

The Central Role of Relationships in Youths' Narratives of Change Through a Residential, Wilderness, and Family Therapy Intervention

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to discover youths' perspectives of the changes they made during a residential, wilderness, and family therapy program, and the aspects of the program they believe were responsible for these changes. A semi-structured interview was conducted, and thematic analysis was used. All youths interviewed cited the ability to have healthier relationships as the most significant change they made in the program. Youth also discussed how their family functioning, sense of self, emotional experience, and thinking styles changed as a result of their participation in the program. Across all participants, relationships with staff, therapists, and other youth emerged as the most important factor influencing their journey of change through the program. Results of this study have implications for staff training, program development, and program evaluation.

Keywords: treatment outcomes, youth perspectives, relationships, residential treatment, wilderness therapy, family therapy

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In the present study, we examined youths' descriptions of their development during an intensive residential, wilderness, and family therapy program for mental health problems and addiction. Much of the literature on the impact of residential treatment has focused on parent or clinician perspectives, with outcome measures often determined by researchers or program staff. There is a growing body of work, however, that examines youths' perceptions about intervention for their mental health and substance use challenges, which is part of a broader movement toward youth-guided treatment (Association of Children's Residential Centers, 2014; Friesen, Koroloff, Walker, & Briggs, 2011; Gyamfi, Keens-Douglas, & Medin, 2007; Polvere, 2011; Ten Brummelaar, Harder, Kalverboer, Post, & Knorth, 2018).

The term "youth voice" is often used to describe experiences in which youth can express themselves and participate fully within contexts that affect them (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). Serido and colleagues (2011) examined how youth having a voice in youth programs may contribute to positive developmental outcomes. Using data from 748 youth who participated in youth–adult partnership programs, the authors found that young people who develop positive relationships with adults perceive they have more voice in the program, which in turn leads them to perceive more benefits of program participation. Another recent study examined youths' perspectives on the implementation of positive behavior interventions in secure residential juvenile facilities and youths' suggestions for improving these interventions (Jolivet, Boden, Sprague, Parks Ennis, & Kimball, 2015).

A number of studies have focused specifically on youth perceptions of the process and structure of residential treatment. For example, in a quantitative study of 73 adolescents in residential care, youth were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to assess the helpfulness of 16 treatment components and therapeutic services. Youth rated individual psychotherapy as the most helpful relationship intervention and perceived both formalized relationship interventions as well as informal relationships with staff and peers as very helpful (Zimmerman, Abraham, Reddy, & Furr, 2000). A group of researchers have also explored youths' perceptions of barriers and facilitators of residential substance use treatment, including perceptions of treatment seeking, finding, initiating, retention, and participation (Gogel, Cavaleri, Gardin, & Wisdom, 2011; Wisdom, Cavaleri, Gogel, & Nacht, 2011). These researchers conducted interviews with 87 adolescents, parents, and staff from three treatment agencies and found that adolescents cited positive adolescent/staff relationships, strong communication with staff, and parent participation in treatment as important facilitators of treatment.

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Few studies have focused on youths' perceptions of the changes they have made in residential treatment programs for mental health issues in general as opposed to specifically for substance addiction. In one study, Preyde and colleagues interviewed a sub-sample of 33 youths in residential care and 36 youths in intensive home-based treatment regarding their overall well-being after program participation (Preyde et al., 2013). Overall, they found that many youths experienced major improvements in their mental health and life circumstances, while a smaller group of youths continued to struggle. In a small study with six participants, youths described improved family relationships, as well as improved communication, conflict management, and time management skills due to their participation in a stepped residential care program in Australia (Magor-Blatch & Ingham, 2015). Finally, Gallagher and Green (2013) interviewed 16 adolescents who had been in residential care in the United Kingdom and found that these youth had positive outcomes in emotional and behavioral wellbeing, physical health, accommodation, absence of early parenthood, and substance use. Due to the limited research on youth perceptions of changes made throughout residential treatment programs for mental health and substance use challenges, more research is needed in this area.

An Intervention for Youth Who Struggle with Addiction and Mental Health Problems

Pine River Institute (PRI) is a 36-bed residential program for youth struggling with addiction and mental health challenges. Located in Ontario, Canada, PRI combines four services: wilderness therapy, residential treatment, parent intervention, and aftercare. There are five stages of the program: Stage 1 is the wilderness phase, Stages 2 - 4 take place at the residential site, and Stage 5 involves the provision of aftercare services while youth transition back to their homes and communities. The wilderness therapy component occurs during the first two months of the program, where youth live in a wilderness environment, camp in tents or yurts, and engage in physical activities such as hiking and canoeing. Personal growth is facilitated through group initiatives, individual therapy, journaling, and other therapeutic activities. After youth graduate from the wilderness, they spend the next eight to ten months at the residential campus completing high school credits, living collectively, and participating in individual, group, and family therapy.

