

Spark is a multi-component program aimed at promoting positive relationships and preventing violence in romantic relationships among youth. It targets teenagers, as well as significant figures in their environment, including school staff members, parents, and other trusted adults.

There are four components to the Spark program. For young people, we offer a series of 6 educational workshops designed for students in grades 9 and 10, along with a complementary component called Young Ambassador, where we encourage the formation of youth committees responsible for organizing additional awareness activities for students in their school.

For school staff, we also offer free online training to raise awareness about violence in romantic relationships and provide tools for their interactions with young people on these subjects. And for parents and trusted adults, we offer a series of informative video capsules that provide expert advice as well as insights from young people themselves on how to address romantic relationships and violence with adolescents.

The training for school staff and the video capsules for parents are available for free on our website, along with interactive activities for young people and additional resources for all targeted populations.

For the implementation of the component targeting youth, the workshops, we offered a series of 6 workshops: three in grade 9 focusing on promoting positive relationships and three in grade 10 focusing on preventing violence in romantic relationships. In total, more than 4500 young people have benefited from these workshops since the implementation began in January 2022 in eight schools in the Montreal and Saguenay regions of Quebec.

The young people completed a pre-test before the workshops and a post-test and follow-up test afterward to assess their appreciation of the program and its impacts on their knowledge, opinions, and personal skills related to the theme of romantic relationships.

The analyses of this evaluation are still ongoing, but we already have preliminary results that suggest that young people have generally appreciated the program.

77% of the young participants consider the topics covered to be relevant, according to them; 76% enjoyed the workshops and would recommend them to other young people their age, and 71% say they intend to use what they learned during the workshops in their personal lives. We also observe significant changes in the perceived ability of young people to differentiate between a positive relationship and one characterized by violence, to react if they encounter violence as witnesses, victims, or confidants, and to seek help if they experience violence in their relationship.

In addition to this quantitative evaluation, we conducted focus groups with young people to gather their opinions on the workshops, and once again, there is generally positive feedback on the program. Particularly, in grade 9, young people retain concepts about communication and conflict resolution methods, and in grade 10, they feel better equipped to recognize signs of violence, raise awareness about its consequences, and understand the importance of taking action if they or someone they know is a victim of violence in their relationships.

What we observed with the implementation of the workshop programs is that young people had very varied starting points regarding the themes of violence and romantic relationships. Some already had very good basic knowledge on these subjects, while others had preconceptions and stereotypes, such as trivializing violence, blaming victims, or holding sexist, homophobic, and transphobic prejudices. This confirms the relevance of having a program like Spark at this stage of their development to prevent the crystallization of these beliefs into problematic behaviors in adulthood.

Fortunately, most young people were very open, very interested in discussing, exchanging their views on these subjects, and learning more about these issues.

For the facilitators, the experience was generally positive as well. The workshop facilitators were proud and confident to deliver the Spark program because it is a program based on clear values. Beyond even the question of violence, it is a program that fits into an inclusive intersectional approach that will deconstruct stereotypes of people, including stereotypes related to the LGBTQ community.

It is also a well-structured program, so the facilitators had access to ready-made animation material, a very clear, comprehensive animation guide that allowed them to really appropriate the program. Even for people who may not necessarily have expertise on the theme of violence in romantic relationships or who are not necessarily very experienced in facilitating workshops with young people.

The main challenge was to stimulate the participation of young people without individually targeting them on topics that are obviously very personal and can be difficult for some, thus it really requires the creation of a trusting relationship with the group, and this is closely linked to the trust relationship that already exists notably between the students and the teacher because indeed, having a teacher present who shows interest in the topics discussed, who participates in class management, makes a huge difference in the facilitation experience.

However, not all teachers are necessarily comfortable with the topics addressed or the approaches of the program. Therefore, we are considering inviting all teachers who will host the Spark workshops to

take our online training to better understand the program, its objectives, and to be better equipped to handle any questions or confidences from students. This would enable optimal learning during the workshops and ensure that students have adequate support to continue the reflections initiated.

Unfortunately, not all teachers are necessarily comfortable with the topics addressed or with the approaches inherent to the program, so a measure we were considering for the future would really be to invite all teachers who will receive the Spark workshops to take our free online training on our website to really better understand the program, its philosophy, its objectives, and to be equipped to welcome any questions, any confidences from students. The idea would be to enable optimal learning during the workshops but also to ensure that students have a proper safety net to continue the reflections initiated during the workshops.

We have benefited greatly from the sustainability groups we have participated in over the past few months. For example, the group on building an effective pitch helped us identify the right questions to highlight the usefulness and innovative nature of the Spark program. This information will be useful to us in seeking future funding or partnerships. Also, the train the trainer groups on partnership creation will be particularly useful to us in the coming times since we are somewhat in the phase of sustaining our project, where we must gradually learn to let it go into the hands of others while ensuring that it remains faithful to its fundamental principles that have led to its success.

And of course, the annual meetings as well, which allowed us to network with a variety of teams across the country working on related themes beyond the academic environment we know better, so we have been able to draw very valuable lessons from their experience, both in terms of conceptualization, implementation, and dissemination of the program, against violence in romantic relationships. We are really grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of such an active and fruitful community of practice.