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**Promoting Program Uptake in Schools:  
Insights from the WITS Peer  
Victimization Prevention Program**

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## Introduction

The widespread dissemination of children’s mental health interventions is a complex and multi-step process. This process is further complicated when the interventions themselves are complex multisystem programs that involve multiple stakeholders and contexts. Serious gaps exist between the growing research on the development of evidence-based programs and their widespread dissemination.

This paper describes factors affecting uptake processes involved with implementing the WITS peer victimization prevention program based on qualitative interviews with teachers, counselors, and principals. We outline key factors that enhance program uptake and make recommendations for increasing the transportability of the program across multiple contexts and developing program components to be more marketable for large-scale dissemination.

## Mental Health Promotion Programs in Schools

Meeting the mental health needs of children has been a provincial priority since the introduction of the Child and Youth Mental Health Plan for British Columbia (Government of British Columbia, 2003). The recent extension, *Healthy Minds, Healthy People: A Ten-Year Plan to Address Mental Health and Substance Use in British Columbia* (Government of British Columbia, 2010), highlights the continued collaboration between ministries and schools in a commitment to improve children's mental health through comprehensive school-based programs.

The plan recognizes that a population-based, health promotion approach that builds on an individual's strengths and capacities while fostering supportive community environments is essential for healthy development. One of the main goals of the plan is to promote mental health within schools using comprehensive school-wide activities that improve health and educational outcomes and encourage the development of lifelong skills, attitudes, and healthy behaviors. A main milestone is to decrease the number of BC children who are vulnerable in terms of social-emotional development by 15 percent by 2015. With the understanding that early child development lays the foundation for health and wellness across the lifespan, the province has increased funding and strategies to address children's mental health needs.

A wealth of evidence-based programs now exists to support and promote mental health and well-being in children but the successful and widespread dissemination of programs can depend on how well they fit within school systems, existing values and approaches, the presence of program champions, commitment to and resources for teacher training, and parent engagement (Kazak et al., 2010; Leadbeater et al., 2012).

Evidence-based programs are now more accessible to schools through a variety of national databases and research networks. For example, the Canadian Best Practices Portal (CBPP), developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada, offers an online repository of reviewed, evidence-based health-related programs suitable for schools, youth serving organizations, etc. (<http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/>). This portal is a virtual front door to community and population health interventions related to chronic disease prevention and health

promotion. Federal infrastructures to support program dissemination have also been developed to help facilitate knowledge transfer between researchers and national non-government organizations. The Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet; <http://prevnet.ca/>) is a national network that brings together researchers and national organizations (e.g., Canadian Red Cross, Canadian Big Brothers and Sisters, the Canadian Principals Association, the Canadian Teachers Federation and RCMP). The network functions as a knowledge hub that bridges research and practice by relaying knowledge about bullying and healthy relationships, providing effective assessment and intervention tools, and promoting policy related to preventing peer victimization in childhood and adolescence.

However, despite the increasing availability of programs and infrastructures for dissemination, Canadian prevalence rates for bullying and peer victimization, and BC rates in particular, have not decreased over the past decade (Molcho et al., 2009; Pepler and Craig, 2011; Leadbeater et al., 2012). Moreover, even established programs that have been empirically evaluated can face substantial challenges in influencing positive change within the targeted population (McCall, 2009). Given the well-established link between peer victimization and risks for mental health problems in children (Hawker and Boulton, 2000), there is clearly a need to identify mechanisms that enhance the diffusion, fidelity, and sustainability of school-based prevention programs.

The extant literature on factors that facilitate effective programs have mainly focused on implementation fidelity (i.e., the degree to which an intervention is implemented completely and successfully in a new setting; Fixsen et al., 2005). Research has repeatedly shown that better implemented programs are associated with larger effect sizes and more likely to influence positive youth outcomes (reviews by Mihalic & Irwin, 2003; Domitrovich et al., 2008; Wilson and Lipsey, 2007). Some key factors that affect implementation fidelity in school-based programs include school climate (e.g., administrative leadership and support between staff, teachers, and students; Gregory, Henry, and Schoeny, 2007), demographics (e.g., school size, community poverty, and urban/rural residences; Payne & Eckert, 2010), and personal attributes (e.g., perceptions of success and perceived value of a given program; Han and Weiss, 2005; Bradshaw, Buckley, and Ialongo, 2008). Yet despite the multitude of available programs, a growing number of studies indicates that implementation of these programs is still low (see review by Forman et al.,

2009). For example, in a meta-analysis of nationally representative schools in the United States, Gottfredson and Goffredson (2002) found that only 25-50% of mental health promotion programs in schools were implemented at a level comparable to research-based programs. Poor implementation of the programs can undermine their expected positive impact. In a meta-analysis of mentoring school-based programs for youth, DuBois et al. (2002) found that the desired impact was generally greater within youth mentorship programs that exhibited the most frequent implementation support (e.g., ongoing training for mentors, expectations for contact, mechanisms for involving parents, and overall monitoring of implementation).