An important aspect of the program is the requirement of parent involvement. Parents meet individually with staff and in groups to learn how to respond to their adolescents in developmentally appropriate ways. Furthermore, youth and parents engage in family therapy. The program uses the Satir Family

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Therapy model to support change throughout the youth's family system. More information about the family therapy component of PRI's program can be found in a recent article by van Ryn and Creighton (2019). In the final phase of the program, youth are reintegrated into the community with the support of aftercare services. Since PRI is the only organization in Canada that combines these four types of services, research is necessary to document the impact of the program on youths and their families, as well as to inform expectations related to the types of changes that can be anticipated from a multimodal treatment program.

The goal of this study was to understand youths' perspectives of the changes they made through treatment and the program elements they perceive to be responsible for these changes. In this qualitative study, we interviewed adolescents struggling with mental health challenges and addiction about their experience in a treatment program. The qualitative approach enabled us to derive an in-depth understanding of youths' experiences in their own words and to answer two main research questions: (1) What do youth perceive to be the most significant changes they made through this multimodal treatment program? (2) What do youth view as the most impactful aspects of the program?

Method

This study was conducted at Pine River Institute (PRI) with ethics approval from the York University Ethics Review Board. Parents were informed about the research project and provided written consent for youth to participate. Parental consent was obtained for 24 youth (71%). Only youth with parental consent participated in this study and the youth themselves assented to participate. Youth were informed that if they declined to participate in the study, it would not jeopardize their relationships with staff nor the services they received at PRI. Conversely, they were told that if they chose to participate, every effort would be made to de-identify their responses. They were cautioned that it was possible that individuals who knew them well might recognize quotations as belonging to them.

Participants

Youth were informed about the study by the PRI principal and were invited to speak with the first author if they wanted more information about the study and/or were interested in participating. It was decided a priori that the sample would be 10 youth, as this is an ideal sample size when conducting in-depth interviews and doing qualitative analyses. The total sample consisted of seven boys and three girls. Youth were chosen for the interviews to represent the gender ratio at PRI, which ranges from 66% to 85% male (Pine River Institute,

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2014). During daily activities, six male youths mentioned that they were interested in being interviewed. All six of these youths were interviewed. For the remaining four participants, four girls were selected from diverse stages in the program. Of the youth invited to participate, one female youth declined, and a male youth who was interested in the study was chosen instead.

Youth were also chosen from different stages of the program: two participants were from Stage 2, four from Stage 3 and four from Stage 4. No youth were from Stages 1 or 5 as they were not present in the center. Similar to the population at PRI, all 10 youth who participated in this study were white and their average age was 17.5 years old, with an age range between 14 and 18 years old (Pine River Institute, 2015). Half of the participants were from the Greater Toronto Area and the others were from within the province of Ontario.

More than half of youth admitted to PRI have been diagnosed with a significant mental health challenge, the most common challenges being anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Similarly, many of the youth in this sample struggled with a range of mental health challenges in addition to addiction, including self-harm, school refusal, family conflict, and past trauma. Information on socioeconomic status (SES)/income is not formally collected by the program; however, clinicians have reported that most youth tend to be from mid-to-high SES families. At the time of interview, the youth in this study had been in the program for an average of 8.5 months, whereas youth typically spend an average of 11 months in the program in total (Pine River Institute, 2015).

Procedure

The first step in developing this study was to meet with the clinical staff to discuss the project and receive feedback on the research goals and procedures. The research questions and methods were mutually decided upon with the clinical staff. The first author spent a few days a week at PRI for about eight months, participating in daily activities with the youth and staff. This extended time at PRI was essential in developing trusting relationships with the youth and staff, as well as getting a deeper understanding of the program. Since the goal of this study was to capture the perspectives of youth in their own words, open-ended interviews were conducted with the youth.

Analyses

The semi-structured interview guide contained 15 main questions, which are included in Table 1. These questions were intentionally broad to give youth

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Table 1
<i>Main Question from Interview Guide</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think of yourself before you came to Pine River. How would you have described yourself? How would your parents have described you? 2. Now think of who you are at this moment, how would you describe yourself? What has changed? 3. What challenges led you to participate in this program? 4. Since you've been at Pine River, have you noticed any changes? What part(s) of the program was (were) most helpful in making these changes? 5. Think of a time you felt you could be yourself around someone else. Who was this person? Who else do you feel like you can be yourself around? 6. Think back to the circle of trust activity you completed at the beginning of the program. What did your circle of trust look like then? What does your circle of trust look like now? 7. Has your relationship with your parents changed since coming to Pine River? If so, how has it changed? What aspects of the program helped you and your parents make these changes? 8. Think back to when you wrote your letter of accountability to your parents. Describe the experience of writing the letter in as much detail as you can remember. Did this letter impact your relationship with your parents? 9. Describe your relationships with your friends before you came to Pine River. Have these friendships changed at all in the time you've been at Pine River? 10. Describe your romantic relationships before you came to Pine River. Have these relationships changed at all in the time you've been at Pine River? 11. Please describe your relationships with the staff at Pine River. 12. Please describe your relationships with your team members. 13. Please describe what it's like to participate in the weekly process groups. 14. How would you summarize your experience in this program overall? 15. What do you think the future holds for you? What are your plans after you finish at Pine River?

