Inspire Program Overview

Inspire is a program for grade 8 adolescent girls designed to provide them with a safe, non-judgmental and girl-friendly venue for developing life-skills. Inspire seeks to provide positive mentoring and role modelling that encourages self-care, healthy decision making and the development of critical- thinking and problem solving skills. Inspire is held in a group setting that fosters the development of effective communication and social skills and promotes a sense of self and an awareness of rights and responsibilities to community.

The Inspire program is designed to reflect the learning needs of the girls. In the early sessions of the group, the girls are asked to determine topics for the group as well as group guidelines. While sessions for each group may vary in content, most groups are interested in a similar range of issues. These include self-esteem, body image, media awareness, stress and conflict management, communication and, since public health nurses typically co-facilitate the group, diet and nutrition.

Adolescent girls in our communities are living incredibly complex lives. Only when adults hear what is truly happening for youth, can we provide them with the information and support that they require to make healthy, safe and informed decisions around the issues impacting their lives.

Youth in the Inspire program have reported dealing with issues that include family violence, the separation or divorce of their parents, bullying, substance use, relationships (including intimate partner violence), and such mental health issues as depression, low self-esteem, self-harm or disordered eating.

These issues are compounded by barriers unique to rural settings. In rural communities it is often quite difficult to ensure anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. It can be quite difficult for youth in our communities to find a safe space to speak out, and a safe person who isn't related to them or somehow connected to their situation. In rural communities, the lack of services and the distance from the services that are available pose a significant barrier to youth in terms of their ability to seek support. Many youth in rural communities live in very isolated settings, many live in poverty and not all have access to their own source of transportation.

When youth are not supported in addressing the issues in their lives, their personal and academic worlds can suffer. When they are not supported in examining and addressing their issues, they are more likely to engage in risk taking behavior. Inspire offers the girls a safe space to explore the issues impacting their lives. The youth in our communities are tremendously strong and resilient. They are open to learning and eager to discuss the issues of their lives.

The girls themselves have consistently noted that the strengths of the Inspire group. In their words, one thing the youth like best about Inspire is:

- That I felt I could talk about almost anything, it wasn't a controlling environment!
- That it was fun way to talk about things I don't like talking about.
- Getting to express how <u>you</u> feel and have inputs by other's going through similar issues

The girls have also reported great benefits from the opportunity to discuss topics they deem to be important. When asked the girls noted that they learned in Inspire, in their words:

- to be comfortable with who you are and be comfortable with your body.
- that you have the right to stand on your own two feet
- how to communicate with each other
- the time we did the stuff on bullying really made me think about how I treat people
- where to get help when you need it
- to love yourself
- to believe in yourself
- that it's ok to say no
- that it's great to be a girl

In 2011, The Inspire Program was offered in the following schools and communities:

St Andrew Junior School, Antigonish
East Antigonish Education Centre, Monastery
Chedabucto Education Centre, Guysborough
Paqtnkek First Nation
Fanning Education Centre, Canso
St. Mary's Education Centre, Sherbrooke
Tamarac Education centre, Port Hawkesbury