The process of maintaining implementation fidelity in school-based programs may only be one component in the process of program implementation and sustainability. Challenges associated with using any new program include the process by which the users (i.e., implementers) discover, embrace, share, prepare for and endorse the widespread implementation of mental health promotion programs in their schools (Leadbeater et al., 2012). Sustaining uptake momentum across potential barriers is crucial to program success in real world settings.

## **The WITS Program**

Previous studies have shown that multi-systemic programs that target multiple layers of the child's ecology can reduce peer victimization and enhance social-emotional outcomes (see reviews by Greenberg, Domitrovich, and Bumbarger, 2001; Ryan and Smith, 2009). The WITS Program ([www.witsprogram.ca](http://www.witsprogram.ca)) is a whole-school prevention program that targets multiple support systems in the child's context. The program seeks to create responsive communities by uniting adults and children across the school, family, and community to protect children from peer victimization.

The program has two components: the WITS Primary Program for Kindergarten to Grade 3 children and the WITS LEADS Program for Grades 4 to 6 children. The WITS acronym stands for "Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, and Seek help." The program gives younger children developmentally appropriate, interpersonal negotiation strategies for handling peer conflicts. WITS LEADS adds a leadership component to the WITS messages for older

elementary school children. The LEADS acronym stands for “Look and listen, Explore points of Views, Act, Did it work?” and “Seek help.” Using your WITS also becomes a common language that can be used by both children and adults within the school, home, and community. The goal is to create classroom, school, family, and community environments that speak with a uniform voice to promote positive conflict resolution strategies among children.

The WITS Programs are literacy-based and include a list of children’s books accompanied by lesson plans. Classroom and school activities integrate WITS messages with curricula in language arts, social studies, health, and personal planning. Curricula and activities encourage discussions with children about peer victimization and WITS strategies. The program is also highly accessible and low cost. Teachers and community leaders (e.g., RCMP officers, emergency services personnel, elders, athletes, and other community role models) can access program materials and complete an accredited, 90-minute training module online at no cost. The program also has additional resources that reach out to community leaders, parents, and children themselves.

The WITS Programs have been evaluated in two quasi-experimental, longitudinal studies and findings give evidence for the effectiveness of the programs in reducing peer victimization and enhancing social responsibility among elementary school children (Giesbrecht, Leadbeater, and MacDonald, 2011; Leadbeater and Hoglund, 2009; Leadbeater and Sukhawathanakul, 2011). A randomized control trial of the program is currently underway.

## Understanding WITS Program Uptake

Recommendations for facilitating program uptake in schools were based on qualitative interviews with program champions and early implementers (e.g., principals, teachers, librarians, and counselors) of the WITS programs (Leadbeater et al., 2012). These interviews were conducted in February and May of 2011 when the schools were in the first year of implementing the WITS programs. This provided a window into the processes of uptake as they occurred in real world settings. Seven elementary schools residing in rural communities with populations of 2,700 to 22,000 participated in this two-wave qualitative study.

To help guide our interpretations of uptake processes, we sought to answer questions that pertain to how early users discover, start-up, and adopt mental health promotion programs in their schools, as well as what strategies they used to overcome potential implementation barriers. Program champions revealed many essential elements for fostering program uptake when describing motivations for researching and adopting the program.

## Themes of WITS Program Uptake

Leadbeater et al. (2012) report four main themes that emerged from the interviews which were fundamental to program uptake. These include the processes of program discovery, motivations for incorporating the program, the fit of the program into the specific contexts, as well as certain barriers to starting the program and sharing it with others. (The themes that emerged from the interviews also informed the recommendations for best practices to enhance uptake and spur implementation of evidence-based programs discussed in the following sections of this paper.)