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the opportunity to discuss the aspects of themselves and their experiences that they considered most important. Subsequent follow-up questions were asked, such as asking youth to provide more information about something they had shared. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with the majority of interviews lasting 60 minutes. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a flexible and accessible approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In short, and like other qualitative methods, thematic analysis is a way of parsing qualitative data into themes that are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. The decision to use a descriptive approach as opposed to a more interpretive approach was made before beginning the analysis. In the analysis phase, the first author worked on bracketing assumptions from previous reading, research, and personal experiences to allow the themes to emerge from the data, as is consistent with an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). In line with this inductive approach, care was taken to stick closely to the language of the participants when creating categories and to limit the amount of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the first phase of the analysis, transcripts of the 10 interviews were coded using NVivo software with the initial main categories and subcategories identified. NVivo is a software used to organize data. It allows the researcher to manually highlight sections of text and code it with the name of a theme that the researcher creates. All parts of the text that have been given the same theme name can then be viewed in one section to allow the researcher to then assess the theme for internal consistency.

In the second phase, all 10 interviews were re-coded to identify any additional examples of existing categories, as well as to identify new categories. In the third stage of analysis, each category was examined to ensure it was internally consistent (i.e., the properties within the category were conceptually similar), as well as to ensure the category was conceptually distinct from other categories. All categories that contained properties from only one or two participants were excluded from the final model. The final step was sorting all categories into domains, and the main categories and subcategories that fall under those domains. A consensus was reached amongst researchers on the structure of domains, categories, and subcategories.

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Results

Changes Made in the Program

During the interviews, youths spoke excitedly about the changes they had made in the program, resulting in the emergence of five main categories in the *Changes* domain (see Figure 1).

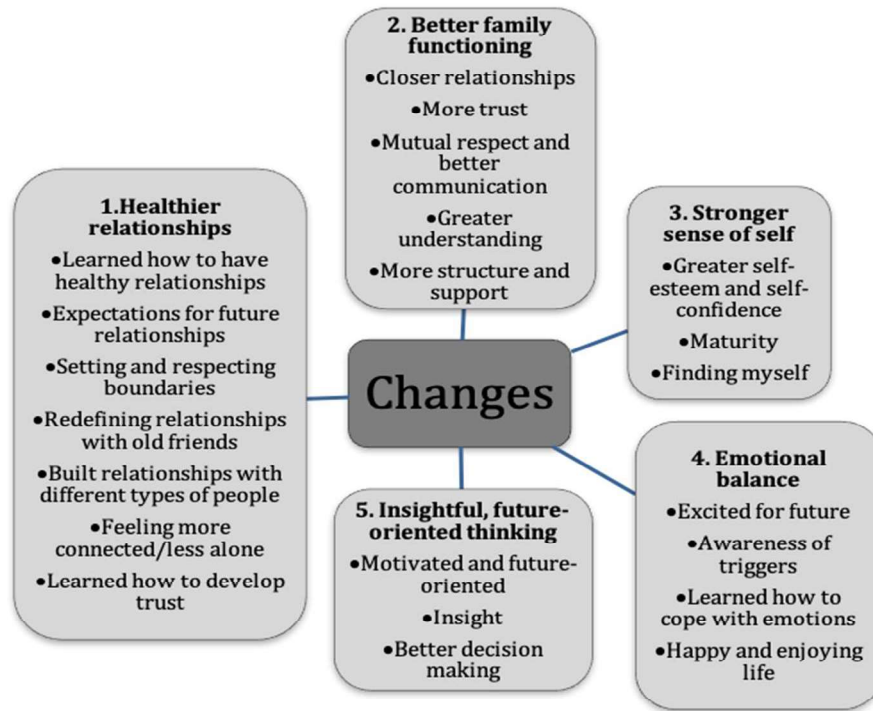


Figure 1. Youths' perspectives of the main changes they through the program

Healthier relationships. This first main category was the most prevalent change participants discussed and involved a shift in their understanding of and experiences in relationships. This main category comprised seven subcategories.

Learned how to have healthy relationships. Participants mentioned changes in their ability to have positive relationships with the people around them. One youth who discussed experiencing a lot of distance in their previous

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relationships mentioned that through the program they “learned how to deal with interpersonal situations.”

Expectations for future relationships. Youth discussed having new expectations for future relationships. One participant shared their intention to seek out “friends that are supportive and mature,” whereas another participant explained that they planned to seek out new relationships based on shared values. A third participant indicated, “You set a new standard for yourself...I deserve for someone to be there for me. I deserve someone who’s going to care about me ... I care about myself more, and I want more for myself.”

