

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



Choosing school-based programming interventions: a WITS example

Use evidence-based criteria to assess and select programming interventions that will work best for your school community

Bolstering student strengths and preventing social problems such as bullying behaviour or early school leaving is most effective when multi-year, integrated efforts are aimed at developing student's social and emotional skills and positive mental health. This is best done through a comprehensive approach that includes effective classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and parent and community involvement in supporting positive learning environments.

When selecting a specific instructional program for your school, consider the following six criteria.

1. Program effectiveness is documented, credible and aligned with school needs.
2. Program design is robust, intentional and manageable.
3. Program content incorporate sound instructional practice and addresses student and culture differences.
4. Supports for implementation enhance school staff's capacity to create learning environments and experiences that develop students' social and emotional learning and positive mental health.
5. Program emphasizes a shared responsibility for student success through family involvement and community partnerships.
6. Content and strategies align with and support key initiatives in Alberta, including Safe and Caring Schools & Communities renewed vision, Alberta's Social Policy Framework, the *Education Act* and cross-curricular competencies.

The following checklist provides brief descriptions for each of these six criteria. When considering implementing an instructional program for improving social and emotional learning and positive mental health, school staff can use this checklist to help select an evidence-based program that will best meets the needs of their students and school community.

Completing the checklist requires access to programming materials and information, often available on the web, and will be more effective if a small team undertakes the review and compares and discusses findings.

WITS Programs are used to bring this example to life. The WITS Programs bring together schools, families and communities to create responsive environments that help students develop healthy relationships and deal with bullying behaviour.

Program overview:

Developed in British Columbia, through a collaborative effort of a number of community partners, WITS is a one-year intervention program that builds a common language between school staff, students and families by teaching basic problem-solving strategies for dealing with bullying behaviour. There are two components: the WITS primary program for Kindergarten to Grade 3 and the WITS LEADS Program for Grades 4 to 6. Both programs use a literature-based approach to illustrate and reinforce four basic strategies. Community leaders introduce the programs at the beginning of the school year and make informal classroom visits throughout the school year. A major focus of the intervention is to create responsive environments where students can seek help from caring adults when they experience or witness bullying behaviour.

1. Program effectiveness is documented and credible and aligned with school needs.

- There is **strong and reliable evidence** from at least one carefully conducted and unbiased evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behaviour and/or academic performance.*

strong

promising

marginal

none

Since 2000, data has been collected from both program and control schools by a research team lead by Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater, a psychology professor from the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Dr. Leadbeater is a principal author of the WITS program.

The first longitudinal evaluation (2001 to 2006) followed 430 students and their families and collected four waves of data (Leadbeater et al., 2003; Woods, Coyle, Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2007). The second (2006 to 2008) involved 1,130 children, their families and teachers across three waves of data (Leadbeater, Sukhawathanakul, Yeung & Desjardin, in preparation).

These studies show that, compared to students in control schools, students in schools with well-established WITS Programs report more incidents of bullying behaviour. This is consistent with the WITS Programs' aim to encourage students to report bullying behaviour or 'Seek Help' and suggests students in the program schools are capable of identifying bullying behaviour and reporting them. Findings also showed that rates of bullying behaviour declined significantly faster in program schools compared to control schools. In addition, the second study showed that teachers in program schools consistently rated children's levels of social responsibility higher than teachers in control schools.

Evaluation data is available on the website at:

<http://www.witsprogram.ca/faq/#2><http://www.witsprogram.ca/schools/research-evaluation/>

The Primary WITS program meets the criteria to be included in the Public Health Agency of Canada's Canadian Best Practices Portal-Preventing Violence at: http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/?s=wits&qcwu-srch-submit=Search&post_type=any

- Documented impacts align with **identified student needs** in your school. For example:
 - improved academic performance
 - decrease in bullying behaviour (including relational and physical aggression)
 - increase in peer support and improved peer relationships *strong* *promising* *marginal* *none*

WITS' longitudinal evaluations measure levels of relational aggression (e.g., social exclusion, rumour spreading) and physical aggression (e.g., hitting, pushing). More recent evaluations include measures for increased peer support and social responsibility.

Summary: **meets criteria** **does not meet criteria**

2. Program design is robust, intentional and manageable.

- The program recognizes that all student benefit from approaches designed to enhance their social and emotional development and is designed for **the general student population***, including but not exclusive to students who are considered at-risk of problem behaviour.
 yes *no*

Both WITS programs were originally developed in elementary schools in British Columbia and targeted all students in the school.

