TAKE A HIKE
FOUNDATION

Program Model & Theory of Change

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Take a Hike, a program funded through philanthropy, is a mental health and social-emotional well-being program that utilizes land-based learning to facilitate youth development. Take a Hike's goal is to minimize barriers for vulnerable youth to help them succeed in school and beyond. We believe that learning must be approached as a holistic process that simultaneously supports the development of the mind, heart, body, and spirit.[1,2,3,4] Over two decades, Take a Hike has discovered critical practice-based evidence as to what program ingredients help youth make positive changes. This practice-based evidence combined with existing empirical literature from education and psychology has resulted in a one-of-a-kind program in Canada. The Take a Hike model includes staffing each program with a teacher, youth worker, and mental health clinician. Through the program, youth are offered an intensive opportunity to counter past negative experiences in school and improve mental health and resilience ahead of a critical transition time in their lives. Youth can stay engaged in school, receive support and treatment, and be referred to additional community-based services, thereby increasing their ability to complete their education and be successful in life – however they define it.

We believe that youth who have endured past adversity, which has negatively impacted their development, can thrive through engaging in learning and personal reflection if they experience the environment as safe, caring, and responsive to their individual needs. Both practical (e.g., food, clothing etc.) and psychological (e.g., assurance from others that they are safe, that they can overcome challenges etc.) needs are expressed by youth and identified by staff who come to know the youth through the development of stable and trusting relationships.

Staff in Take a Hike act as facilitators and supporters of change who meet youth where they are in the journey and travel alongside them to help them reach their goals. This facilitator/supporter role requires high levels of insight, collaboration, emotion management, and openness to personal and professional growth. Critical to supporting youth is the need for each staff member to consistently tune into their own practical and internal needs to ensure that those needs are acknowledged and addressed, allowing them to be fully present when helping youth manage inner experiences. Staff attention to their needs is akin to putting on one's oxygen mask first before assisting others. In this parallel process, staff must continually pay attention to their emerging emotions and reactions when interacting with youth. Through this practitioner trauma-informed approach, staff remain open, curious, non-judgmental, and self-reflective. In this way, they can effectively explore the potential emotions and reactions that can act as barriers to creating a positive space for youth to express themselves, feel heard and seen, and engage in challenging emotional processes. Working in this way supports staff to continue growing their capacity to become increasingly successful so that they can support youth who present with a wide range of challenges.

Take a Hike staff design all program structures and activities through an integrated approach that weaves together **best practices** from the fields of:

1. Attachment theory
2. Trauma-informed care
3. Social and emotional learning
4. Positive youth development
5. First People's Principles of Learning[a].

These five approaches are further grounded in an advanced understanding of child and youth development. Through this integrated approach, staff are intentional in their work with youth to ensure that youth experience the five **core elements** that comprise the foundation of the Take a Hike's effectiveness:

1. Safe and caring relationships
2. Safe and predictable environment
3. Individualized and responsive support
4. Relationship continuity through shared time and learning among staff and youth
5. The belief that all youth can succeed and that what constitutes success is individually determined

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[a] See Appendix A for a brief overview of these 5 approaches.

Staff understand that for many youth in the program, adverse life events have impacted their ability to learn and fully be present in the world around them. Coping with these unresolved experiences takes energy, leading to a compromised capacity to engage in typical developmental tasks such as academic learning, friendship development, and identity formation. For many struggling youth, school has been an environment rife with stress and potential failure. With this backdrop, learning to trust new adults and engage in a dynamic program that addresses not only academic needs, but also mental, physical, and spiritual wellness takes time. Building trust and becoming engaged fully is central to the work that youth take on with attentive staff who have the skills to meet their unique needs.

As youth enter the program and come to know and trust staff and classmates, as well as engage in the diverse group and personal reflection activities, they develop a better understanding of themselves. The maturation of self-awareness processes includes appreciating the life circumstances, unique coping strategies, and challenges that have hindered the recognition, development and pursuit of passions and goals. Notably, the development of self-awareness includes youth recognizing the strengths that helped them walk through the door of Take a Hike. Once this understanding develops, youth voice the need to make personal changes, articulate changes they want to pursue, and see how their strengths can support change. Through the ongoing interactions with staff and community, youth receive validation for their efforts to work on areas of change. They move toward becoming fully engaged and seek as much benefit as possible from participating in the four program activities (academics, therapy, learning on and from the land, and community engagement). Staff and youth enter an intrapersonal and interpersonal space in which youth's inner and outer worlds are safe to explore, including passions, goals, and anxieties, all supporting positive change.[b]

