



Landon Pearson Resource Centre  
for the Study of Childhood  
and Children's Rights

RYERSON  
UNIVERSITY

Provincial Advocate  
for Children & Youth

L'intervenant provincial  
en faveur des enfants & des jeunes

# Shaking the Movers VI:

## STANDING UP FOR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH



## PREFACE

Since 2007, the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights at Carleton University has sponsored a series of annual workshops for children and youth from across Canada and from a variety of backgrounds, on themes related to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). According to Article 12 of the CRC (which was ratified by Canada in 1991), young people under the age of 18 have the right to speak out and be heard on issues that affect them directly. Shaking the Movers workshops are designed to provide a space for children and young people to "have the floor", to present their unique perspectives and experiences and to provide specific recommendations and input related to the theme chosen for the year. While some adults do attend, they are there simply to listen and hear the recommendations made, to be a resource, to provide support to the young participants and to ensure that the workshop takes place in a safe and comfortable setting.

The outcomes, priorities and ideas presented by the youth are captured in reports like this one, and the responsible adults who were present undertake to ensure that the words of the young people reach as many 'movers' as possible and that some, at least, of the 'movers' respond. Among the rights that have been addressed in the past are the right to language and culture, the right to be free from exploitation, children's rights in cyberspace, the right to be protected and to be informed and the rights of young people in the youth justice system. The theme of this year's workshop, which was held with the support of Ryerson University, the Office of the Provincial

Advocate for Children and Youth, the Landon Pearson Resource Centre at Carleton University and the Public Health Agency of Canada, was the rights of children and youth with mental health issues. Next year, youth would like to address issues related to the right to play and to artistic expression (Art. 31 of the CRC). Kindly read this report and consider what the young people had to say about mental health.

Children and Youth are experts in their own lives and if we are to find workable solutions to the challenges that confront them we need to find them together.

Hon. Landon Pearson, OC  
December 2012



## OVERVIEW

On November 16th and 17th, 2012, the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights, in partnership with the School of Child and Youth Care at Ryerson University, supported by Ontario's Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and the Public Health Agency of Canada, conducted a 2-day workshop with Canadian young people, for the purpose of:

- providing an opportunity for children and youth to exercise their right to take part in important civil and political processes with the assurance that their voices will be heard and valued.
- providing an opportunity for children and youth to prepare comments and recommendations for governments and civil society, with respect to Article 23 and 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the themes that arise from these articles.

Recent events including the relentless cyber bullying of Amanda Todd that led to her suicide, have raised mental health concerns among the young to a new level. *According to the World Health Organization (WHO) someone around the globe commits suicide every 40 seconds. The suicide rate for Inuit peoples living in Northern Canada is between 60 and 75 per 100,000 people, significantly higher than for the general population. Other populations at an increased risk of suicide include youth, the elderly, inmates in correctional facilities, people with a mental illness, and those who have previously attempted suicide.* (Canadian Mental Health Association: Ontario, 2006). Although suicide is only one manifestation of the mental health issues facing children and youth, as a theme it came up numerous times throughout Shaking the Movers where the youth expressed the importance discussing suicide openly. There was also a good deal of talk about bullying, stigma, inadequate education about mental health as well as about child and youth rights.

This report highlights discussions that took place around four thematic areas associated with the two articles of the CRC most directly related to the child's rights to be both mentally and physically healthy and to the best healthcare possible, Articles 23 and 24. Article 12, the child's right to participate in any deliberations or decisions that affect him or her directly, is one of the cross-cutting principles of the CRC and respect for Article 12, which is key to a child rights based approach, permeates every Shaking the Movers workshop that has been held so far.

The four thematic areas and the questions they give rise to varied according to which of the two articles was under discussion. Article 23, the focus of Day One, deals specifically with children (defined in the CRC as "every human being under the age of 18") who suffer from a mental illness or a disability and demands recognition for their right to enjoy "a full and decent life in

conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community." The young participants were asked to consider the following questions: What is meant by mental health? What does it mean to you? Has it impacted your life? How? How do you think the perceptions of others affects youth your age who have mental health concerns?

On Day Two, the focus was on Article 24 and participants were asked to consider problems primarily related to services and to access. What does treatment mean to you? What mental health services have you or others you know been involved with? What roadblocks have you or someone you know encountered accessing services? Are young people included in developing treatment plans?

All of these questions were formulated by child and youth care workers from Ryerson as they studied the CRC in preparation for the workshop but they were only intended to guide the dis-



cussions and to encourage solutions. Of course the young people usually took over the discussion sessions completely but that is the whole point of Article 12! The children and youth shared experiences in a safe and respectful environment and brainstormed solutions to some of the problems currently being faced inside and out of the children's mental health system. Authentic participation by the young people present on issues of direct concern gave them an opportunity, we hope, to 'shake up movers' who are making decisions about them so that planning and programming will respect their rights and serve their best interests. Please listen to what they had to say.