Program champions and early implementers of the program describe iterative processes of personalization in their discovery and early review of the WITS Programs. This process is depicted in Figure 1. Specifically, various channels

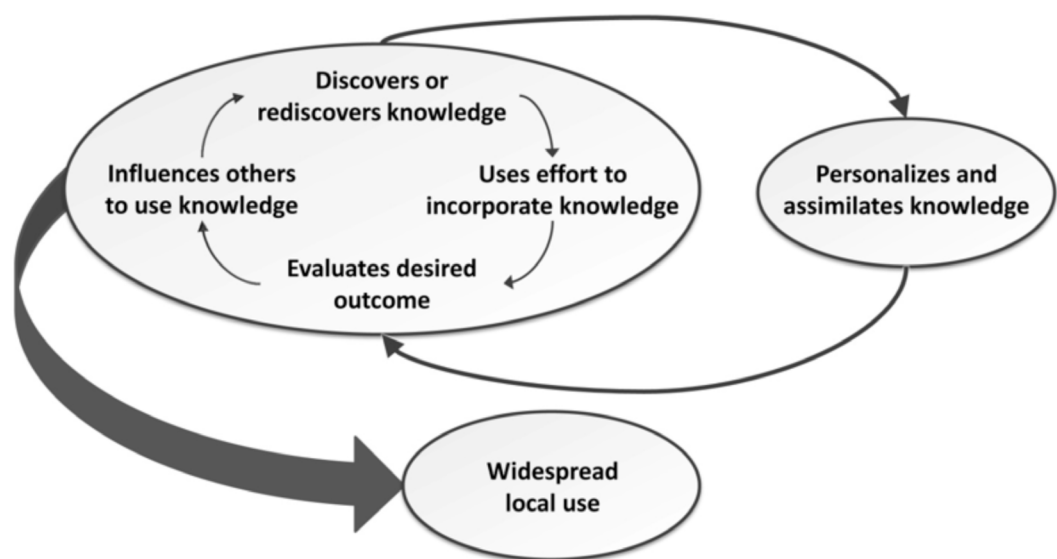


Figure 1. The iterative process of program uptake in elementary school settings



influenced the discovery and rediscovery of the WITS programs. Active discovery often spurred interest by means of hearing about the program from other schools, professional workshops and meetings, or by word of mouth. Rediscovering the program through these channels not only helped maintain interest in starting up the program but also motivated champions to actively search for online resources and to learn more about the program.

During the process of learning more about the program, participants also actively evaluated whether the program was consistent with their school philosophies and personal beliefs about children's needs. For example, many participants understood the importance of providing a support system for children, giving them opportunities to feel listened to and to gain skills for dealing with bullying themselves. Along with goals such as building children's confidence and providing life skills, this was a main motivation for incorporating the WITS program. WITS program uptake appeared to be most successful in schools where it was perceived to be aligned with the participants' already held beliefs.

Program champions and early starters also assessed the logistical and cultural 'fit' of the WITS resources to their own teaching styles and overall values and norms of the schools. Teachers valued the flexibility of the program as they could tailor curriculum contents to fit their personal teaching styles. Specifically, the book-based curriculum was easy to integrate into existing lesson plans. Beyond personal beliefs and teacher strategies, the perceived fit of the WITS Programs with existing programs and school policies was fundamental in influencing program uptake, particularly for administrators. Participants were more receptive to using WITS when it was not perceived as another 'add-on' or as something in competition with existing programs and strategies. Program flexibility, the book-based curriculum and congruence with school culture created the elements of perceived fit that ultimately created momentum for using the WITS Programs.

Recruiting support for a new program from staff members can be difficult. Program champions and early starters also expressed their efforts to influence others and overcome barriers. According to participants, convincing overburdened teachers to adopt a program can be aided by marketing it as 'time saving' and by explaining how incorporating the curriculum effectively would

ultimately help children independently handle bully-related situations thereby reducing the teacher's workload.

## Recommendations for enhancing the discovery of programs

***Involve multiple people.*** While principals and teachers were instrumental in driving program uptake in schools, other members of the school community were also champions themselves. In particular, school counselors played a major role in disseminating the program because they often work in multiple schools and talk about the program with teachers and administrators in multiple settings (e.g., at conferences, workshops). Recruiting multiple members of the school community (e.g., parents, librarians, educational assistants, playground supervisors, and community leaders) can spark conversations about the program and foster uptake.

***Use the program language and marketing strategies in order to provide opportunities for rediscovery.*** The branding of a program can be a helpful marketing tool to help maintain a presence in schools. When new principals and teachers see WITS posters, engage in school-wide WITS activities, and hear the acronym being used among staff and students, they become motivated to learn more about the program. The online accessibility of the program can also ease training of new staff. Rather than organizing group training, new staff can access online training and curriculum materials on their own time.

***Encourage word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer exchanges.*** Principals and teachers attend professional workshops and auxiliary meetings on a regular basis. These meetings can provide opportunities for schools to publicize WITS related activities, highlight their unique adaptations of the program, and encourage other schools to participate. For example, some program schools have created songs to remind students to use their WITS (<http://www.witsprograms.ca/schools/media-resources/audio.php>).