Through embracing all that Take a Hike has to offer, youth can make positive changes and experience growth in their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in four **areas of development**:

1.   Mind: Academic development
2.   Heart: Social and emotional well-being
3.   Body: Physical well-being
4.   Spirit: Spiritual well-being

Note that in Take a Hike, spirituality is viewed from an Indigenous perspective. Spirituality can be defined as how people understand the world and how humans should be in the world. "[O]ne's spirituality is the inner resource that facilitates knowing oneself, one's surroundings, and finding meaning for oneself in connection and relation to those surroundings" (p 146-147).[5]

These four areas support the development of the whole person. Take a Hike believes that every youth has a different life path. Still, no matter what that path may hold, the long-term goal for every student is to become resilient young adults with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to face and overcome life's challenges and engage fully in their life.
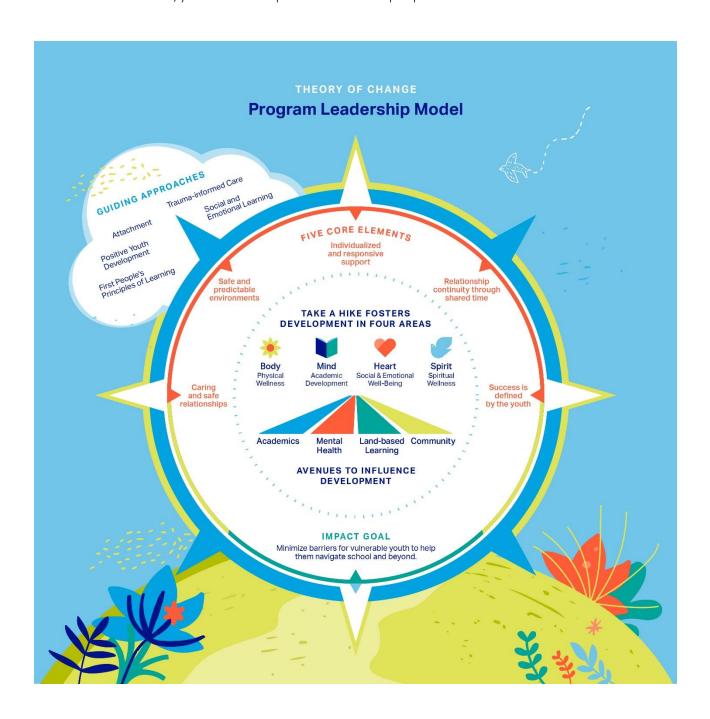
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[b] In 2022, Take a Hike engaged in a process to explicitly weave in the First People's Principles of Learning (FPPL) to strengthen the overall program impact for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners alike. Much appreciation to Jo Chrona for reviewing the Take a Hike's Theory of Change and providing relevant research and understandings of Indigenous perspectives in Education. While the Take a Hike theory of change was found to be highly aligned with the FPPL, there were several ways in which it could be strengthened to achieve a greater intentional alignment with the FPPL. This alignment included specific language and a deepening understanding of how program activities foster Indigenous teachings and perspectives. It was clearly stated that ongoing professional development and Indigenous community support would be required to truly embrace the FPPL.

Take a Hike Theory of Change

4 seasons: Sept – Oct (belonging)
Four meetings a year in which staff reflect on the degree to which they see achievement in meeting the goals for the season. At the same time, youth are asked questions as to their perspective.

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Participant Profile

The grades 10-12 youth we serve are capable and generally motivated young people who have experienced difficulty succeeding in the mainstream school system. Many youth have experienced trauma or mental health concerns and have commonly coped in unhealthy and destructive ways at some point in their lives. This complexity in their lives means that youth need additional supports, which many have struggled to access through other means.

For most youth in Take a Hike, attending to mental health needs is critical to fostering school engagement and positive development. Each Take a Hike youth enters the program with a unique background and life experience, and the program responds to their individual needs. It is common for Take a Hike youth to be identified in the mainstream school system as requiring additional support for behaviour or mental health (BC Ministry of Education' R' or 'H' designations). For this reason, Take a Hike is a program to which youth who struggle in the mainstream system are referred so that they can receive more intensive and intentional support.

Sources[6,7]

Each Take a Hike program is comprised of a unique and diverse mix of youth, reflective of the local community. One common element among all youth is that they experience the program as a viable way to change their lives. Youth often enter the program with various labels and feel marginalized because these labels don't reflect their whole experience. Take a Hike provides youth with a fresh start and an opportunity to see and experience themselves differently.