The youth were split up into four groups in order to discuss their personal thoughts on children's mental health and how they are directly or indirectly impacted. There were two 17+ groups (the Bears and the Eagles), a 14-16 age group (the Lions) and the 10-13 age group (the Monkeys). In total we had 40 youth attend. The youth were in their designated groups for small group discussions only. Otherwise the groups, were blended, which allowed for all of them to get to know one another.



## ARTICLE 23

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.
2. States Parties recognize the right of the disabled child to special care and shall encourage and ensure the extension, subject to available resources, to the eligible child and those responsible for his or her care, of assistance for which application is made and which is appropriate to the child's condition and to the circumstances of the parents or others caring for the child.
3. Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development
4. States Parties shall promote, in the spirit of international cooperation, the exchange of appropriate information in the field of preventive health care and of medical, psychological and functional treatment of disabled children, including dissemination of and access to information concerning methods of rehabilitation, education and vocational services, with the aim of enabling States Parties to improve their capabilities and skills and to widen their experience in these areas. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.

The youth were chosen due to their personal interest in mental health issues, not because they had a mental health problem. The weekend allowed us to see that mental health issues are relevant and important to discuss. Some youth are advocates for mental health and this conference was a way to learn more, but also to advocate for themselves or others.

The workshop was designed to allow a safe space for youth to share their experiences and have their insights appreciated by peers and child and youth workers. The youth were provided with an information package prior to the workshop in order to have a clear understanding of what the two days would look like. At the end of the workshop, youth were given an evaluation form to present their thoughts on the conference and provide further feedback.

The Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights and the School of Child and Youth Care at Ryerson University have committed to bringing the voices of young people not only to professionals, who work with children and youth but also to government officials, political leaders, organizations, researchers, etc. so that they will better understand the rights, as well as the needs, of children and youth. One example is CRAN, the network of Canadian, USA and UK child rights academics sponsored by the Landon Pearson Resource Centre and supported by the Muttart Foundation. CRAN members come together once a year to respond to what the youth share at each Shaking the Movers conference. Their responses, and the collaboration that accompanies their meeting, is intended to reassure the young people that their voices have been heard and respected.

## FEATURES OF THE 2012 SHAKING THE MOVERS CONFERENCE

At the 2011 Shaking the Movers Conference, three Ryerson University Child and Youth Care classes were involved in facilitation. This year, we invited a total of five classes to facilitate different activities throughout the weekend.

One Advanced Group Work class deconstructed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and discussed children's mental health in language that children and youth could understand and appreciate. A second Advanced Group Work class organized and facilitated evening activities on the Friday night, which included icebreakers, art, music and recreational activities. These activities all focused on the theme of mental health with the underlying aim of bringing mental health issues to the surface and learning about them in a meaningful way.



We had three other Ryerson University classes join us: the Children's Rights classes. The first class did an interactive welcome activity on Friday to explain what the CRC is. We learned from last year that it is important to focus on explaining the CRC, considering that so many children and youth are not aware of it. The second class came on Saturday morning to conduct games with the youth on the themes of:

1. *Advocacy*
2. *Having a 'voice'*
3. *Using your voice*

The last Children's Rights class joined us at Saturday's lunch for optional arts and crafts, games, and the sharing of informal information on mental health.

Another new aspect of this year's conference was that we had two **youth speakers** attend our conference. Our first youth speaker was a young woman who described her experiences with mental health, the importance of seeking support and what it is like to try and get it. *"I was scared at first, but then I was fine. It was a good place to be; to be with other people that want to make a change and stand up for it. My story could have moved people and shown that there is hope and stick to what you want, I was glad I was there and it was a good time."* (YOUTH SPEAKER, 2013). She was an incredible inspiration and provided encouragement to the young people at our conference to speak out about what is going on in their lives. Our second youth speaker was a young man who outlined his experiences and his advocacy work with First Nations youth in northern Ontario. His presentation was a great way to close our conference by encouraging the youth to answer the question 'What Next?'

Throughout Shaking the Movers conferences, our main goal is always to hear the voices of young people. This year, building on our experience at Shaking the Movers V, we listened to the voices of young people in a particularly effective way. On Day Two of the conference, we created an inner/outer circle after our morning presentations. The inner circle comprised nine youth from different backgrounds. They sat facing one another to talk. The other young participants sat around them in an outer circle leaning in to listen to them. It was incredibly intense and moving. The youth truly opened up and shared their personal stories about mental health. We had to end the inner/outer circle for lunch, but during lunch the youth requested to continue the inner/outer circle in the afternoon and to ask others who would like to speak to join the inner circle. The option was also available for those who would like to continue their small group discussions to do so. The youngest age group opted out of the afternoon inner/outer circle. Several of the youth from the inner circle chose to write their stories down and permit them to be part of this report.

