

Regional Multicultural Youth Council



Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario

SAFER SPACES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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During the 2019 *"Coming Together to Talk With Youth"* forum at Lakehead University, 250 high school students enjoyed a warm climate and the cordial relationships they rarely enjoyed at school. The friendly atmosphere allowed for open and frank dialogue on topics such as bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia and discrimination. Peer facilitators encouraged the students to dialogue, build bridges of understanding and foster mutual respect. The event provided an opportunity for young people to know about diversity, practice tolerance, appreciate our different heritages and learn to get along.

Cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice, and discrimination were everywhere. Students shared stories about name-calling, shunning, bullying and mistreatment they saw, had witnessed or experienced. They commented on mean attitudes, bad behavior, demeaning actions, incidents of aggression and violence at school and in the community. Many were afraid to speak up or felt uncomfortable to challenge the wrong assumptions and misconceptions passed around verbally or on social media. Ignorance and misinformation contributed to biases, mistreatment and exclusion of racialized, vulnerable, marginalized, underprivileged and minority groups.

Children and youth should have their voices heard, their feelings acknowledged and opinions respected. They have stories to tell and need support when they are facing difficulties and experiencing problems. They want encouragement when they make mistakes and guidance to make correct decisions, the right choices and find solutions. This requires creating the right space they feel comfortable and safe to open up and say what is bothering them without being criticized, put down, judged or laughed at. Such spaces are more than physical structures. They should be warm, friendly, cheerful, and offer a respectful climate where kids and teens matter, feel welcome, accepted, included and gain a sense of being and belonging.

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) was involved in planning and organizing the "*Coming Together to Talk*" event. It was a delight to see Indigenous and non-Indigenous students interact freely at a level different from what they normally do at school and in the community. Youth council members who facilitated the workshops and took notes connected well with the students discussions were held in a spirit of trust and mutual respect. Even though the participants attended the same schools, they did not easily open up about racism in class or challenge classmates when they were being racist, sexist, homophobic or disrespectful. The atmosphere was not very conducive to speaking up and engaging their peers or teachers on matters related to diversity, social justice and discrimination.

The forum revealed the importance of providing safer spaces and the right climate for children and youth to open up, share experiences, get to know each other better and foster a sense of a united community. This inspired the youth council to identify potential facilities and the human, social and behavioral qualities that make spaces safer for kids and teens.

- Facilities such as youth drop-in centres, schools, recreation centres, community halls, church basements, etc. can that conveniently located and accessible and for youths to gather, be happy, hang out, feel safe, socialize together and have fun. Providing food, recreation and entertainment adds the attraction that appeals to diverse youths to mix and grow together sharing experiences to help them make right choices and wise decisions.
- Programs, services, and activities should be affordable since children and youth are a dependent population with no money of their own to pay fees. Adequate funding to support and sustain safe spaces for continuous access to facilities, services and a warm climate.
- Good supervision ensures security for at risk and vulnerable youths. Caring staff, peer mentors, resourceful volunteers, adult allies, professionals and empathetic significant others who understand children and youth and communicate well with them to establish positive relationships and earn their trust will let them to open up on sensitive issues and controversial topics they normally would not talk about or discuss in public. They will help to influence their attitudes, behavior and character and make them feel they matter.

From brainstorming sessions, the youth listed the following human and social qualities that make places safer and enhance the warm climate children and youth need for wellness:

Be loving - Treat all children like family. Connect with them and help them to grow.

Be patient - Some kids and teens struggle with issues that are not easily seen. They need time to develop trust and feel comfortable to open up.

Be understanding - Young people want to be understood and validated for how they feel. It is important to acknowledge them and how far they have come. This adds value to what they have accomplished, and encourages them to continue improving.

Be respectful - When you do not agree with what youths say, continue having conversations in a kind and respectful way that engages them to learn. This is more effective than out-right arguing and dismissing them as ignorant or shutting them out.

Be someone they can trust - Many young people who have been let down find it hard to trust people. Show that you are different, are there for them, kind, and can be relied on. If you make a promise, keep it, or give a good honest reason if you break it!

Be mindful - Use courteous language - no swearing or degrading talk. Do not use violence, offensive gestures, inappropriate, demeaning or offensive jokes, etc. Always be aware of body language, attitude and the impact your words can have on youth.

Be conciliatory – When there is conflict, have Elders or peer mediators intervene to resolve arguments and relieve tensions. Use restorative practices to encourage dialogue and hear stories to address problems amicably without retaliation and revenge.

Be compassionate - Young people can be emotional, get upset and angry. They have strong feelings but lack experience to self-control. Help them to develop skills to deal with their frustrations, and teach them healthy ways to control anger.

- Be accepting and use inclusive language** – Gender issues are very delicate, and learn proper 'people' pronouns. Be willing to learn and use the correct terminology regarding culture, race, gender, sexuality, etc. Learn from mistakes and how to self-correct when wrong and avoid using improper and hurtful words.

- Be supportive of their ideas and goals** - Connect the youth to the resources, programs, services and supports they need to initiate projects and to reach their goals. Be polite. Ask for their input to avoid guessing and making wrong assumptions.

- Be empathetic** - Youths need someone who shows empathy and is capable of understanding where they are coming from, how they are feeling, and their aspirations to create a trusting bond. Avoid being seen as arrogant and condescending.

- Be caring and loving** – Act as a compassionate ally watching out after a true friend. Be a peer mentor and helper taking responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

- Be self-confident** - Everyone is an amazing soul and human being with talents and potential. They have come so far and be a role model to build their self-confidence.

- Be open-minded** - It feels nice to relate to other people. Be open and honest with your personal struggles. Talking about creative ways of over-coming barriers will guide the youth in the right direction. Sharing knowledge is empowering.

- Be aware of personal boundaries for your own safety and others' well-being** - Remember your role as a youth mentor leading by example. Your attitude, values, behavior and character are important. Always know boundaries and keep them in mind.

- Be professional. Keep private conversations confidential.** Do not breach confidentiality by talking about others' personal problems and struggles. Experiences and words shared in private should not be broadcast on social media or splashed around. Interactions at work should be professional and treated fodder for gossip