Struggles with mental health are unfortunately not unique to Take a Hike youth. About 1 in 7 young people in BC will experience a mental illness, with 50% and 70% of mental illnesses manifesting before 18. At the same time, only 1 in 4 children and youth in Canada receive treatment.[a] Canadian research has found that older youth who struggle with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out of school compared to peers without depression or those who recovered from depression. Furthermore, youth with conduct disorders and/or ADHD are more likely to drop out compared to other at-risk youth.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division (6)

Dupéré, V., Dion, E., Nault-Brière, F., Archambault, I. Leventhal, T., & Lesage, A. (2018) (7)

Program Objectives and Outcomes for youth in the Take a Hike Program

Program Objectives
- Increase student attendance and engagement in school
- Support student cognitive, mental, physical, and spiritual development
- Improve academic success, leading to high school graduation

Short-Term (0-6 months) Outcomes: Becoming Engaged
- Attend regularly.
- Engage in Take a Hike daily activities.
- Feel safe and a sense of belonging in the program.
- Develop trusting relationships with staff.
- Express the need to make personal changes.

Medium-Term (6 months to 2 years) Outcomes: Experiencing Increased Feelings of Mastery
- Mind: Academic development
    - ✓ Improved academic success
    - ✓ Improved employment knowledge and skills
- Heart: Social and emotional well-being
    - ✓ Improved relationships
    - ✓ Improved social-emotional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (i.e., self-awareness, relationship skills, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making skills)
    - ✓ Improved healthy coping skills
    - ✓ Increased hope and optimism
    - ✓ Reduced problematic substance use
    - ✓ Decreased depression and anxiety
- Body: Physical well-being
    - ✓ Improved positive levels of physical well-being
- Spirit: Spiritual well-being
    - ✓ Increased sense of purpose
    - ✓ Increased levels of life satisfaction

Long-Term (2-3 years) Outcomes: Experiencing Mastery to Support a Successful Transition to Young Adulthood
- Mind: Academic development
    - ✓ Increased graduation rates
    - ✓ Increased employment readiness
- Heart: Social and emotional well-being
    - ✓ Improved mental health and well-being
    - ✓ Improved social support network
    - ✓ Improved community connections
    - ✓ Increased ability to reach out to healthy and trustworthy sources of support
    - ✓ Increased goal setting for the future
- Body: Physical well-being
    - ✓ Increased engagement in healthy physical activities
- Spirit: Spiritual well-being

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✓   Increased feelings of gratitude

✓   Increased feelings of self-compassion

Post-Program Outcomes: Living a Fully Engaged Life

Take A Hike Alumni are resilient individuals who can navigate the challenges of young adulthood. They are able to:

- Engage in work or post-secondary training
- Secure stable housing and living situations

. They attend to their mind, heart, body, and spirit. These youth experience high levels of:

- Mastery (i.e., feeling self-confident and optimistic, seeing challenges as opportunities for growth, feeling able to adapt)
- A sense of relatedness (i.e., being able to assess which relationships are healthy, having good social supports, being able to reach out to social supports, trusting in others)
- Emotional regulation skills (i.e., being able regulate emotions to internal and external stimuli)

Note: Take a Hike alumni are invited to complete follow-up surveys at specific timepoints to better understand their life experiences post-Take a Hike.

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Five Core Values of Take a Hike

Youth spend the entire school day, five days a week, with the same youth and staff members for the full school year.[c] In a short time, the program becomes a tight-knit group through the development of collective identity and a sense of shared responsibility to tend to these relationships. Research has demonstrated that learning (i.e., attention, memory, decision-making, motivation, social functioning) is heavily affected by how we feel.[8] To that end, how Take a Hike creates a culture and environment for learning is as important as the learning itself.

SAFE AND CARING RELATIONSHIPS

Without attention to developing healthy and supportive relationships, effective learning cannot occur. Relationships have been described as the *'soil'* which forms the foundation for youth development of social and emotional skills.[9] As articulated in the FPPL, "Learning is ...relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)".[10] In Take a Hike, staff understand the importance of developing trusting relationships with youth from the first moment a youth comes into contact with Take a Hike, and extending the focus on developing healthy relationships beyond the Take a Hike program to include families and communities. Through this relational focus, learners can thrive in all areas of their life.

To nurture the development of relationships, staff start each day by 'collecting' youth by connecting with, acknowledging, and validating each student individually. Seeing each student for the unique person they are, paves the way for building the trust and attachment at the heart of safe, caring relationships. A more fulsome understanding comes from an Indigenous perspective. Relationships are understood to be multi-dimensional and include relationships to self, relationships with others (current and past), and relationships to land and place. Through exploring and deepening self-awareness in all relational spaces, youth come to understand themselves better, where they belong and how they relate to others. Through engaging in healthy relationships, youth grow their capacity for positive intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences in times of harmony and conflict.

