

Evidence-based, teacher-delivered social and emotional learning

A Ministry of Children and Family Development program helps educators support their students and build engagement.

by Kate Evans and Kelly Angelius

“Before FUN FRIENDS I made assumptions that the things that worked 10 years ago would still work now, but they don’t ... I am a giving, caring teacher, but I was really concerned because I didn’t know how to deal with the modern child.”

Margot Jansen, Gr. 1 teacher, Surrey

Many teachers echo Margot’s concerns, wondering why student behaviour seems so different now than it did 10 or 15 years ago. The *modern child* Margot refers to lives in a fast-paced, technological world in which information is available at the stroke of a key, and our connections to nature and to each other appear to be eroding. Coupled with this, and complicating matters further, is how common mental health problems are among school aged children. Current research estimates that more than 12 percent, or about 84,000 children and youth in BC, meet the criteria for at least one mental health disorder (Waddell, Shepherd, Schwartz & Barican, 2014). The prevalence and impact of these disorders in the classroom has prompted many educators to embrace school-based prevention programs that address student mental health and wellbeing. Under the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) umbrella, these programs strive to meet

the diverse needs of children who are identified with, or at risk of developing mental health problems, and may ultimately reduce the cost and stigmatization of targeted treatment programs. Moreover, they provide the tools with which to build the social and emotional competencies of non-targeted students which in turn, promote positive mental health outcomes and increase academic success.

“We know from looking at Social Emotional Learning programs in school settings, that children who engage in these programs attend school in higher rates, do better academically, report liking school better, have fewer incidents of playground disturbance, and fewer administrative reprimands. So overall, any kind of SEL programming in schools sets the tone.”

Dr. Lynn Miller, UBC Anxiety Lab

Of all identified mental health disorders, anxiety is the most prevalent among BC children and youth (Waddell, et al 2014). In an effort to reduce the risk and mitigate the effects of childhood anxiety, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) partnered with BC schools and adopted the FRIENDS for Life program as a risk reduction and prevention strategy in

2004; it has been available to schools ever since.

FRIENDS is an evidence-based, teacher-delivered, social and emotional learning program designed to prevent anxiety and build resilience. The 10- to 12-week curriculum teaches life-long coping skills while promoting self-esteem through feelings identification, emotional regulation, problem solving, attention training, relaxation, empathy skill-building, and much more. There are three program levels available to BC public and independent schools: FUN FRIENDS (k-1), FRIENDS for Life (4-5) and My FRIENDS Youth (6-7). FRIENDS includes a comprehensive leader’s manual, student workbooks, and other supplementary resources. A website for parents, created in collaboration with the FORCE Society for Kids’ Mental Health, provides families with an online workshop, current information about anxiety, parent-friendly resources, and a variety of ways to reinforce FRIENDS skills at home.

Initially developed to address the impact of high level anxiety on student well-being, it has become apparent that FRIENDS also has a positive influence on the mental health of non-targeted students, and the teachers who implement it. Margot, a veteran teacher of 30 years started using Fun FRIENDS with her grade 1 class in Surrey last year. She was becoming increasingly concerned with the behaviour of the students in her room and shared that they seemed to have no idea how to interact with each other, how to express their feelings, or how to respond to the feelings of others. Unhappy with her own reactions to their behaviour, Margot realized she needed a new frame of reference if she was going to be able to intervene with them effectively. Never one to give up, she shopped around for a “new bag of tricks” that would fit with her own teaching philosophy and enable her to view

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her students in a new light. Happily, she signed up for a FUN FRIENDS teacher training.

“FRIENDS has been my saving grace, and it’s so easy. To me it’s one of the first curriculums that doesn’t feel like ‘one more thing to do’. Teachers need common sense stuff and FUN FRIENDS deals with common sense, everyday situations that kids run into. It helps with anxiety, yes, but it’s so much more than that.”

After implementing the program, Margot immediately saw the difference in her ability to support her students. She noticed that the overall climate of her classroom changed along with the change in her approach. “It feels more inclusive and children play together. It’s a calmer, happier, more comfortable place where students feel safe” and are better able to take on academic challenges. Margot’s enthusiasm for FRIENDS has prompted one of her colleagues to take the training and implement it in her own classroom, and others have signed up to take the training next year.

“FRIENDS gave me the tools to change my approach from reactive-based to skills-based. I was amazed with the difference in myself and the children. Kids got along much better because they were developing skills to talk things out.”


The utility of FRIENDS doesn’t stop at social skills

instruction or when a specific FRIENDS lesson ends. FRIENDS fits well within the current Health and Career Education curriculum, and it also aligns with the social and personal responsibility competencies of BC’s new Education Plan. A Surrey elementary school principal believes FRIENDS enables teachers to build classroom norms quickly and effectively and to easily share those expectations with parents through home based activities, handouts, and the parent program website. Teachers find ways to integrate FRIENDS skills within various subject areas and to enhance the pre-written lessons with their own creativity and interests whenever possible. Margot finds connections to the grade one social studies curriculum, and a grade 7 teacher from Vancouver uses FRIENDS as a springboard for writing assignments.

“You integrate it into whatever you’re already doing. Writing assignments can be based on things you’re discussing in FRIENDS – and these are things that really interest the kids. It’s about them.”

They love getting to know themselves and they love thinking through their ideas, so you incorporate that into writing, or into the way you’re reading books.”

MCFD is committed to ensuring schools have access to FRIENDS programming and includes it as a health promotion strategy in its current provincial mental health and substance use plan, “Healthy Minds, Healthy People: A Ten Year Plan to Address Mental Health and Substance Use in British Columbia.”

Prior to implementation of FRIENDS, one-day certification is required. MCFD covers the cost of training and materials and a FRIENDS liaison is associated with each school district. For information contact the BC FRIENDS Program at MCF.CYMHFRIENDS@gov.bc.ca or visit www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental-health/friends and www.friendsparentprogram.com 

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School Mental Health Symposium

Keynote speaker

Mary-Ellen Turpel-Lafond

BC Representative for Children and Youth
Sponsored by the **BCPVA** in collaboration with
School-Centered Mental Health Coalition

Among the confirmed speakers, presenters and panelists:

Keli Anderson The FORCE Society for Kid’s Mental Health
Dr. Candice Murray, Dr. Connie Coniglio & Dr. Jana Davidson Children’s Hospital
Jeff Stewart District Principal, Comox Valley, BC School Centered Mental Health Coalition
Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc McCreary Centre Society
Laurie Ebenal SD#43 District Principal Aboriginal Education • **Kim Weatherby** DashBC
Cindy Andrew Helping Schools Centre for Addictions Research of BC/UofV
Maria LeRose Dalai Lama Centre Panel Moderator • **Dr. Patti Peterson** UNB
Dr. Kristin Buhr Anxiety BC

Friday October 24
Westin Wall Center
Richmond

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\$125 BCPVA members • \$150 non-members
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