Setting and respecting boundaries. Half of the youths interviewed indicated that setting boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others are essential interpersonal skills they gained through the program. One youth shared their process of developing these skills: “I’ve gotten a lot better at setting boundaries with people. And I’ve found that setting those boundaries has made it a lot easier, and feels really good, because I don’t have to feel guilty about it.” This language of boundaries is part of the clinical model at PRI, which the youth have taken up in their narrative of change.

Redefining relationships with old friends. Many youth discussed having to redefine relationships with old friends and carefully consider which friends to reconnect with when returning home after the program. One youth explained this by saying:

If they do want to come in my life as someone who I'm not using with, then like that's perfect. That's great, and then I'll be able to support them, but it would be rebuilding the friendship from start, and if they don't accept me for the person I am now, then whatever. Like, they can just live their life and I'll live mine.

Built relationships with different types of people. Youths discussed changes in their willingness to have relationships with others who they perceive to be unlike them. One participant admitted, “I didn't really like adults back home, and I didn't talk to them that much, and I thought they all judged teenagers and they all didn't like us. But I realized that I can have a friendship with an adult.”

Feeling more connected/less alone. Youths explained that through their participation in the program, they felt more connected to the people in their lives and less alone. One youth stated, “I'm not alone anymore and that's an awesome feeling.” Another student described changes in their circle of trust, which is a

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drawing youth do at the beginning of the program in which those close to the inside of the circle are people they trust the most. Comparing their circle of trust before and after the program, one youth said:

Yeah it's pretty different ... I probably would have only had two or three people on there before and now I would probably say I have at least, you know like six or seven people on there ... all those people would be closer than anyone that would be on there before, so yeah it's definitely changed a lot.

Learned how to develop trust. Another important change involved learning how to develop trust in relationships in an appropriate way and at an appropriate pace. One youth said, "I kind of trust too early. So, as soon as I thought, 'yeah, we're going to have a relationship,' I immediately put all my trust in [them], which was wrong because I should have developed it later."

Better family functioning. The second most prevalent main category was an improvement in family relationships. The five subcategories of family functioning are described below.

Closer relationships. Most youth described their family relationships as much closer due to their experiences at PRI. One youth articulated this by saying, "I'm very close with my mom now. She's been through a lot with herself, as well as my dad. So I'm very close with both of them now, I'm pretty happy about that." Other comments in this category included sharing more personal things with their family, asking family members for support or advice, and wanting to spend time with their family.

More trust. Students described building more mutual trust in their family relationships. Participants talked about all they have gone through with their family in their journey to seek treatment, how they now trust their parents more, and how there is more mutual honesty in their relationships. Many youth also commented that their parents trust them more because of all the work they have done at PRI. One youth explained that in their current relationship with their mother, "she takes my word on things. Which is really important. Whenever I said anything to her before, she had zero faith in me."

Mutual respect and better communication. Youth spoke about greater mutual respect and communication in their relationships with their families. One youth mentioned that their parents "respect me a lot for coming to Pine River, I think that was the first measure point, after that it's been steady since." Other youth mentioned that their communication with their parents has greatly

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improved over their time at PRI, partly because they respect each other more. One youth explained:

I think they've learned how to communicate ... now [my dad]'s able to tell me why he makes certain decisions instead of just saying, 'This is how it's going to be.' He's able to say, 'I want it to be like that because of this.' And I can completely empathize with that ... even if I don't agree with it...that's fine and I understand that and I think that's helped our relationship a lot.

Greater understanding. A few youth spoke about their families having a greater understanding of them as a person. For example, one youth believed their parents had “developed more understanding for my issues and where I'm coming from. They understand a lot more about me and my past.”

More structure and support. The final change in family functioning involved their parents creating a more structured and supportive home environment. As one youth stated, “We're slowly building a new dynamic that has a bit more structure in it,” and another participant said that their parents now “know how to be more supportive of me.”

Stronger sense of self. The third main category captures how youth define, describe, and feel about themselves.

Greater self-esteem and self-confidence. Most youth indicated that having more confidence in who they are was one of the greatest changes they had made in the program. One youth commented, “I was very self-conscious and very uncomfortable with myself, and here, I've developed the ability to have a whole lot of confidence.” Another youth mentioned feeling a lack of self-confidence until a staff mentored this youth during the wilderness component and taught them about positive affirmations. This youth shared some of these affirmations such as, “I'm proud that I was helping today ... I'm proud that I cooked for people. And all those little things add up, and you can really look and be like 'wow, there's a lot of things I should be proud of.'”

Maturity. Youth felt they had matured over their time at PRI, and many described themselves as a mature person. For example, one youth was asked how they would describe themselves at this moment in time. They replied, “Smart. Future oriented. Hopeful. Happy. Mature and grounded.”

