



## The Aboriginal EMPATHIC Program

### Introduction

The Aboriginal Emotional Maturity Problem-Solving & Awareness Targeting Higher Impulse Control (EMPATHIC) Program is a school-based curriculum designed for students in grades one to five. It was implemented in the Eskasoni Elementary and Middle School, Nova Scotia, between 2003 and 2006. EMPATHIC is based upon the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program which is widely recognized in the United States as a proven program to prevent or reduce levels of violence, crime, or drug use.<sup>1</sup> The program was modified to reflect Aboriginal cultural values and teachings.

The goal of the EMPATHIC program was to develop emotional awareness and impulse control among Aboriginal children as a means of reducing the likelihood of future violent and criminal behaviour. The expected outcomes included:

- Reduction of aggressive or violent incidents at school;
- Reduction of anti-social behaviour requiring intervention;
- Increased self control;
- Increased resiliency and conflict resolution;
- Increased attachment to school;
- Improved communication between the school, parents and child;
- Increased community involvement with youth.

Students at each of the five levels of the program were required to attend 40 lessons. Important modules were repeated from year to year for positive reinforcement. The lesson activities included role-playing, journal writing, picture-based scenarios, and story telling. In addition to the curriculum, a program representative conducted selected home visits each week to create a positive focus on the child.

### Program Assessment

The project evaluation consisted of a process and outcome evaluation. Methods of data collection included school staff surveys, file reviews, class observation, student discussion groups and interviews with teachers, guidance counsellors, school administrators, program representatives, management-team members, community members, and family members.

The outcome evaluation was based on a quasi-experimental design that included a comparison school. A survey on general perceptions of school atmosphere and student behavior was administered to staff (teachers, guidance counsellors and school administrators) in the Eskasoni School and a comparison school. The survey was administered before, during and at the end of the project.

The design was supplemented by a second survey in the Eskasoni School to capture quantitative data on the types of disruptive behaviors teachers were experiencing in the classroom. All teachers completed the supplementary survey early in the project and again at the end of the project.

Data collection problems in the comparison school resulted in too few responses to permit the intended analyses. The analysis of the Eskasoni staff survey did not reveal changes in general perceptions of school atmosphere or student behavior. The supplementary teacher survey on the other hand reported several positive trends in terms of improved classroom behavior.

<sup>1</sup> — Delbert Elliott, Ph.D., Blueprints Project for the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence

## Key Findings

### The process evaluation found that:

- There was strong support for program delivery and content among the school administration, teachers, and parents. The program has since been adopted and incorporated into the daily school plan;
- The program was well designed and well implemented;
- The program successfully adapted the PATHS program to reflect Aboriginal culture;
- Students participated in all the activities for the intended duration. They especially enjoyed the “PATH Kid of the week” initiative;
- There was a need for more awareness about the program among community members and families.

### The outcome evaluation found that:

- Students who were interviewed reported that the program helped them better manage their emotions and deal with difficult situations;
- Teachers and school administrators reported students using EMPATHIC words to describe a situation or how they were feeling; they also believed students demonstrated an increased tendency to walk away from situations that could escalate into a physical fight;
- Teachers reported students giving more compliments to one another and showing more concern for others. Some also reported fewer overly aggressive students per class, fewer students having difficulty expressing feelings, and generally spending less time correcting disruptive behavior;
- Some family members reported an increase in their child’s self-esteem as a result of the program.

## Lessons Learned

The program theory identified community involvement as a short-term outcome necessary to achieve the intermediate outcomes. Therefore, concerted efforts should be made to increase awareness of the program within the community.

Full support from many levels within the school system and commitment from those involved in program delivery was a key factor in the successful implementation of the program.

Home visits were an important component for increasing parents’ understanding and awareness of the program. They also provided the entire family with

a positive boost as parents were also praised for the efforts.

Training and orientation was important to the success of the program. The individual delivering the program needs to be familiar with the lesson content and possess an understanding of Aboriginal culture.

Collecting data for the evaluation required close attention to the school schedule.

Since the comparison school data was not useable, the use of multiple methods of data collection provided valuable information about the program’s effectiveness. Using a comparison group design requires early consideration of the extent to which both groups are comparable and the ability to gain a sufficient sample size.

## Conclusion

The evaluation findings suggest that students responded well to the adaptation of the program to reflect Aboriginal culture and teachings. Improvements were reported in the students’ ability to understand and express their emotions. Students were also beginning to show signs of improved impulse control. Given that PATHS is a proven program and students in the Eskasoni School participated fully in the program activities, it is reasonable to conclude that aggressive and anti-social behavioral changes will occur in the longer term.

The EMPHATIC Program is a promising intervention for increasing resiliency among Aboriginal youth. By using culturally appropriate intervention methods and focusing on key risk factors, the program has the potential to prevent youth from future delinquency and criminal behaviour. There may be value in replicating the program in another Aboriginal community and conducting a more rigorous evaluation design to gain further evidence of the program’s effectiveness.

*For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre at 1-877-302-6272 or visit our website at: [www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/NCPC](http://www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/NCPC)*

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