Research has shown that:
- Student-teacher relationships that are warm, trusting, and have low degrees of conflict have been shown to improve social competence and positive school adjustment. When the program is characterized by these types of relationships between youth and teachers, deeper and more complex learning can take place. Furthermore, caring relationships with adults are one of the strongest predictors of learning outcomes. [11] [12] [13] [14]
- Building strong relationships between parents and school-based staff supports student performance.[15]
- Having consistent and caring relationships with adults improves developmental outcomes such as positive identity, empowerment, ability to maintain healthy boundaries and constructive use of time. [16]
- Learning is a highly social process that nurtures family and community relationships. This process highlights the importance of collective identity and responsibility.[17, 18, 19]

SAFE AND PREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENT

Take a Hike recognizes the importance of creating an environment in the program and beyond (e.g., time spent outside the school with staff and youth) that is predictable and safe for youth. Predictability is created by being explicit as to expectations and boundaries. These expectations and boundaries are consistently applied so that youth come to trust that they are safe in Take a Hike and know that stressful situations (e.g., conflict among peers, group distress when facing challenges, etc.) will be addressed by staff. Take a Hike's comprehensive risk management strategy addresses physical safety across all outdoor activities. Creating an external environment that is safe and predictable supports

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[c] Note that Take a Hike also offers summer support for students. Summer programming is led by clinical staff.

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youth in learning how to self-manage over time. They can turn their attention to their inner challenges as they trust that staff will manage the external environment.

Research has shown that:
- Routines, consistency, and predictability are vital to working from a trauma-informed approach.[20]
- Environments that are 'safe and orderly' can reinforce positive classroom behavior, promoting better school achievement.[21]
- A caring, supportive, and well-managed environment increases the effectiveness of efforts to enhance youth' social and emotional competencies.[22] [23]

INDIVIDUALIZED AND RESPONSIVE SUPPORT

Each youth who comes into Take a Hike brings their gifts and talents. Through their involvement in Take a Hike, staff support youth to identify those gifts and talents and apply them to learning and personal growth, sparking the development of passion in areas of interest. This individualized and responsive support can only happen in caring and safe relationships, and staff understand that youth may have experienced several attachment wounds throughout their lives. Therefore, youth will naturally be defended against close relationships to protect themselves from further hurt because of these attachment wounds. Staff strive to provide interventions/interactions that are intentional, relational and facilitate a drawing closer, all within the understanding that positive change occurs within safe and caring relationships. Staff engage in ongoing assessment of individual youth needs with youth to create tailored and responsive plans to support the continuing positive development of youth, so that they can develop the skills that foster resilience. Although staff bring diverse toolboxes of knowledge and skills to the program in their work with youth, all undertake the work in Take a Hike by weaving in the five Take a Hike guiding approaches (i.e., attachment, trauma-informed care, social and emotional learning, positive youth development, and First People's Principles of Learning). These approaches are embedded in a solid understanding of child and youth development.

Research has shown that:
- Creating personalized plans for learning and growth helps youth feel more connected and supported to achieve academic outcomes.[24]
- Youth more interested in their learning are more likely to feel positive about the future.[25]
- Youth who engage in learning that is meaningful to them are more likely to experience feelings of intrinsic motivation.[26]
- Supporting youth to better understand their capabilities and needs, and tailoring land-based learning activities to meet identified needs, positively impact program outcomes for youth.[27] [28]

RELATIONSHIP CONTINUITY THROUGH SHARED TIME AND LEARNING AMONG STAFF AND YOUTH

Staff and youth share the same space during school time and for substantial periods away from the program. The high level of contact among staff and youth in Take a Hike affords staff the opportunity to learn more about youth through day-to-day interactions. Continuity of relationships over time enables staff to support youth as needs emerge through real-time interactions. Relationship continuity can provide youth with an opportunity to see other possibilities, grow emotionally, and increasingly experience positive outcomes.