## Presentations from the small groups about what they learned

### Question 1: What is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?

*"I learned that the UNCRC is a document that explains all children's rights."*

(15 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"It teaches us about what we should be receiving, but not necessarily what we are receiving."*

(19 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

Youth learned about what the CRC is and how it is a really important document to study in order to know your rights. *When you know your rights you see what is wrong.* (21 YEAR OLD MALE). Children and youth at Shaking the Movers recognized that not all children and youth have access to all of the rights guaranteed by the CRC. A youth asked the question, *If these are our rights, how come some of them aren't a reality?* This question was asked in the first hour of our conference – why aren't all children and youth receiving all of the rights they **should** have?

To begin with the youth drew up a chart:

### *Rights are...*

ACCESSIBLE	NOT ACCESSIBLE
Water	Right to not be judged for having a disability: Stigma
Education	Resources for mental illness and disabilities: very hard to access
Health care	Special accommodations for people with mental illness and disabilities: wheel chair accessibility
	Support system



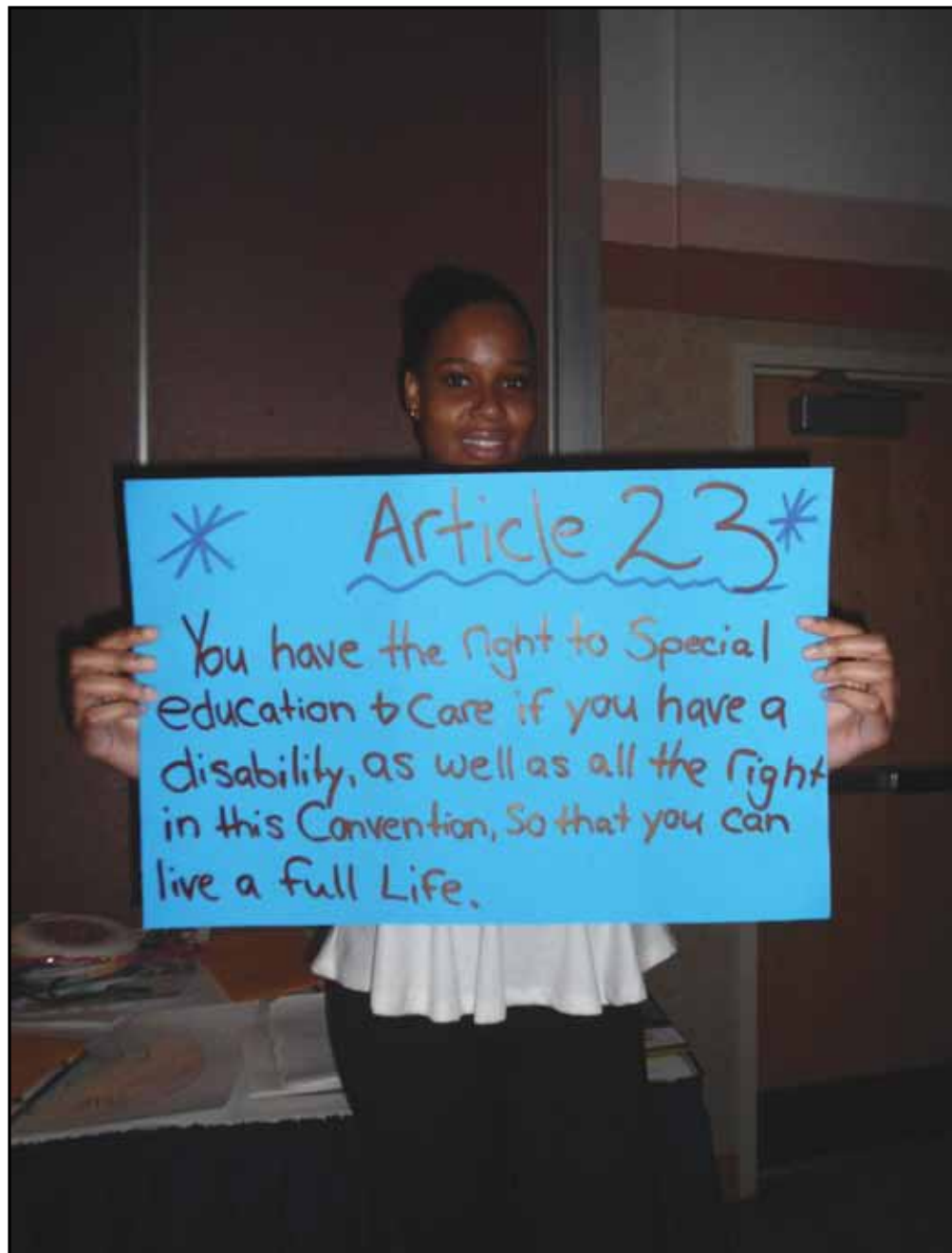
After the youth discussed what rights they thought were either accessible or inaccessible, they soon realized that water, education and health care are not accessible for everyone – not even everyone in Ontario.

