomes—making every dollar invested an investment in the future of Elmwood/Chalmers youth.

**Thank you, Rotary Club of Winnipeg, for investing in the mental health and well-being of our youth.**

**Your support has truly made a difference.**



# Photo Gallery