Research has shown that:
- Adults spending time outside of the classroom, thereby taking on different roles with youth, have been found to support relationship development. Youth can see adults in a wider range of environments, allowing more opportunities for connecting on different levels.[29]
- Youth achieve more positive outcomes when these relationships are longer in duration, as it allows youth time to assess the trustworthiness of adults. [30] [31] [32]

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- Trusting and caring relationships are critical for all but can provide those youth who have not had positive relationships with adults a corrective relational experience. [33]
- Through spending time together in multiple contexts, youth have more opportunities to develop social and competence skills, which are best embedded 'deep and wide' throughout a program.[34]

THE BELIEF THAT ALL YOUTH HAVE THE ABILITY TO SUCCEED AND THAT WHAT CONSTITUTES SUCCESS IS INDIVIDUALLY DETERMINED

In Take a Hike, success is not seen as a one-size-fits-all approach. While key skills are known to be critical for transitioning to adulthood (i.e., social and emotional skills, well-being etc.), a highly tailored approach to supporting youth is essential to promote student success. Ultimate success looks different for everyone, depending on their gifts, talents, and passions. Staff believe that all youth can be successful and be contributing citizens, regardless of their past or current challenges. If staff give youth the message that they will be successful, it is more likely that youth will adopt a belief in themselves that they can be successful. There is pursuit and follow-through with youth who have difficulty meeting expectations. Every absent student has daily contact with a Take a Hike staff member. Take a Hike staff believe that every student has the capacity to flourish. They work intentionally to support each student to develop and manifest skills known to be important for adult success.

Research has shown that:
- Teachers who have high expectations for their youth present content and learning that is more advanced compared to teachers who have low expectations.[35]
- Setting a norm that communicates high expectations for academic learning and classroom behaviour contributes to student success.[36] [37]
- Youth who experience high expectations are more likely to have increased motivation for learning.[38]
- The Canadian education system has much work to do to eliminate an attitude of low expectations for Indigenous learners.[39]

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Program Leadership Model

Take a Hike is offered in partnership with the public school system and incorporates other community partners. This partnership allows the program to include well-trained staff who strive to meet the diverse needs of youth. To this end, the program includes a teacher, mental health clinician, and youth/support worker.

All staff work from an attachment-based, trauma-informed framework that is embedded in a solid understanding of child and youth development. They have experience working with vulnerable youth and skill in teaching social and emotional skills. Further to this, Take a Hike is committed to ongoing personal and professional development given that research has shown that a teacher's own social-emotional competence is an important factor that contributes to the "quality of teacher–student relationships, student and classroom management, and effective social and emotional learning (SEL) program implementation all which mediate classroom and student outcomes".[40]

All staff are expected to demonstrate self-sufficiency in the outdoors through extensive backcountry experience. Teachers possess a valid teaching certificate; mental health clinicians a registered clinical counselling designation; youth workers degrees in humanities

Each Take a Hike program has a teacher, child and youth support worker and mental health clinician. While each staff member demonstrates high personal and professional standards, their real strength is in the way they interact as a team. Job functions overlap. Meetings occur daily and weekly, and sometimes many times a day.

The District Principal and Take a Hike's regional program managers provides hands-on support and training to each program as they help youth grow and learn. An active supervision model ensures staff receive continuous feedback and is a leading practice within the school system. Beyond are the Basecamp staff, who provide program support and community engagement.

Throughout all Take a Hike programs we strive for a community of practice that is informed and guided by First Peoples principals of learning. Through ongoing consultation and training from Indigenous knowledge keepers and Elders, all those involved in Take a Hike have the opportunity to grow and develop in their personal, collective, and relational ways of engaging in First Nations culture. This further inspires and builds on the commitment Take a Hike has to truth and reconciliation in our personal lives and the community in which we live.

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Four Take a Hike Avenues to Support Student Growth and Development

ACADEMICS

Take a Hike aims to meet youth's educational needs to support their academic success and their social and emotional development. Academics are closely integrated with, and supported by, the other three core program components: mental health clinicians support the social and emotional learning that helps youth thrive academically; the academic curriculum is incorporated into outdoor land-based activities; community engagement offers a place-based and service-oriented form of experiential learning.

School districts are the partners with the expertise in education; as such, the academic offering at each Take a Hike program is unique. Common across all programs is a place-based and cross-curricular approach that includes direct instruction and experiential learning, both within and outside the classroom. Academic components that are common amongst all Take a Hike programs include:

- Youth have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that considers all aspects of student development; this includes academic, social-emotional, and behavioural goals for the student.
- The primary teacher spends all day, every day, including long trips, with the class. In many cases, subject specialist guest speakers will complement the primary teacher.
- Volunteers provide one-on-one academic support.
- Youth are offered all the core courses required for the Dogwood Diploma. Elective courses offered are often a natural fit with experiential learning, including leadership, tourism, physical education, outdoor education, art, foods and nutrition, and planning.

