

Project Background

When people are connected to others, they develop protective factors, increase self-esteem, facilitate healthy brain development, and ultimately lead more healthful lives. **It is vital that young people, especially those who have experienced trauma, develop the skills necessary to make these critical connections with others.**

The mission of the YMCA Connections Project is to increase relational competencies among San Diego’s foster and former foster youth. Funded through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), YMCA Youth & Family Services developed an intervention that has **successfully supported youths’ capacity to identify, create and maintain positive, healthy relationships while decreasing participation in high-risk behaviors.**

The intervention is a combination of adapted Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Motivational Interviewing, Harm Reduction and Positive Youth Development. The YMCA contracted with Harder+Company Community Research to conduct a five-year formative evaluation of the project.

Project Objectives



Youth will improve relational competencies



Youth will form healthy, lasting relationships with peers and adults leading to increased permanency



Youth will demonstrate improvement in overall well-being



Youth will show an increase in mindfulness



Youth will engage in fewer high risk behaviors



Study will determine staff qualities most important to youth engagement

“[My Coach] teaches a lot of stuff that you miss without a loving family unit at home where you learn emotional lessons in subtle ways, unspoken life lessons that I feel all of us missed.” –Connections Participant

Project Elements



Project Impact Summary

- The most impactful program element was **Relational Wellness Classes**. Participants **significantly improved** social conduct, emotion regulation, resiliency and **decreased** high-risk behaviors while **improving** the quality and quantity of their relationships.
- Youth who participated in **One-on-One Coaching** also **improved** resiliency and social conduct and **decreased** high-risk behaviors and **improved** the quality of their relationships.
- The **combination** of classes and one-on-one sessions is most beneficial.
- In one-on-one coaching sessions, youth focused predominantly on **improving a relationship** and their preferred class topic was **mindfulness**.
- Youth who participated also **increased employability** and **educational status**.

“I accept my life, I don’t forget what I have been through but with distress tolerance and stuff I am conscious about who I am and the situation I am in, I am accepted because I accept myself.” –Connections Participant



Youth Characteristics



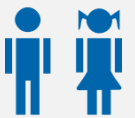
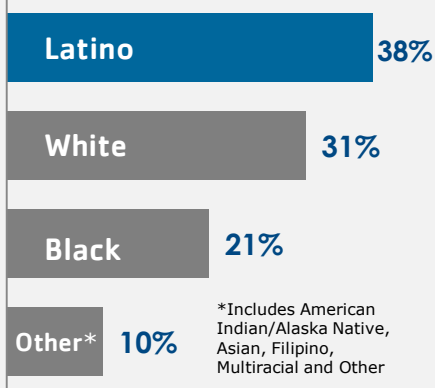
198 Enrolled
77 Engaged



60% Female
40% Male
21% LGBTQ



13% Parenting



20.6 yrs. Avg. age
9.3 yrs. Avg. age at entry into system



6 Avg. number of placements



39% Non-minor dependents



31% Living in subsidized housing



37% Employed at intake

Project Services

One-on-One Coaching

57

Participants received one-on-one coaching

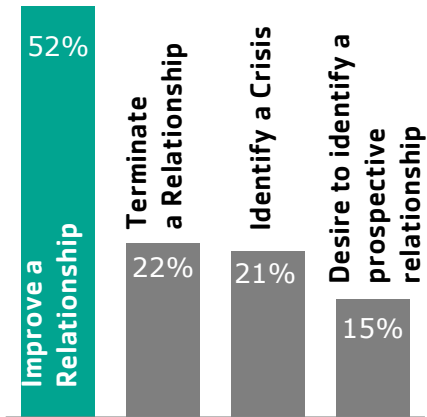
57

Average length of sessions (minutes)

14

Sessions per youth over an average of almost 20 months

Top Coaching Topics



Relational Wellness Classes

255

Wellness classes held

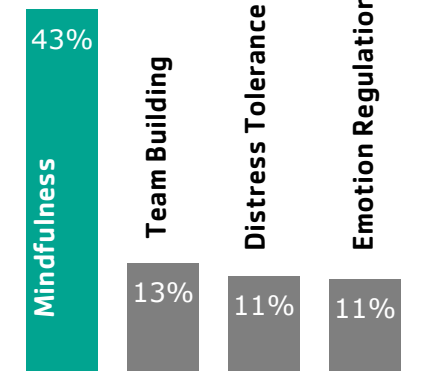
45

Participants attended a wellness class

8

Average number of classes attended over an average of 10 months

Top Class Topics



Top High Risk Behaviors at Intake



More than **half** report alcohol consumption



One third report engaging in physical altercations

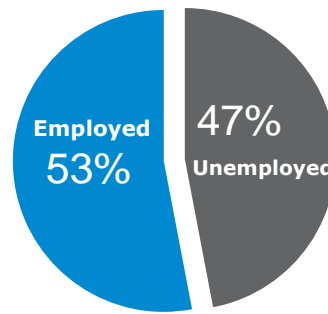
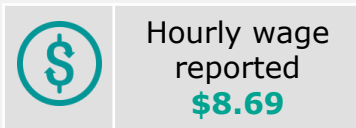
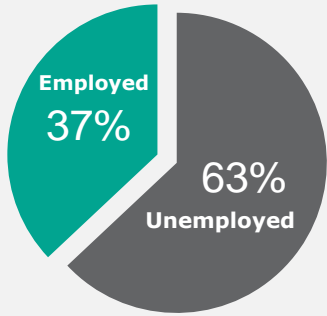


One fourth report running away from their living situation

INTAKE

1 YEAR FOLLOW UP

Employment & Education Gains



One-on-One Coaching Gains Reduction in High-Risk Behaviors



+ 12.5 points

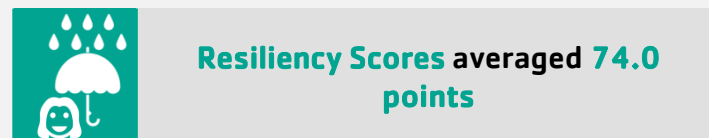


+ 4.5 points

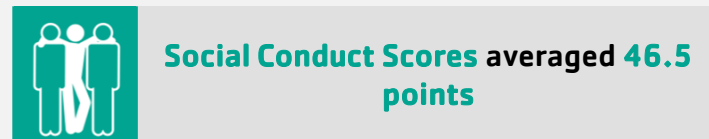


Relational Wellness Class Gains

Significant reduction in High-Risk Behaviors when attending at least 3 classes



+ 12.5 points



+ 6.1 points



More youth who attended classes increased the **quality*** of their relationships

*Increase in positive or decrease in negative or high-risk relationships

Attended 3+ classes



85.7%

Did not attend 3+ classes



60.6%