The chart soon changed to:

### *Rights are...*

ACCESSIBLE	NOT ACCESSIBLE
	Right to not be judged for having a disability: Stigma
	Resources for mental illness and disabilities: very hard to access
	Special accommodations for people with mental illness and disabilities: wheel chair accessibility
	Support system
	Water
	Education
	Health care

Although it was recognized that these discussion items are accessible for some children and youth, these items are by no means accessible for **ALL** children and youth in Canada and around the world.



## What is Mental Health?

According to Children's Mental Health Ontario, a "**mental (health) disorder** is a behavioural, emotional or cognitive pattern of functioning in an individual that is associated with distress, suffering, or impairment in one or more areas of life – such as school, work, or social and family interactions." (2013).

### Here is what the youth had to say:

*"Mental health is a very broad topic, it can be anything such as Down Syndrome or A.D.D., but it's bad to generalize it as mental health."* (17 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"Mental health has different aspects, people label the kids at school as having a certain mental illness, but I don't really know what it means."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Mental health can be a day to day thing, you wake up and you're not feeling well."* (17 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"People don't think mental illness is a 'real illness'."* (19 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"You can see mental health in actions, for example we can see that by people acting differently."* (18 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Mental health is about someone who learns differently."* (12 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"It is derived from our perspectives of ourselves and others."* (14 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Mental health can come in many different forms and look different in every person."* (15 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"I would like to learn more about mental health and become more aware."* (11 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

Youth expressed their need to learn more about mental health and confirmed that it is not something that is talked about on a regular basis or at all. Youth expressed that in schools, at home, in the community there needs to be more accessible information and resources about mental health in order to remove the stigmas and encourage disclosure.

## What does Mental Health mean to you and how has it impacted your life?

*"Mental health can be a variety of things for people experiencing this, they may want help."*  
(17 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"It is difficult to go to the doctor about mental health, let's say you have a bump on your body and they can fix it, but you can't see if you have a mental illness."*  
(16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"The health care system has a lot of flaws."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"I am a visual learner, my teacher suggested I might have dyslexia, I was in denial because of stigmas around dyslexia. Then I got tested and found out it was true, I do have dyslexia."*  
(19 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"Depression came as a shock to me, it felt foreign to my body. I fell behind in school, felt hopeless. I received therapy, but it was too expensive to continue. I felt bad that it was costing my parents so much money, so I stopped going."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"My brother has Asperger's and how I interact with him is different from how I interact with my other siblings. I feel more careful about what I say to him because I think he takes what I say very literally."* (12 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"I have been living with anorexia and depression for the past three years. It affects my family life and my life a lot. My family often has to take me to appointments and I feel they don't understand me and my illness. My illness does not define me."* (14 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

The biggest lesson learned at Shaking the Movers was that **everyone** is affected by mental health issues directly or indirectly through family, friends or as an individual. At the end of the conference a sense of togetherness had formed, an awareness of each other in light of mental health.

## Youth Expressions: What is Mental Health?

Youth did activities to represent what they learned in their small group discussions; here are two examples of what they shared:

### Baggage Skit:

**Theme:** How everyday situations can trigger mental health issues.

Group members came up to the young man (black t-shirt) and told him their problems; then they gave him their physical baggage (backpacks, purses, etc.). The physical bags represented the young man carrying their 'baggage' and now he was not only carrying his own story, but that of all of his peers. At the end of the skit, the young man put his head down and expressed feeling overwhelmed and stressed with the responsibility of helping everyone.

This skit was a great representation of secondary trauma and the stress that can come along with being a support for another person. This is a responsibility that is too much to ask of youth and this skit showed that it can have long lasting impacts on their mental health and well-being.





**Bears Rap:**

Another group decided to represent mental health through a rap that they had written together:

*We are the bears and we're here to say  
Mental Health is our discussion today.  
When help is needed, you need to increase it.  
Discriminating against mental health is taboo.  
Instead, what should we do?  
Sometimes, when help is not there.  
We need to branch out, help is everywhere.  
That you know someone cares.  
It's impacted us in so many ways,  
so we can change the perception of today.  
I matter.  
You matter.  
We matter.*



## Advocacy and Awareness...

*Advocacy and awareness* were the most discussed themes throughout the conference. Many youth felt strongly that they should step up and advocate for their peers because there is simply not enough being done for children and youth living with mental health concerns. *"I would like to start a program at my school where myself and other students in my school stand up for mental health and allow all students to come and talk to us if they need someone to talk to – it will be sort of like a hall monitor idea where we will be identified as a 'safe' person."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE). Youth at the conference believed that it is hard to talk to people about themselves and that there are not any real opportunities or spaces where they feel safe or able to talk about what is going on in their lives. *"I don't think there are enough people for us to talk to...I think this is the first place I have felt safe to talk about myself and not feel judged."* (18 YEAR OLD MALE).