- The program is of sufficient **intensity and duration** to be effective:
 - provides at least eight learning experiences per year*
 yes *no*

The WITS resource guide recommends that after the initial launch at the beginning of the school year, there be at least one related classroom experience per month. These could be a combination of teachable moments (i.e., through discussion and active problem-solving teacher helps students apply the WITS strategies to real-life situations in the classroom and on the playground), literature-based lessons and informal classroom visits from community leaders.

- provides a **clear sequencing** of activities and skills*
 yes *no*

The WITS programs offer both structure and flexibility. There is a clear sequence to the annual fall orientation sessions and then teachers can choose what sequence of literature-based lessons would work best for their group of students. The Grade 4 to 6 LEADS program offers a sequenced series of five lessons for reinforcing the strategies.

- creates meaningful opportunities for review, **practice and reinforcement** from grade-to-grade and from year-to-year
 yes *no*

The WITS programs build a common language and teach a set of core strategies so school staff can implement and reinforce a problem-solving approach across the grade-levels and across settings. The common language around the core strategies also set the groundwork for using teachable moments that occur spontaneously in the school day to help students apply the strategies.

The resource guide mandates an annual orientation at the beginning of the school year as a reminder to teachers, students and parents to use the WITS strategies. The informal classroom visits from the community leaders throughout the year are an opportunity for students to interact with positive role models in the community who reinforce the WITS message. The reminder gifts from each visit provide a visual reminder of the strategies.

The literature-based lessons also reinforce the strategies by creating opportunities for students to reflect, discuss, role-play and make personal connections.

- facilitates **long-term commitment** (i.e., three-to-five years) needed to support transformational change to the learning environment

yes no

The program is designed as a school-wide one-year intervention. There are no specific recommendations in the resource guide on planning past the first year.

- majority of program can be **delivered by classroom teachers** and other school staff

yes no

Although the participation of community leaders is an integral part of WITS programs, teachers are responsible for the majority of implementation including addressing teachable moment to reinforce the WITS strategies, facilitating the literature-based learning activities and hosting the informal classroom visits with the community leaders.

- majority of program activities can be **incorporated into classroom instruction** and can be linked to curriculum and day-to-day learning experiences

yes no

*The majority of WITS instruction is through literature-based learning that can typically be incorporated into Language Arts instruction. The correlation of each WITS lesson plan to provincial and territorial learning outcomes is available at:
www.witsprogram.ca/schools/lesson-plans/*

The program also encourages teachers to use teachable moments (i.e., situations that occur spontaneously in the learning environment, such as peer conflict among students) throughout the school day to review, reflect on, reinforce, and apply WITS strategies.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

3. Student activities incorporate sound instructional practice and address student and cultural differences.

- Provides strategies for changing the learning environment, including school and classroom policies and practices, and providing ongoing support and structure that enhances positive behaviour and student success.

strong *promising* *marginal* *none*

The goal of the WITS programs is to create a common language, both in school and at home, so adults can communicate positively and proactively about healthy relationships and bullying behaviour and can respond effectively to a child's requests for help. The WITS strategies are a way for adults to empower students, focus on behaviour rather than blame, and provide support to enhance positive behaviour and social interactions.

- Instructional strategies and student learning experiences are grounded in **evidence-based instructional practice** for engaging students and enhancing learning, and include opportunities for:

- activating/building background knowledge *yes* *no*

There are numerous opportunities through the WITS' literature lessons and related discussions to activate and/or build students' background knowledge.

- making personal connections *yes* *no*

There are numerous opportunities through the WITS literature lessons for students to make personal connections to situations, feelings and stories.

- accessing information in multiple ways *yes* *no*

Students learn the WITS problem-solving strategies through demonstrations, modelling and discussion. The strategies are reinforced through the use of mnemonics, posters, literature, poems, videos, photos and role plays.

- expressing learning in multiple and personally relevant ways *yes* *no*

The WITS literature lesson plans contain multiple ways for expressing learning including discussion, brainstorming, making predictions, role plays, visualization, drawing pictures, self-reflection, graphic organizers, making comic strips, using metaphors, character sketches, simulations, letter writing and story writing.

- participating in experiential and creative activities *yes* *no*

The programs contain a range of suggestions for a variety of experiential and creative activities, most using literature as the starting point.

Choosing school-based programming interventions:
a WITS example

- developing personal strategies yes no

The Primary WITS program focuses on four specific strategies: Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, Seek Help and the LEADS program for older students focuses on the four strategies: Look and listen, Explore points of view, Act, Did it work?, Seek help. Students are encouraged to internalize these strategies and make them their own.