## Recommendations for enhancing consistency with beliefs

***Encourage schools to articulate their needs and beliefs.*** Encourage program champions and early users to identify their school values and to articulate how they perceive the program fitting in with their belief systems. This will

provide a vision for what to look for in a program and how to move forward in implementing the program. For example, if the school encourages independent problem solving, then a program that encourages children to take initiative in conflict resolution would be aligned with their beliefs.

***Improve compatibility and flexibility of programs.*** In order to enhance integration with school values, ensure that the prevention program is compatible with the established beliefs and activities that are happening at the school, including teaching styles, philosophies, and other existing programs. For example, schools may have a mission statement, code of conduct, or provincial mandate in place that can influence how the program fits within the school's established value system. Ensure that the program is consistent with the school culture.

***Encourage ownership.*** Successful implementation depends on how well the program fits within a community's preference (Schoenwald and Hoagwood, 2001). Therefore, consumers should have a vested interest in the program. Allowing the school to tailor the program to their existing organizational structures, without compromising the structural integrity of the program, can improve the transportability of the program into real world settings and enhance uptake within the school.

## Recommendations for increasing fit

***Integrate program components with curriculum.*** WITS Programs were specifically designed to make a large impact using as little time or resources as possible. Its book-based curriculum integrates easily into existing provincial and territorial learning objectives. Teachers can select stories from the WITS book lists that they find fitting. They can read to their students, use suggested questions, and use post-reading activities in the WITS lesson plans to reinforce WITS messages. Encourage teachers to personalize lesson plans by incorporating their unique teaching styles.

***Ensure program materials are accessible.*** Offering both online and print resources can ease the transition of learning a new program. Ensure that books and lesson plans are also easily accessible. For example, some program schools provide a WITS specific book corner in their library, while others have a WITS

book box in the principal's office. If teachers can easily access supplies, they are more inclined to fit the program into their classrooms.

***Offer space for creativity.*** The WITS program materials can be adapted by users to function within their own teaching strategies. If a teacher wants to use the program but also wants to further student creativity, they can expand on the materials provided (i.e., have students create a new WITS song or write their own story using Witsup the Walrus, the program's mascot). If a program allows for the creative adjustment of materials, it will be more likely to fit with the users' established systems. For example, the WITS program offers a space for teachers on Pinterest, a content sharing online service that allows members to "pin" images, videos and other objects to their virtual pinboard, to share and discuss their WITS-related activity with other teachers who are also using the program (<http://pinterest.com/witsprograms/>).

## Recommendations for influencing others and overcoming barriers

***Anticipate barriers to adoption.*** Before starting a new program, planning ahead can prevent the program from simply becoming a "flavor of the week" and promote long term investment. Problems with rallying continued support can be avoided by utilizing program components designed for community participants. The WITS program recommends monthly visits by community leaders to check on how things are going in classrooms. This ensures that the students and teachers are reminded of the program on a regular basis. The WITS program also runs a yearly poster contest, which encourages continued school participation.

***Influence program use through outreach to parents.*** Outreach strategies aid in gaining support for a program and work to influence program use. For example, the WITS program sends out brochures and newsletters to parents and the community in order to involve them in the program. Not only can parents help promote the importance of using WITS at school, but they are also shown how to use the program at home. Further outreach has been pioneered by schools themselves through initiatives such as setting up a WITS program booth at parent teacher conferences and promoting parent lead activities.

***Create channels for encouraging involvement.*** Interactive and informative channels can be employed to help increase involvement. The WITS program website involves parents, teachers, children and the community. It encourages program use by providing open access to information. Participants are also encouraged to reach out to others to share their points of view and unique ideas. The WITS Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/witsprograms>), Twitter (<https://twitter.com/witsprograms>), and Pinterest (<http://pinterest.com/witsprograms/>) pages provide venues where teachers can see what other teachers are doing and share their own ideas.

## Conclusion

The successful widespread dissemination of school-based mental health programs requires consideration of uptake processes at both the development and implementation stages. Maintaining a program's presence by involving multiple people, promoting fit with ongoing school values and activities, and creating a school-wide program language can provide opportunities for discovery and rediscovery. Schools should be encouraged to reflect on their values and to choose programs that fit with their belief systems. Ensuring that a program can be integrated with an established curriculum and is easy to access can promote cohesion with the school's existing culture. Programs that are flexible and easy to tailor to unique teaching styles can also enhance uptake. Anticipating foreseeable barriers and planning regular activities can sustain involvement in the program and outreach strategies targeted to multiple members of the school community can help to gain support and encourage continual program use.

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