Youth also discussed their lack of knowledge or awareness about mental health; in fact many youth were unaware that they themselves may have been affected by mental health issues di-



rectly or indirectly. *"Education is key in learning, knowledge leads to empathy and understanding, compassion and communication."* (15 YEAR OLD MALE). In fact, several weeks after the conference took place we received a phone call from a parent of a youth who attended the conference. This parent said her child came home from Shaking the Movers and told her mother that she thought she was depressed. The mother thought at first it might have had to do with the content of the weekend, but decided, nevertheless, to send her child to receive psychological testing. The psychologist determined that her child was depressed. The mother was calling to thank us for giving her child the

strength to speak up and now they are able to receive the support that they need. This was such an important moment after the conference had taken place. Although we were well aware that for many youth this was their first experience learning about mental health, we had no idea of the extent to which it would affect them in such a positive way.

## What is Advocacy and Awareness?

*"Yes, I am very serious about this because I want to reach out and speak for children and put mental health out there."* (12 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"I feel that if I had a mental illness, I don't think I would really be able to cope with it and it may lead to something more. This is why I want to help others who are my age in coping."* (13 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"I learned that illness is not just physical, it can be mental...it may impact yourself and your family and friends."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Education is most important in changing perceptions regarding mental health!"* (16 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"Judgement needs to stop. People living with mental illness can be judged and have been judged, this needs to stop."* (17 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Advocate means to speak up and represent others."* (14 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"Common sense is common experience. Ramps are visible for physical accessibility, accommodations for mental health are not visible."* (19 YEAR OLD FEMALE)

*"Schools should be a safe space in order for it to be a positive learning environment."* (18 YEAR OLD MALE).

*"You need to remove the stigma, not the people."* (15 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

*"Mental health is such a broad term, this is why there is so much ambiguity and lack of education."* (16 YEAR OLD FEMALE).

Youth are knowledgeable about advocating for themselves and others. However, they felt it was and is much easier to advocate on behalf of a friend or peer instead of themselves. This is so significant as it shows that there needs to be more individuals and groups advocating for young people and listening to their stories.

Facilitators asked youth what they can do to take action to advocate and spread awareness for those children and youth living with mental illness:

- write a letter to your Member of Parliament
- spread awareness in your school and with your friends and family
- support groups and petitions for mental health
- get involved in your community or events
- start a program about mental health at school, church or in our community
- need to have more youth-led programming
- using social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) in a positive way
- start small and then get bigger
- it's okay to spread the word as an individual
- break down the walls of stigma
- work together: networking
- create change within yourself
- use art to spread the message (music, painting, poetry)
- EDUCATION is KEY



## ARTICLE 24

**The BIG picture...**What is meant by mental health and what does it mean to you? Has it impacted your life? How do you think the perceptions of others affects youth your age who have mental health concerns?

**How WE fit in...**What is Canada doing to address our children and youth's need for adequate mental health support and resources?

**Playing a role...**How can we stand up for children and youth who are struggling with a mental illness and how can we have their voices heard and acknowledged?



## Youth Supports

Youth worked in their groups to determine what they can do in the home, school, on the computer or in the community in order to help cope with mental health issues or where you can access support. Here is what the youth had to say:

### Home:

Talking to family  
Siblings  
Telephone  
Kids help line  
Texting  
Bibles  
Places to be alone and safe  
Extended family  
Neighbours  
Music  
Showers

### School:

Guidance Counsellor  
Talk to your Coach  
Talk to a teacher you are close with  
Friends  
Join a club or organization  
Take part in the arts program  
Principal/vice principal  
Nurse  
Social worker  
Sexual Health Nurse

### Computer:

Social Media – Facebook, Twitter, etc.  
Organizations: online website  
Educational websites  
(ie: Children's Mental Health)  
Skype  
Word press/Blogs: Have my voice heard  
Online Forums  
Teenmentalhealth.org  
211.ca

### Community:

Neighbourhood  
Local Businesses  
Church  
Town Hall  
Adult Allies  
Food Banks  
Parks  
Friends  
Youth Centre  
Block Parent  
Librarian  
Youth Outreach Programs  
Band Council  
Community Centre  
Social Assistance

It is clear that youth are aware of possible places where they can receive support or learn how to cope with some challenges they may be dealing with. However, this does not necessarily mean they are accessing these supports or using these coping mechanisms. As we learned on Day One, youth expressed the need to advocate for one another and support their peers, thus many youth are not seeking the support that they need. By no means should the onus be on the youth; the BIG question is why aren't adult allies helping the youth seek support? Why was this the first time many youth had shared their stories and why was this the first time they had discussed possible supports?