Finding myself. Some youth described being in the process of “finding themselves,” or building a sense of identity through their interactions with the world. One youth described their journey as:

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I've worked a bit on identifying who I am, I guess when I came I didn't really know who I was, because I'd been like browsing around, looking for someone's personality to try on. Like a new pair of pants, or something. Now I guess I'm a bit more comfortable in where I stand.

Emotional balance (enjoying positive emotions, coping with negative emotions). In this fourth main category, youth reported that they were now able to enjoy positive emotions such as happiness and excitement for the future, while also coping more effectively with negative emotions.

Excited for future. The most common subcategory of emotional balance was feeling hopeful and excited for the future. This feeling of excitement for the future is captured in this participant's words: "I actually can now look forward to life. I never saw a future for myself, and that's pretty scary, and now I'm really excited for tomorrow and for whatever is to come, which is ridiculously unbelievable."

Awareness of triggers. Half of the participants cited a growing awareness of how external events make them feel. They use the term "trigger" to refer to an experience that causes them to have an intense, often negative, emotional experience. Gaining awareness of one's triggers is a part of the clinical framework at PRI, and youth have taken up this language in how they describe their journey of change. For example, one youth who was planning to remain sober after the program reflected, "I was thinking about living on residence for university and then I thought about it, and I think that would be pretty triggering. I think it would be hard to be around a bunch of people who were constantly partying."

Learned how to cope with emotions. Many youths discussed being able to cope with strong emotions more effectively. As one participant commented, "I think that's what's really good about here, is that you learn how to work through those feelings."

Happy and enjoying life. Finally, youth explained that they experienced more joy and were able to enjoy life after beginning the program. For example, one youth stated:

I was on anti-depressants for really close to three years, the highest dose. I thought I was going to be severely depressed my whole life ... I just had all these medications and now I'm not on any medication. I'm actually genuinely happy. I enjoy living, I enjoy my life, I enjoy my relationships with my friends and my family. I have goals set for the future. And I'm usually in a calm, good mood.

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Insightful, future-oriented thinking. The fifth main category of change is related to developing a greater future orientation. Youth noted changes in their thinking patterns, including greater motivation, insight, and better decision-making abilities.

More motivated and future oriented. Participants mentioned that they were thinking about and planning for the future much more after being at PRI. When asked how they would describe themselves at this point in time, one youth answered, “more future oriented, more aware of what I need to get done, a better sense of what I want to do after I'm done high school.” Moreover, some youth felt that they were more motivated because of their participation in the program and had the drive to work towards their goals.

Insight. After participating in the program, participants had greater insight into their past behavior and articulated their place in relationships with greater clarity. For example, when asked to summarize their experiences in the program overall, one youth said, “Overall, I would say that it is eye-opening ... because you can clearly see that there were things wrong with the way you were living before.”

Better decision-making. Youth commented on the advances they had made in their decision-making abilities, including their ability to effectively analyze situations and make choices that contribute to their wellbeing. One participant mentioned:

I wasn't always very good at thinking through difficult situations, which made me make stupid decisions, and it caused problems. Now I think I have a better understanding of what will benefit me and what will be destructive. Which I think will help me make better decisions in the future.

Program Elements Linked to Change

Youth discussed the key aspects of the program that they considered highly influential in their development, resulting in the emergence of four main categories in this domain, each with a number of sub-categories, as detailed below (see Figure 2).

Development through critical relationships. Across all participants, relationships with staff, therapists, and peers emerged as the single most important factor influencing youths' journey of change through the program.

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Relationships with staff. All ten participants talked extensively about how their relationships with staff were essential in their development as a person. One youth reflected, “I developed a close relationship with the staff ... they just helped me so much with my life, and [staff name]. He was the main role model for me to be a man and an adult”. The youth articulated how staff modeled what a healthy relationship looks like, and through these relationships they learned how to have healthier relationships with others in their lives. For example, one youth said, “I don't know if you remember [staff name] ... I'm like super close to her so yeah that helped me understand how to build those relationships and then I can do that for the rest of my life with other people.” Other youth talked about what it felt like to be cared for unconditionally by an adult. This was significant for many of these youth, as some of them had experienced abuse, trauma, and ongoing conflict in their family and peer relationships before beginning the program. When asked what the most helpful thing about the program was, one youth answered, “They just care. They care about you. They give you everything you need.”