Research has shown that:
- Social-emotional competencies are inextricably linked to academic success. [41] [42]
- Academic engagement is influenced by the degree to which youth feel that teachers are meeting their psychological needs. [43] [44]
- Academic engagement is associated with better academic competence, a lower likelihood of dropping out of school, and a higher likelihood of healthy social and emotional outcomes. [45] [46] [47]
- Neuroscience has shown that learning is strengthened when multiple and diverse opportunities are provided to use and deepen an understanding of new knowledge and skills, such as is done in cross-curricular and experiential learning. [48]

MENTAL HEALTH

A unique feature of the Take a Hike program is the inclusion in each program of a dedicated full-time mental health clinician who holds a master's degree in Counselling, Counselling Psychology or Marriage and Family Therapy. The mental health clinician is embedded in the Take a Hike classroom on a fulltime basis. They participate and co-facilitate weekly program activities, including on multi-day trips. every day. The mental Health clinician provides a therapeutic continuity of care beyond the school year into the summer months.

School District counsellors are in a position to assist with academic concerns, provide brief intervention, and assist with referrals to other services. In contrast, Take A Hike mental health clinicians provide long-term, intensive psychotherapeutic interventions for youth who require ongoing support. [49] Continuous and intentional time together enables mental health clinicians to develop authentic relationships with youth, giving a true picture of the challenges youth are experiencing. Shared time also allows mental health clinicians to be present to support youth as challenges arise moment to moment. Having this continuity of supports in schools is ideal as schools, as opposed to clinics, are more likely to be the environment where youth are open to receiving mental health supports. [50] Therapy becomes a natural part of the program that takes place alongside academics, instead of separate support. Because of the embedded nature of the mental health clinician, youth often do not see this as what they understand to be 'therapy'.

For many youth, Take a Hike is their first encounter with mental health supports. Take a Hike mental health clinicians provide prevention and early mental health supports that help youth build social and emotional skills, find healthy ways to cope with life's stressors, and improve mental health and well-being. Therapy focuses on learning to cope with anxiety, depression, ADHD, past trauma, or other mental health concerns. Working from a trauma-informed and attachment-based lens, Take a Hike mental health clinicians use various therapeutic approaches tailored to the needs of each student. Approaches include emotion-focused therapy (EFT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), Satir transformational therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), art therapy and narrative therapy. The daily relational nature between the youth and mental health clinician, helps to remove barriers to mental health supports and the stigma that may have been attached to these supports.

- Mental health clinicians work with youth one-on-one as often as needed.
- Parents and family are involved where possible, including through family therapy.
- Peer support is cultivated through group sessions (e.g., daily circle).
- Mental health clinicians work with youth' existing supports (e.g., community policing officers, other mental health clinicians, etc.) and will help connect them with further resources in the community when needed (e.g., addictions treatment).
- Mental health clinicians work with adults in the program to help them build relationships with more challenging youth.
- Mental health clinicians provide a first point of support for other issues that arise for adults in the program (e.g., after crises, burnout prevention, etc.)

Take a Hike begins every day with 'circle'. This daily group meeting, held in a circle, is a way to bring staff and youth together to ensure that everyone is seen and to provide structure for the day, thereby reducing anxiety about the unknown. The circle provides a venue for staff and youth to reflect, share experiences, and strengthen skills. Each day a different question is posed for youth and staff to answer, such as 'what is something you will do better today than you usually do?', 'how will you avoid conflict and discomfort today?', or 'what is something that you used to think about your family that you don't any longer?'. The circle is a structure that youth and staff use throughout other parts of the day when needed and on out-trips. Because the circle is such a dominant format of group connection in Take a Hike, youth see the circle as a central process in the Take a Hike program

Through these activities, relationships are strengthened, and the program community takes shape over the year, becoming what many Take a Hike alumni call 'family'. Youth come to experience this "family environment" as a place where challenges are faced and overcome rather than avoided and left unresolved. Through this, they have a chance to learn, and later model for others, healthy emotion identification, expression, and regulation. In essence, they learn what healthy relationships should look like, how we can effectively communicate, listen to others, and enhance perspective-taking.

Research has shown that:
- Psychotherapy, both individual and group, provided in school settings can effectively address youth needs.[51][52]
- Psychotherapy that is longer in duration positively impacts school attendance.[53]
- Better outcomes are achieved when youth have access to more frequent psychotherapy sessions rather than the traditional once-a-week format.[54][55]
- Social and emotional well-being is linked to academic success.[56][57]
- Youth with stronger social and emotional competencies are more likely to enter college, succeed in their careers, have positive work and family relationships, have better mental and physical health, have reduced criminal behaviour, and become engaged citizens.[58]

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LAND-BASED LEARNING

Land can be understood as medicine or as a healer for all people. In Take a Hike, land-based learning (learning on and from the land) is the avenue through which youth have opportunities to explore and nurture their cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual development.