## There is no 'Normal'

Another major theme of this year's conference was 'there is no normal'. This theme emerged at the very beginning of the sessions and continued on throughout the weekend. The youth made posters, discussed and even did their presentations with this theme in mind. *"What is normal? No one is normal, normal is a word that was made for the rest of us to try and reach unreachable standards and judge others on what they are or are not."* (19 YEAR OLD FEMALE). This new notion of normal had a strong and positive impact on our group; we all decided that there really is no normal, we are all different and that is what makes us special. Although we agreed that there is no normal, our youth brought up the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding mental health and how they can have a negative effect on children and youth living with mental illness.

## Stigma

Stigma affects everyone in a different way, but when it comes to mental health, it could deter someone from seeking support or even admitting that they need support. Youth expressed that children and youth at school who are 'different' get made fun of or bullied and that many people are scared of being different. *"Many people bully or make fun of the kids who are different and may be suspected to be living with mental health issues. I feel very sad for these kids who are being made fun of and angry at the kids who are doing it. Mental health is very misunderstood."* (14 YEAR OLD FEMALE). Mental health is not something that is taught regularly in schools, and those who have mental illness are often stigmatized.

*"I experience and recognize stigmas and symptoms through my work as a tutor in school. It is hard to see other students my age struggling so much, but I am not sure what I can do to help."* (17 YEAR OLD FEMALE). Although this youth wants to help, she is unsure of what she can do; thus, there needs to be more readily available information on mental health so peers support peers.

Youth shared that they feel parents and teachers only 'do something' when things get bad, but until that point they are receiving little to no support. *"People aren't as forward with mental illness*

*until symptoms have progressed, we only notice it once it gets bad and this is a problem because we need to be noticing it from the beginning to be able to help people.” (17 YEAR OLD FEMALE).* Why is it that in many cases our society does not take things seriously until a traumatic event occurs? We should, instead, be putting in place safeguards and preventative measures in hopes that young people today are safe and supported. In order to break down these barriers for seeking support, we need to provide education on mental health, where to access supports/resources and make it clear that mental health affects everyone.





## Inner/Outer Circle

For the past two years at Shaking the Movers, we have done an inner/outer circle, where we invite approximately ten youth who have had experiences with the theme under consideration, and ask them if they feel comfortable sharing. How the inner/outer circle functions is that the only people allowed to speak are the individuals on the inner circle. The outer circle has to be very quiet and observe/respect the individuals on the inner circle.

Judy Finlay, who is not only the co-chair of Shaking the Movers, but also a clinical psychologist, facilitates the inner circle and allows time for each youth to share their story. This year was quite



powerful, but also quite heavy due to the nature of the subject. Being on the outer circle you are able to truly feel the emotions of the young people on the inner circle. To hear them share – and feel safe to share – is very inspiring.

We had intended our inner/outer circle to occupy one and a half hours of the morning on the last day of Shaking the Movers. However, at lunch on Saturday the youth requested that we continue the inner/outer circle in the afternoon. Of course, this being a youth conference, we were thrilled that they took matters into their own hands.

By the afternoon all of the youth on the inner circle had shared their deepest stories. Some of the youth said that this was the first time telling people what they had gone through; they felt relieved, happy and listened to.

After the youth on the inner circle share their stories, the outer circle is given a time to respond and offer their insights with the inner circle. The youth responded with an overall expression of understanding and respect for their peers. Some of the youth said that they had similar stories, and that it was nice to know they weren't alone. One of our biggest moments from the weekend was young people identifying with one another and realizing that there are others who are dealing with similar issues.



At the end of the inner/outer circle we went around to every youth in the room and asked them to say one word that described their experience. We heard words like; powerful, inspirational, hope, brave, together, meaningful, humbled, unified. This was an eye-opening experience for all of us and brought us closer as a group. In conversations with the youth after the conference, the majority shared that the inner/outer circle was their favourite part of the weekend. This shows that if you provide a space for youth to share, they will.

## Youth Stories

Several youth who participated in the inner/outer circle decided to write their stories for inclusion in this report, in order to allow others to see how meaningful and important it is to have your voice heard. Here are the stories of four young people who have had experience with mental health issues, either directly or indirectly. We have respected their *right to privacy* as two of the four youth chose to remain anonymous. The others we have identified by initials only.