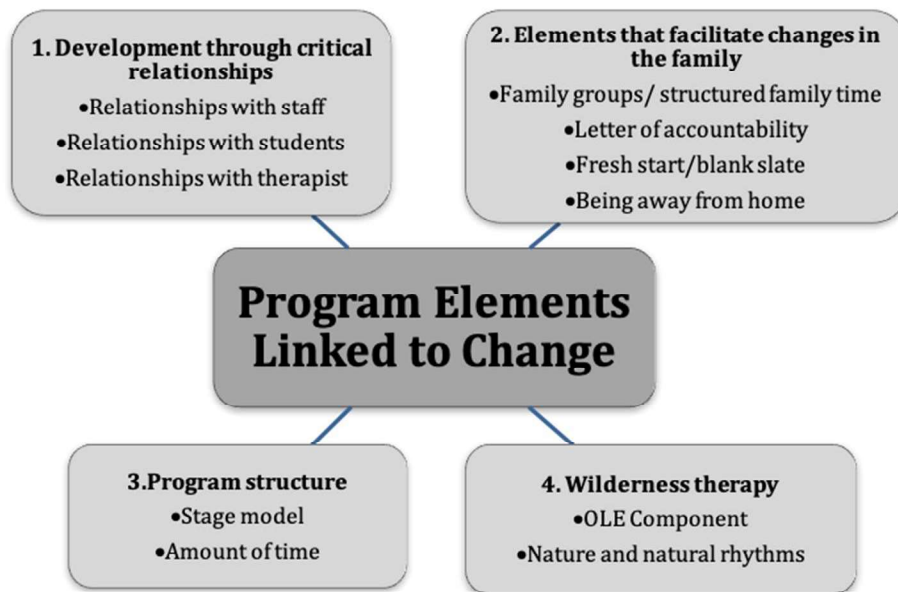


Figure 2. The four main aspects of the program that youth discussed as highly influential in their journey of change.

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Relationships with students. All youth mentioned their relationships with other students as important to the progress they made in the program. When asked what the most helpful parts of the program were, one student responded, “the students that you're living with. They're the ones you do most of your work with. Whether you like them or not, they teach you so much.” Another student described their relationships with other students as “really deep ... you open up about everything that you never plan on opening up about, in your life, with these people.” It was also common for participants to discuss how their work with other students at the school transferred to their relationships with friends and family. For example, one youth said, “I feel like they have the team dynamic as a mimic of your family... it teaches you that you can't escape it. You gotta deal with it. You can't just bury it down.”

Relationship with therapist. Youth mentioned that their relationship with their therapist helped them develop a deeper sense of their identity, as well as work through the problematic aspects of their relationships with people at PRI and at home. One youth said that without their therapist, “I would never have found out who I was.” Other students talked about their therapist encouraging them to be more open and push their comfort zone, connect with other students on a deeper level, and be more aware of how certain behaviors impacted those around them. Similar to relationships with other staff, the experience of being cared about unconditionally was mentioned as a defining feature of the relationship with their therapist. For example, one participant explained, “She'll constantly tell me, 'I still care about you, just as much as I did before. Just because I called you out on something, I don't stop caring about you because of that.’”

Elements that facilitate changes in the family. During the interviews, youth were also asked what parts of the program helped them to shift their family dynamic and improve their relationships with family members. They responded that the family groups and structured family time, letter of accountability, fresh start with their parents, and time away from home were all important in facilitating changes in their family relationships.

Family groups/structured family time. Youth mentioned that the family therapy and structured family time were core components of the program that helped repair their family relationships. One youth stated that family therapy was “incredible. I never thought I'd talk to [my family] again, or ... have a meaningful, respectful relationship. I never thought that would ever happen. And it's happened.” When asked what had helped them make these changes, they shared, “It's the gradual re-integration of them into your life, as well as therapy

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with a person to listen to what's going on and step in when necessary.” Other participants discussed the changes their parents had made due to their participation in the family therapy. Through the parent support groups and family therapy, parents gain skills such as setting boundaries, communication, and coping with emotions. The parents' growth and development is essential in improving the quality of family relationships, which in turn impacts youths' wellbeing.

Letter of accountability. In the first stage of the program, parents write a letter to their youth naming the youth's problematic behaviors and explaining how these behaviors impacted the family. Youth are then expected to write a letter in response, taking responsibility for their behavior before PRI. The youth interviewed cited this letter as an important part of their therapeutic process. One youth described the effect of this letter as making them “just really realize like, how much I need help. How much I need to change things. That was a huge wake up call.”

Fresh start/blank slate. Youth describe the program as a whole as giving them a fresh start with their parents. When asked about the most helpful components of the program, one youth replied, “really just being away from all the influences at home, a fresh start I guess, especially with my parents.” In this way, the program acts to interrupt the negative patterns of interactions and helps parents and youth create a new foundation for their relationship.

Being away from home. Youth discussed being away from all of the influences of home as central to the improvements they made in the program. One youth elucidated this process:

I think probably one of the most helpful things was the way it takes you out of your life completely ... I hadn't seen any people I used to hang out with, or had any form of communication with them for just under a year... it helped me not worry about those relationships and just deal with that I need to work on here ... so just being disconnected from those kinds of things and being able to work on myself is helpful.

Program structure. Youths mentioned two aspects of the program structure as helpful in their journey of change: the stage model and the amount of time spent in the program.