- meaningful review and guided and independent practice yes no

The programs provide for regular review of strategies through the literature-based lessons and the classroom visits from community leaders. The LEAD program includes five training sessions that also provide guided practice. The goal of the program is that students will independently use these strategies throughout the school day (and beyond), on an as-needed basis.

- transferring learning into everyday life yes no

The WITS programs emphasise the importance of using teachable moments as opportunities to engage students in reflection and discussion about when and how to use new strategies for managing conflict and responding to bullying behaviour. In addition, parents are encouraged to learn and talk about the strategies so students can be supported in their use of the strategies across settings.

- Strategies and learning experiences can be **easily adapted for the local context** and unique strengths and needs of the school community yes no

Teachers can choose literature that is most appropriate to the local context and, taking advantage of teachable moments, they can use the WITS strategies to help students review, reflect on, reinforce, apply and evaluate the effectiveness of WITS strategies.

- Student learning activities explicitly **teach core social and emotional competencies***, that lead to positive mental health, including:

- self-awareness strong promising marginal none

Self-awareness is not explicitly addressed through the WITS strategies but may be addressed incidentally through some of the literature activities.

- social awareness strong promising marginal none

The WITS LEAD strategies Look and Listen and Explore Point of View address development of social awareness. The Seek Help strategies in both programs are based on social awareness of what a supportive community is, and how to access it.

- self-management strong promising marginal none

The WITS program puts a strong emphasis on developing self-management skills, including two of the four WITS strategies in the Primary Program: Walk away, Ignore.

- relationship skills strong promising marginal none

There is strong emphasis on developing relationship skills. The primary program focuses on the strategy Talk it out and the LEAD program focuses on the skill of Exploring points of view.

- responsible decision-making strong promising marginal none

Both versions of the WITS programs focus on helping students develop strategies for resolving conflict so they are better able to make responsible decisions in a variety of challenging social situations.

- Program encourages the use positive and people-first language and helps students and staff build a **vocabulary of hope** and empowerment. (For example, avoids hyperbole and uses neutral, proactive language such as `experiences bullying behaviour` rather than `victim`).

- yes no

Although the website and materials for adults uses terms such as "victimization", most of the materials and literature selections for students avoid hyperbole and uses neutral or positive language. For example, the title of the poster illustrating the four WITS strategies uses a low-key title "What do you do if someone is bothering you?" One exception to the use of the positive language is an adapted poster entitled "The Bully Circle" which uses pejorative terms such as "bullies", "target", and "victim". For the most part the literature selections have a positive tone but as there are a number of authors, tone and language does vary.

- Instructional materials and activities are flexible enough to accommodate a range of **students' learning needs**, strengths, preferences and ways of knowing.

- strong promising marginal none

The WITS booklists offer a wide range of literature choices and the teachers can adapt the lesson plans to best meets the individual learning needs of their students.

- Instructional materials and activities acknowledge, accommodate, respect and celebrate **cultural differences**.

- strong promising marginal none

The WITS resource guide states that the instructional themes and strategies were designed to be sensitive to ethically and culturally diverse communities (page 190). In particular, the WITS program includes a number of lesson plans based on children's literature that explores characters, settings or interactions representing Aboriginal worldviews. The guide also offers additional information on indigenous traditions and values related to the stories (pages 190-191).

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

4. Supports for implementation enhance school staff's capacity to create learning environments and experiences that promote students' social and emotional development and positive mental health.

- Effective and engaging **professional learning** materials and opportunities are available for school staff at both the start of the program, and throughout the duration of the initiative.*

strong *promising* *marginal* *none*

WITS provides a comprehensive online guide for teachers and community leaders, with detailed information on how to implement the programs. In addition, a 90-minute online course for teachers and community leaders is available free-of-charge. The WITS website contains additional professional learning resources such as video collections, connections to provincial curriculum outcomes, and examples of how participating schools are implementing and building on the WITS programs to create positive school cultures.

- **Classroom implementation** tools such as instructional materials, graphic organizers and learning resources are available.

strong *promising* *marginal* *none*

The WITS resource guide provides detailed literature-based lessons with accompanying graphic organizers for students. There are four separate booklists and related lesson plans, including: Primary Program (K–3) booklist, LEADS Program (4–6) booklist, an Aboriginal-themed book list (designed for the Primary Program but can be used with older students), and a French-language version of the Primary and LEADS booklists. The recommended literature can be ordered from online booksellers and many of the titles are likely to be in a school library. In addition, the LEADS program for older students offers teaching plans for five training sessions, one for each of the five problem-solving steps. Additional materials on the WITS strategies can be reproduced from online masters or can be ordered at nominal cost.