### Youth Story #1:

*"Well, mental health didn't affect me personally but, I was a victim of the effects that mental health has on our loved ones and their surroundings. I'd say it happened about 2 years ago when my best friend was a witness of a devastating, terrific and violent situation (suicide of a family member) since that day my friend was tremendously affected by mental health.*

*I realized my friend was extremely traumatized and unstable, so I convinced him to get professional help, from the Cuban health institutions, but sadly those so-called 'professionals' led by ignorance and thought we were just some other 'drugged up attention-seeking whore punk', telling us to literally suck it up and that time heals everything.*

*I think there is not enough support for young people when it comes to mental health, because some elders still think we are just kids and that it's not that big of a deal, just a temporary issue, which sometimes it is, but from my experience it is definitely not. Luckily in Canada there are some institutions that provide support like the suicide hotline and 'The Blue Weave' movement, but I think there is still a lot to do, so events like the suicide of Amanda Todd or the most recent school shooting won't happen again.*

*My friend and I sure did face some obstacles like, professional ignorance and urban apathy. Sadly I had to emigrate from Cuba and my friend wasn't strong enough to overcome those obstacles so he chose the downhill fall of hard core drug addiction, depending on heroin on an everyday basis suffering from dope sickness and severe paranoia. I can tell that it hurts a lot to see one of my loved ones in such a*

*depressing situation, but I can't do much anymore, I just hope that he overcomes the addiction and gets the help he has needed all this time.*

*My message to youth facing mental health issues is a quote from A Better Place a Better Time by the ska punk band 'Streetlight Manifesto':*

And when you wake up, everything is gonna be fine.  
 I guarantee you that you'll wake in a better place, in a better time.  
 So you are tired of living and feel like you may give in. But don't,  
 It's not your time. And even if it was so, I wouldn't let you go, you  
 Can run run run, but I will always follow close. Someday you'll say, "That's it  
 That's all". But I'll be there waiting with open arms to break your fall. I know  
 That you think that you are on your own, but just know that I am here and I will  
 Lead you home.

***Music helps through everything, I promise.***

*I learned at Shaking the Movers that our feelings are the most important thing we have and the no matter how bad things are getting, you always keep your hopes up high and your head down low."*

## **Youth Story #2: E. P.**

*"Mental health issues have affected me for as long as I can remember. I don't know exactly why, but I've always been an anxious person. I think I was predisposed to anxiety. My earliest experiences with mental health issues began when I was a small child. I suffered from extreme shyness. The only people I felt comfortable talking to were extended family members and close friends in situations where only they could hear my voice. In situations where I didn't feel comfortable, I didn't talk. Often, it felt like I couldn't talk as if I was paralyzed by fear. Sometimes I would have to communicate by whispering into the ear of someone I felt more comfortable hearing me talk, so no one else would hear me. In school, I couldn't answer questions in class even when called upon. I wouldn't even talk to my peers. Sometimes teachers would bend over so I could whisper in their ears. I now realize that I had selective mutism, an apparently rare anxiety disorder that begins in childhood.*

*This started to improve after I moved and changed schools where I could try to pretend I wasn't extremely shy. Although this helped a little, the anxiety in social situations persisted, and I got a reputation of being the quiet one again. It wasn't until after I began taking anti-depressants that I became significantly became less anxious in social situations.*

*I was a pretty big worrier in general – or as one of my friends put it, a 'worry wart'. My head was filled with 'what ifs?' and I think that is one of the reasons I had trouble falling asleep at night. I seemed to worry about everything.*

*In my first year of high school, the pressure to be thin hit me. The scale was pulled out in gym class one day, and the girls took turns weighing themselves. Many made self-deprecating comments, even the girls who were visibly quite slender. Being bigger than most of them (but still at a normal BMI), this made me feel worse about myself. I had felt that I had 'thunder thighs' before then, but I didn't seriously try to lose weight until that point. What began as an innocent goal to slim down and become healthier, turned into a calorie-counting obsession. I would constantly be thinking about my next meal and the calories in food. It took a lot of time and effort, but I eventually began losing weight without resorting to unhealthy methods. However, after I hit my lowest weight of 103lbs in late 2009, I began binge eating like never before. It's hard to describe the extreme compulsions I had to over eat. I tried and tried to stop but I was caught in a vicious cycle of bingeing and restricting. In a matter of a few months, I shot up to my highest weight of 129lbs (I'm only 5'1" tall). My eating was out of control. I even tried starving myself for five days straight to 'get back on track', but the results didn't last long. Once I began university, I began focusing less on what I ate and I naturally began to lose some of the excess weight. The less I obsessed, the less I had compulsions to binge on food. I never really looked at food the same anymore, though.*