Stage model. The PRI program is set up so students must pass through five stages. This process is valuable because students in higher stages offer mentorship and support to newer students. To pass through each stage, the

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student must meet a specific set of maturity measures and relationship skills (e.g., honesty, accountability, etc.). If a student has regressed into old patterns, it is possible for them to be demoted to the previous stage. One student explained how getting “stage dropped” was a valuable learning experience for them: “I took an honest look and asked, 'what's not going right?' and then I looked at the relationships I had ... If I didn't get stage dropped ... I think I would have stayed in a very rough spot.” Another aspect of the stage model is slowly transitioning back into the home environment and participating in the after-care stage. One youth explained, “you slowly see your parents first every other weekend, then every weekend, then you start going out with them ... and then you visit home ... it's a slow transition”.

Amount of time. Many youth interviewed mentioned the importance of being at PRI for a long period of time in order to make profound and lasting changes. This can be seen in this student's passionate monologue: “Such a long process, you know? It needs to be long... Most of these characteristics I learned it over what? 16 years or something? You think you're going to break that in six months? Gimme a break.” Many youth felt that the program's principle to only discharge students when they are ready, as opposed to having a set length of time that each student is in the program, was one of the program's greatest strengths. One youth explained:

It's not like 'okay, after five months, we're sending you home' ... They say 'We're going to send you home when we feel confident that you're ready. And if you go home, and you really start hitting problems, you can come back to the school.'

Wilderness Component. Youth identified the opportunity to become more connected to the natural world as important in their journey of change. This included the Outdoor Leadership Experience (OLE) component of the program, as well as being able to connect with nature and to engage in more natural rhythms.

Outdoor Leadership Experience (OLE). The Outdoor Leadership Experience (OLE) takes place in a northern Canadian wilderness setting and is the first component of the program that the youth experience. Youth typically spend about two months in this first stage of the program, although the length of time depends on how long it takes each youth to meet the goals of this stage. For some, the experience was quite physically and emotionally demanding, and their self-confidence increased after having completed this part of the program. One

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youth explained how the wilderness component helped in their development of self in relationships:

I loved being smelly and greasy and getting to know these people. And they're not judging you because they're gross too you know? And that was probably one of my favourite parts was not feeling self-conscious. That was a really important thing for me was to feel okay being myself, just physically, and then it kind of transferred to emotionally. I could be more real, I guess...

A number of participants also reflected on the role of the OLE as helping them develop gratitude for the things in their life. For example, one youth said, "another part of the woods that's really important is that it takes you away from everything and makes you really more appreciative and grateful for the things like school."

Nature and natural rhythms. Youth identified the experience of being connected with the natural world as a contributing factor to changes in their mood and overall wellbeing. One youth suggested, "You need the quietness because it allows you to not have a million things going through your head, or kind of have that over-stimulation ... you have that time to sit down and actually reflect." Youth also described how the natural setting, both in the OLE and at the main campus, helped them develop a more natural circadian rhythm. One participant described this as "resetting, like everything in your body feels really good, you eat at a regular time every day, you go to bed when it's dark and wake up when it's light and you just feel natural."

Discussion

The goal of this study was to enhance understanding of youths' development through residential treatment and to document what was most impactful in this development. According to the youth interviewed, the changes they made in their relationships, including family relationships, represented the most salient part of their transformation through the program. Consistent with ecological perspectives on development, which emphasize the primary role of relationships in adolescent development (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006), this study suggests that the development of healthy relationships is foundational to making progress in other developmental tasks, such as emotion regulation and sense of self. When describing their personal growth, the main category *Sense of Self* emerged, in which youth discussed feeling self-confident, mature, and engaging in a process of finding themselves. Many of the changes map onto the components of Lerner's model of

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Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005). That is, youths in the present study expressed increases in the five domains of this model: confidence (*self-confidence* in the *sense of self* category), competence (*maturity* in the *sense of self* category), connection (*changes in relationships* and *family changes* categories), caring (*changes in relationships* and *family changes* categories), and coping skills (*emotional balance* category). The emergence of a healthy sense of self represents a major developmental gain for the youth in this study and can only occur in the context of caring relationships.

The presence of a positive peer culture and close relationships with other students were mentioned as important by all ten youth interviewed. Although there is much less research on peer relationships in residential treatment, one study of a wilderness therapy program showed that a positive group experience was associated with a statistically significant decrease in depression (Norton, 2010). Early research on wilderness therapy suggests that “the peer group is often one of the most powerful contexts in adolescence for identity development and intimacy ... the group may provide relational experiences that can help rework or resolve developmental crises and dysfunctional patterns that were not dealt with earlier” (Miles & Priest, 1999). Similarly, in one study with a wilderness therapy program in Norway, youth noted that connecting with diverse peers “became a source of positive stimuli and interest while contributing toward creating an inclusive and supportive milieu” (Fernee, Mesel, Andersen, & Gabrielsen, 2019). The youth in this study discussed how support from peers could be as important or sometimes more important than support from therapists (Fernee et al., 2019). Russell and Farnum (2004) suggested that the “social self” is one of the core aspects of wilderness therapy, such that wilderness experiences help youth learn more cooperative behaviors and supports group members forming close interpersonal relationships. Further, Russell and Gillis (2017) included peer relationships as a factor in their Adventure Therapy Experience Scale, which they defined as engaging in conversation with other participants about their experiences during the program. More research within the residential treatment field is needed to understand the impact of positive peer relationships on treatment outcomes and how to promote these types of relationships within a treatment setting.