- **Implementation tracking** strategies and tools are available, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data about how the program is being implemented.

strong *promising* *marginal* *none*

The guide offers a ten-step guide to getting started with the WITS programs. This two-page handout is targeted for school administrators and could form the basis of an informal implementation checklist. In addition, there is a set of tips for school leaders on implementing and sustaining the WITS programs throughout the school year. There is also a template available for tracking classroom visits by the community leaders.

- Strategies and tools for assessing school strengths and needs and **establishing baseline data** are available, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data.

strong promising marginal none

The emphasis in both the WITS resource guide and the website is on the existing evidence base gathered by the professional research team. There is no information for schools who might want to collect and analyze their own data. University of Victoria is continuing to collect and analyze data on the efficacy of the program and a number of participating schools have been involved in data gathering at the local level.

- **Student assessment** strategies and tools are available*, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data.

strong promising marginal none

The WITS program materials do not provide information or strategies for working with or gathering data on individual or targeted groups of students.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

5. Program emphasizes a shared responsibility for student success.

- Provides information, strategies and tools for **school-wide coordination***

strong promising marginal none

The programs are designed for school-wide implementation. The website offers a step-by-step guide for school leaders on initiating the programs and a guide on implementing and sustaining the programs throughout the school year.

- Provides information, strategies and tools for meaningful **family involvement***

strong promising marginal none

The WITS programs focus on creating a shared language between home and school, based on the problem-solving strategies the students learn in the programs. The programs encourages teachers to connect with parents so they understand how the common language of the WITS programs can allow adults to have positive and proactive conversations about conflict that are focused on behaviour rather than on who is to blame. To support this, WITS has dedicated a section of their website for parents and there is also a downloadable pamphlet "Using Your WITS At Home" that schools can distribute at the beginning of the school year. The reminder gifts that community leaders distribute during their classroom visits are another tangible way to provide families with opportunities to initiate conversations about proactive strategies for responding to bullying behaviour.

- Provides information, strategies and tools for meaningful and effective **community partnerships***

strong *promising* *marginal* *none*

Community partnerships are an essential component of the WITS programs. When the program first began, school-based police liaisons provided the friendly community presence for schools. In recent years WITS has extended the community leader role to include paramedics, firefighters, Elders and any adult with a commitment to preventing bullying behaviour. The community leader provides the first contact with the program through the Swearing-In Ceremony (Primary Program) and the Tug-of-Help Skit (LEAD Program). These orientations are also an opportunity for other community role models, such as athletes, to participate and demonstrate that there are caring adults in the community. The community leaders also commit to making a number of follow-up classroom visits throughout the school year to check in with students to see how they are using their WITs strategies. The resource guide provides scripts for the orientation sessions, as well as tips for the classroom visits. There is a dedicated section of the WITS website for community leaders, as well as a 60-minute online learning module.

Summary: **meets criteria** **does not meet criteria**

6. Content and strategies align with and support key initiatives in Alberta, including:

- **Safe and Caring Schools & Communities** renewed vision and guiding principles (2013)
<http://safeandcaring.ca/about-us/safe-caring-overview/>

- ✓ Evidence-based and grounded in reliable research and best practice for the Alberta context

WITS are evidence-based programs with an ongoing commitment to research, through the University of Victoria. The WITS website allows for sharing of best practices.

- ✓ Promotes healthy relationships, respect and dignity as a way of supporting diversity and inclusion

The goal of the WITS strategies is to improve social interactions with others, manage conflict effectively, and resist negative social pressures. The program encourages students to help other children and “make school a safe and fun place to be.”

- ✓ Empowers schools and communities by teaching prevention and intervention strategies

The WITS programs offer a set of effective prevention and intervention strategies that students can use across settings. The program are designed to help school staff and families develop a common language around these strategies, so adults can have proactive conversations with students that focus on behaviour (versus blame) and empower students to solve problems and better manage their relationships.