Land-based learning is comprised of three understanding:
- the land is our teacher
- the land is medicine
- it is our responsibility to be responsive to the land

Other program components are enhanced by spending time on the land. It's a place where youth can have fun, connect classroom learning to real-world experience, build and test relationships in a safe environment, and experience mastery.

Land-based learning offers unique opportunities for youth to grow and develop trust, communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, but this often comes through challenging and uncomfortable experiences. We ensure that youth experience these challenges in a safe, supportive way, with mental health clinicians present to help youth work through issues that arise.

Many Take a Hike youth will leave their specific city or town for the first time with Take a Hike; outdoor activities are often a new experience. Being outdoors allows staff and youth to interact through shared experience, which builds attachment that supports mental health and social-emotional work done with the youth. Being in nature takes youth away from daily stressors and distractions and helps them to self-regulate and engage in self-reflection.

Time on the land provides place-based and experiential learning opportunities that support classroom learning. Cross-curricular academics covering sciences, math and other subjects are often incorporated into outdoor activities. Acquisition of outdoor skills is usually a by-product of land-based learning, but it is not the primary objective.
- Activities are intentionally planned to consider the unique needs of the group and group dynamics, and the individual youth participating.
- Out-days occur weekly. Activities focus on exploring the local area in a variety of ways whether on the land or water
- Activities are planned collaboratively as a staff team. Taking into consideration the gifts and skills of staff members and their knowledge of where students are at in their lives.
- Youth participate in two excursions (fall, and spring) of 3-5 days in length each year.
- Youth are taught responsible environmental stewardship and a respect for the land.
- Outdoor equipment and clothing are provided by Take a Hike to give the student a comfortable and rich experience.   This provision allows for an equality of participation regardless of economic circumstances.
- Take a Hike provides a well-planned, robust, safe program infrastructure.

Learning on and from the land research has shown that:
- Spending time in nature positively impacts the brain, body, feelings, thought processes and social interactions.[59]
- Being in nature is inherently rewarding, resulting in a surge of positive emotions that calm our nervous system and support the development of greater openness, creativity, connection, generosity, and resilience.[60]
- Walking in nature has been found to decrease rumination, anxiety, and negative affect and enhance cognition and cardiovascular relaxation.[61] [62] [63]
- Even brief periods in nature can increase cognitive control, and prolonged time in nature can strengthen attentional processes.[64] [65]
- Overall, regular exposure to nature increases physical, mental, and well-being outcomes.[66]

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- Youth can strengthen relationships with their peers through spending extended time together in nature, as they must learn to work together and rely on one another, thereby drawing support from one another. [67] [68] [69]
- Land-based programs can positively impact academic skills as a result of having practical and interactive opportunities to learn, as well as a need to engage in problem-solving. [70]
- Land-based learning engages the spirit and the heart, which are both fundamental ways of knowing. [71]
- For youth, who have not had healthy, supportive, stable relationships, the land offers much promise as a way to support them to thrive. [72]

COMMUNITY

Community is an essential part of the Take a Hike program. Youth are re-engaged through a unique program community and come to feel a sense of belonging as part of this. The community extends to include program volunteers to enhance student's awareness of the broader community that cares about their well-being, where they can seek out support, and where they can contribute. Youth begin building connections in the broader community by engaging in a variety of volunteer opportunities each year. These connections help youth to build skills and resilience and come to form part of youth's network of support as they transition to life as young adults.

- Community engagement develops the understanding of the responsibility that we all have in that we are all interconnected, and the actions that we take impact those around us.
- Community engagement helps break down the barriers between vulnerable youth and the community.
- Youth learn to trust that the community can support them in times of need and that they have something to offer.
- Youth gain valuable job readiness and community service skills.

Research has shown that:
- Youth who volunteer benefit through developing increased respect for others, satisfaction through helping others, and understanding of how to be helpful and kind. Furthermore, youth can develop better decision-making skills, create an ethic of civic responsibility, and enhance existing social skills. [73]
- Volunteering provides youth with an opportunity to gain social and cultural capital. [74]
- More recently, youth volunteering has been found to reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease significantly. [75]

Youth Journey

Youth in Take a Hike have faced challenges in the mainstream school system. Take a Hike provides youth a fresh start in their schooling and an opportunity to see themselves differently within the school system. Taking this leap into a new program after having had many challenges in the mainstream school system is a process for youth.