The youth interviewed described their relationships with staff and therapists as one of the most important program elements that helped them in their journey of change. This finding is consistent with surveys and interviews with youth placed in residential care who cite relationships with staff as among the most helpful and positive aspects of their residential experience (Zimmerman et al., 2000; Anglin, 2004; Gallagher & Green, 2012; Smith, McKay, &

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Chakrabarti, 2004). Fernee and colleagues (2019) reported that the amount of time therapists spent with clients and the familiarity that unfolded when doing activities such as hiking together contributed to establishing a strong therapeutic alliance. A group of children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders from a program in Finland cited the availability of staff, as well as a clear set of rules and boundaries, as the most helpful aspects of treatment (Soenen, D'Oosterlinck, & Broekaert, 2013). Conversely, they listed strictness, not listening, and inappropriate staff attitudes and interventions as counterproductive elements of treatment (Soenen et al., 2013). These findings point to the importance of training staff in residential treatment centres to relate with youth in ways that foster their optimal development.

Youth identified several additional elements that helped facilitate changes. In terms of the importance of a “fresh start” and time away from families, Harper and Russell (2008) described how this “meaningful separation” is an important way for youth to reflect on how their negative behaviors affected their families. The finding that youth felt they needed to be in the program for a long period of time stands in contrast to previous residential treatment research, which asserts that most therapeutic gains are made in the first 6 months of treatment (Hair, 2005). From youths’ perspectives in this study, it was important that they could take as long as needed to master the tasks in each stage, to be “stage dropped” if they were regressing back to old patterns, and to have their progress through the program trailered to their own trajectory. These youth recognized that they had developed mental health and substance abuse problems over several years, and that it takes a long time to catch up developmentally, repair relationships, and embark on a healthier pathway. Finally, the helpfulness of the wilderness component is consistent with previous research on the effectiveness of wilderness therapy programs for youth struggling with emotional and behavioral problems (Norton, 2010; Russell & Gillis, 2017; Wilson & Lipsey, 2000). The youth that Fernee and colleagues (2019) interviewed cited the wilderness as one of the most impactful aspects of the program, helping youth move from a sense of chaos to a feeling of calm, and helping them disconnect from technology and reconnect with the present moment (Fernee et al., 2019).

Limitations

Given the highly personal nature of this research, it was important to allow youth to self-select into this study. This led to a potential sampling bias, as the participants may have over-represented youth who had a positive attitude toward and who had benefitted from the program. Furthermore, the present study had a small sample size and contained youth from one treatment program. As

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such, findings from this sample of youth may not generalize to other programs. It is important to follow up on this research with a larger sample size and a mixed-methods approach with youth from other programs and in other geographic regions. It would also be interesting to conduct a follow-up study asking youth to rank the most impactful components of the program, as Russell and Gillis (2017) had youth do when developing the Adventure Therapy Experience Scale.

In future research, it might be advantageous to interview youth who have graduated from PRI and other programs to explore the lasting impact. Previous research in wilderness therapy has documented a “halo effect,” in which respondents provide higher scores if given the survey immediately following program completion (Graham & Robinson, 2007; Norton, 2010). Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether these changes are sustained long-term and to measure the underlying processes responsible for these changes. Moreover, to get a more complete picture of the changes youth make in themselves and in their relationships, it would be useful to interview parents and others with whom the youth have close relationships. These limitations present important avenues for future research.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Given the central role of relationships in youths' description of their changes in the program, cultivating healthy relationships emerges as a primary process in remediating emotional and behavioral challenges. Youths' insights in the present study suggest a cluster of outcomes to be considered in program development and evaluation. These include changes in understanding of and capacity for relationships, changes in the quality of relationships, and changes in specific social skills such as setting boundaries and building trust.

Youth discussed the importance of their relationships with staff. These findings highlight the importance of training staff who work with adolescents to be attuned to the nature of youths' developmental tasks and challenges, as well as to the quality of their relationships with youth. To ensure youth are able to develop authentically within their relationships, it is essential for staff to create a positive peer culture and teach youth how to support each other's journey of change. Future research is needed to examine how specific experiences in relationships within different programs relate to the diverse range of outcomes youth achieve during these programs designed to guide them onto healthy pathways.

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