- ✓ Supports youth action

The LEAD program for older students emphasizes leadership skills. The website has a dedicated section for students that includes examples of a Youth Action Project to create public service videos. <http://www.witsprogram.ca/kids/youth-voices/>

- ✓ Encourages collaboration with partners and stakeholders

The development of the WITS programs was a collaborative effort between school staff, community resource officers and researchers from the University of Victoria. It continues to be a collaborative effort with community leaders taking on an essential role at each participating school.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

- **Alberta Social Policy Framework's goals and principles**

<http://socialpolicyframework.alberta.ca/>

- ✓ Reduce inequality
- ✓ Protect vulnerable people

A central theme of the WITS programs is to help others who may be experiencing bullying behaviour or feeling left out or undervalued.

- ✓ Enable collaboration and partnerships

Community leaders play a key role in the delivery of the WITS programs. Families are also considered key partners.

- ✓ Everyone has inherent and equal worth.
- ✓ We all have a role to play in helping out where we can, and creating environments for positive change.

The WITS programs are built on an empowerment model. Through shared understanding and language, school staff and parents collaborate to create responsive environments and facilitate positive relationships. Through the WITS strategies, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour and to help others. In the LEAD program for older students, students have increased opportunities to demonstrate leadership and work for positive change.

- ✓ Diversity encompasses a range of human experience, including age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, language, and physical or mental ability, as well as socio-economic, immigration and citizen status.

The value of diversity is the theme of a number of the children's books recommended for the WITS program and a number of the related learning activities explore this theme in a positive and inclusive way.

- ✓ Proactive approaches work over the long term to prevent or address social problems before they start.

The WITS programs target the whole elementary school community and at each grade-level students take on increasing responsibility for problem-solving, supporting others and participating in Youth Action Projects and leaderships activities.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

Alberta Education Act's vision, principles and values

<http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/education-act.aspx>

- ✓ Students are entitled to welcoming, caring, safe and respectful learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self. (2012-Preamble p.12)

The WITS programs offer tools that schools can use to create more welcoming, caring, safe and respectful learning environments. This happens by reducing bullying behaviour, and through literature-based lessons, nurturing socially responsible behaviour.

- ✓ The role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork, and democratic ideals and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision making. (2012-Preamble p.12)

The WITS approach is based on problem solving, and creating opportunities for students to model respect and teamwork. It teaches strategies students can use to be resilient and adaptable when faced with challenging social situations. The programs also encourage risk-taking and standing up for what is right.

- ✓ Education is a shared responsibility and requires collaboration, engagement and empowerment of all partners in the education system. (2012-Preamble p.12)

The goal of the WITS programs is to bring together schools, families and communities to help elementary students develop relationship skills that will reduce deal with bullying behaviour. The goal is that this collaborative effort will create responsive communities for the prevention of bullying behaviour.

- ✓ Supports students who are impacted by inappropriate behaviour as well as those who engage in inappropriate behaviours (2012-Section 33-3-iv)

The proactive language of the WITS strategies focuses on behaviour, not blame. The program encourages adults to support both students who might bully others, and students who experience bullying.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

Alberta Education Cross-curriculum competencies from the *Ministerial Order on Student Learning* (#001/2013)

<http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/standards/goals.aspx>

- ✓ Know how to learn to gain knowledge, understanding or skills, through experience, study and interaction with others
- ✓ Think critically conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate to construct knowledge
- ✓ Identify and solve complex problems Have the confidence and capacity to solve a range of problems, from simple to complex
- ✓ Manage information ... access, interpret, evaluate and use information effectively, efficiently, and ethically
- ✓ Innovate ... create, generate and apply new ideas or concepts.
- ✓ Create opportunities ... through play, imagination, reflection, negotiations, and competition, with an entrepreneurial spirit
- ✓ Apply multiple literacies reading, writing, mathematics, technology, languages, medial, and personal finance
- ✓ Demonstrate good communication skills and the ability to work cooperatively with others
- ✓ Demonstrate global and cultural understanding ... considering the economy and sustainable development
- ✓ Identify and apply career and life skills through personal growth and well being.

Both the WITS Primary Program strategy (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, Seek Help) and the LEADS strategy (Look and Listen, Explore Points of View, Act, Ask: Did it Work?, Seek Help) are problem- solving frameworks that encourage students to think critically, solve problems, manage information, demonstrate good communication skills, and apply life skills. Being willing to help others requires students to innovate and create opportunities.

Summary: meets criteria does not meet criteria

Please note:

The criteria descriptions marked with an asterisk (*) are adapted from the *CASEL Guide*. This online guide provides a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of classroom-based Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and applies this framework to rate and identify well-designed, evidence-based instructional programs with potential for broad dissemination to schools across the United States. For more information on this resource see: <http://www.casel.org/guide/>