

Giving at-risk youth a chance

February 1, 2013 – “I actually got along with people. I learned to control my anger.”

That’s how one young person describes “lessons learned” from the CHOICES program, a year-old pilot project for at-risk youth in Thunder Bay.

Offered by the Thunder Bay Counselling Centre, in partnership with St. Joseph’s Care Group and Children’s Centre Thunder Bay (the Integrated Youth System), CHOICES is an early intervention program designed to give youth aged 12 to 17 the confidence and skills to resist certain dangerous behaviours – notably drug and alcohol abuse. It is based on the successful *Rebound* program that was established in Sarnia in 1984.

The CHOICES project consists of a series of 10 weekly sessions. Participants are divided into groups no bigger than five, with two community volunteers matched with every group.

The sessions focus on three major areas:

Drug Resistance Skills: Participants learn about the consequences of taking various substances. They also learn to develop refusal techniques and delay tactics when pressured to use substances.

Social Skills Development: Participants learn to communicate and be more assertive, while acquiring skills to help them make decisions, solve problems, and build healthy relationships.

Self Management Skills: Participants are taught to set goals, and taught coping strategies for stress and anxiety.

The weekly sessions focus on the development of different social and interpersonal skills, using a variety of techniques to enhance the learning environment. These include role-playing, group discussions, group exercises to practice skills, video clips and guest speakers.

The first set of CHOICES workshops ran during the spring/summer of 2012, the second set ran in the fall of 2012 and another session just got under way late last month.

Following the program’s start-up, participants evaluated the sessions and here is what they said:

- 78% indicated that they “very much” or “mostly” enjoyed the sessions;
- 69% indicated that they “very much” or “mostly” learned new skills to help them cope better; and
- 69% indicated that they “very much” or “mostly” felt more hopeful after completing the sessions.

About CHOICES

The first of its kind in the region, the goals of this innovative pilot project are to:

- Increase capacity of the health care system to intervene early for at-risk youth;
- Help youth develop skills and techniques to manage stress and pressure; and
- Increase the ability of youth to resist drug use and peer pressure.

CHOICES Motto:

From At-Risk to At-Promise.



It's never easy to gauge success when working with troubled youth, but organizers have seen what they consider to be signs of real progress. One example is the boy who suddenly stopped coming to the sessions, having decided to drop out of the program. After numerous text and Facebook messages from others in his group, he changed his mind, feeling that he had been accepted by his peers.

The motto of the CHOICES program is "From At-Risk to At-Promise." That's a huge transition, and organizers know they won't always succeed. But they also understand the difference it can make for a young person to feel accepted and respected.

They have designed the program with that very much in mind. Judging by another one of the responses they received during their evaluation, the design is a good one.

"I really like the people that are here and CHOICES is really the only place where I feel most comfortable."

Quick Facts

The CHOICES program aligns with the strategic directions of the North West LHIN, and Ontario's comprehensive *Mental Health & Addictions Strategy*.

Focusing on early intervention for youth at risk of severe illicit substance abuse will:

- Improve health outcomes for this population of at-risk youth;
- Reduce reliance on emergency departments;
- Reduce admissions to hospital for substance abuse; and
- Reduce demand for addictions and detox services in the community.

"I commend the work of the Thunder Bay Counselling Centre, and its partners, in taking on the leadership to advance this initiative," says Laura Kokocinski, CEO of the North West LHIN. "Working with youth on prevention strategies such as this is very important for our young people."