PHASE 1: APPLICATION FOR, AND CHOICE TO ATTEND THE PROGRAM
- Youth are often referred to the program by a principal, guidance counsellor or teacher. In some cases, family members or youth themselves reach out for help.
- Youth make a written application to the program and attend an in-person interview.
- Youth and caregivers are introduced to the program through conversations with staff and other Take a Hike youth.
- Youth agree to enter the program after gaining knowledge of what the Take a Hike program entails.
- It is understood that the School District partner holds a great deal of experience and knowledge regarding the needs of youth in the community. Take a Hike works closely with the School District partner to determine youth who would benefit from the environment and resources.

PHASE 2: ACCLIMATING TO PROGRAM CULTURE AND COMMUNITY NORMS
- Youth engage in Take a Hike and learn to trust and feel safe in the program. This can be seen as a process of accepting and buying into the program's goals and values.
- Activities in the first few weeks of the program are very intentional and designed to build a strong program community, a sense of belonging, help youth get to know their peers and build trusting attachment relationships with program staff.
- Youth participate in team building and initiative tasks, participate in weekly out-days, and may participate in a 3-day land-based overnight trip. Staff members are very intentional in their interactions with youth and seek to know everyone.
- Youth begin to attend class regularly, and there is daily contact with and pursuit of youth who are not attending.
- Youth learn (and test) the boundaries and expectations of the program, and staff respond in a way caring and intentional way that holds the boundary.

PHASE 3: NEED FOR CHANGE
- Youth identify that changes need to be made in their life in order for them to successfully move ahead.
- This may happen within the first few weeks of entering the Take a Hike program or may take much longer.
- Mental health clinicians engage with youth on a very casual and friendly basis, often using outdoor activities as a way of connecting. Seemingly innocuous conversations lead into deeper conversations about the student's life experience.
- Once youth come to an awareness that their current ways of being in the world are not working and changes are necessary, they begin to thrive through full engagement in all components of Take a Hike.

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PHASE 4: THRIVING IN THE PROGRAM

Take a Hike supports youth development through four key avenues: academics, individual and group mental health supports, land-based learning, and community. In addition, attention is given to material needs that youth may have (e.g., proper clothing, food, etc.) to ensure that they can fully participate in all Take a Hike activities.

Through full participation in program activities, youth develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that all aim to help them increase their resilience. Although there are numerous skills known to support the development of resilience, Take a Hike focuses on those skills known to be at the heart of resilience for youth (engagement in school, social-emotional development, physical and mental well-being, and positive values).

PHASE 5: PROGRAM COMPLETION

Youth may stay in the program for up to three years; the average student spends one and a half to two years in the program. Many youth graduate high school in Take a Hike, and others choose to return to mainstream high school for graduation.

PHASE 6: ALUMNI SUCCESS

Take a Hike alumni are resilient individuals who can navigate the challenges of young adulthood.

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Appendix A: Take A Hike's Integrated Approach

Take A Hike integrates five theoretical frameworks and this forms the foundation of their approach to supporting youth.

1. **Attachment theory**

   Attachment theory focuses on the importance of the development of healthy bonds and relationships between people. The way in which we relate to others and our ability to form relationships begins in infancy and continues during childhood and adolescence. It is through sensitive and responsive care that individuals are then able to form healthy relationships with others. When there is disruption or absence of sensitive care, individuals are vulnerable to struggles in forming healthy relationships and often require therapeutic interventions to reach a place in which they feel able to trust others and feel safe and secure in relationships.

2. **Trauma-informed care**

   Trauma-Informed care is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma. It emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

   From: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/child-teen-mental-health/trauma-informed-practice-resources

3. **Social and emotional learning (SEL)**

   SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

   From: https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

4. **Positive youth development**

   Positive Youth Development (PYD) is both a philosophy as well as a programmatic approach for supporting healthy, productive, and engaged youth as they grow into adulthood. The PYD approach rests on the idea that youth with more developmental assets are more likely to enjoy academic success, have greater economic prospects, be more civically engaged, and be healthier in the long term.

   From: https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development

5. **First People's Principles of Learning**

   In Indigenous education, the following principles are understood and reflected every aspect of learning.
   - Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

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- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.
- Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge.
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
- Learning involves patience and time.
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity.
- Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.

From: http://www.fnesc.ca/first-peoples-principles-of-learning/

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