*My experience with depression began when I was around 14. It started quite mild with a little loss of energy, withdrawing a bit from friends, and being frequently down. Little did I know that it would gradually become much, much worse. As I progressed through high school, I lost even more energy. I lost my hobbies, my ability to concentrate, and my will to live. Everything became a chore, and even little things like getting out of bed, taking a shower, and brushing my teeth took a lot of effort. Determined and a perfectionist, I managed to struggle by and graduated high school with the highest average. I thought things would only get better once I began university and got away from my abusive family, but I was wrong. I have never performed as badly as I did in my first term of university. I failed numerous exams and had to repeat three courses. Because tuition for my program was so expensive (10k/year), I withdrew after my first term. I knew nothing would change until I took some time off to improve my mental health and evaluate what went wrong. Feeling like a hopeless, worthless, unmotivated failure, I sunk even further into my depression. I had very little support at the time, and I felt that no one would care if I just disappeared. I began to self-harm and seriously began contemplating suicide, and I admitted myself to a psychiatric ward in the summer of 2012 after a mental breakdown. Things improved a little since then, and I managed to pass all my courses after I returned. Fighting depression is a constant battle for me.*

*I didn't receive the help that I needed until I withdrew in my first year of university. It took a term of terrible academic performance for me to start seeing doctors and counsellors on a regular basis. I didn't even know that the office for people with disability at my university supported students with mental disorders like depression and anxiety. Once I signed up with them, I finally got some of the accommodations I've needed for a long time. The accommodations include writing in a quieter, less crowded room and more time to finish my exam. Being able to finish tests is a challenge for me because my anxiety and depression makes it difficult to think clearly.*



*I don't feel like there is enough support for young people today. I think teachers should be more educated on mental health issues and signs of problems. Schools should offer counselling and have an office for people with disability, and they should encourage students to seek out those services if they are struggling. They should make it clear that mental illness is also considered a disability and accommodations can be provided if needed. I think that there is also a shortage of counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists in university health services. It can take weeks to talk to someone, and I think that's too long."*

### **Youth Story #3: S. B.**

*"The onset of my depression had no identifiable trigger; perhaps growing up was my trigger, or being born with high susceptibility for mental illness. Nonetheless, the shot fired by this anonymous trigger silently shattered my grip on existence, which had been delicately stable up until that point. I will admit that I have always been an emotionally volatile person; so initially feeling sadness so intense was only unusual because I had no justifiable reason to feel that way. It only took me a week of slowly sinking into the foggy, draining, tendrils of a depressive episode for me to identify my ailment.*

*I knew very little about depression, however the word easily came to me and seemed to be the only thing that made sense in my confusion. However it didn't take long for this feeling to take me to states that were entirely unfamiliar. As soon as a week into my depressive episode, I began to sink further than sorrow, which was familiar at least, into apathy so sadistic that I lost grip of everything. For months thereafter food tasted like ashes, every image was in gray scale and I felt alien toward every person. My symptoms included loss of appetite, hypersomnia, fatigue and loss of energy, diminished ability to think and concentrate, suicidal thoughts, depressed mood most of the day, frequent feelings of guilt and worthlessness and diminished pleasure in all activities. I began losing weight, sleeping through days, falling behind in school, and had a difficult time maintaining relationships. There were many days that I could not get out of bed. At some points I was so low-functioning that I imagined that this had to be the rest of my life. Unlike many people with depression that I have encountered I had been fairly liberal when it came to talking about my depression with those around me. Unfortunately, in most instances, my family and peers seemed as ill equipped to handle my depression as I was. I soon discovered that mental illness was not something that many people talked about or had knowledge of.*

*However, I was lucky enough to have a loving support system of family and friends during my depressive episode. I sank through four months of living while depressed until I experienced a confrontation with a close friend, which consequently lent me a single moment of clarity. Being able to view my situation objectively for one moment allowed me, for the first time, to really want to get better. From then on, day by day, I lived through a depressive episode that began slowly to dwindle until it became a thing of the past. While moving out of my depressive episode, I started attending therapy sessions with a psychologist. This was paid for by my parents, consisted of venting and cognitive behavioral therapy and will always be highly recommended by me to anyone who has money to spend on their mental health. In*

*conclusion, my experience having depression has had equally beneficial and detrimental effects on my life. The despair of my depression ultimately gave me clarity that I retain to this day and has granted me understanding and empathy that are priceless.”*

## **Youth Story #4:**

*“My experience with mental health started around the time I entered middle school which was around 13 years old and my experiences were quite on and off but were the most serious when I was 13 and 14 and then began to get better.*

*I started to get counseling through the school when I was 13 since I didn’t know where else to find support. This support also approached me since a peer of mine approached a guidance counsellor.*

*I believe there is a lot of resources out there for young people but even then the way to gain access to those resources have their obstacles with parents, friends and even yourself. I believe that to go out and find resources you have to understand that getting better is something that you want. But sometimes when you feel alone you just want what is available to them.*

*I think my biggest obstacle was the constant fear of people knowing that I was struggling with mental health. I believe that pushed me in directions that made my situation worse. I didn’t really overcome that by my own doing rather once a teacher approached me and wanted to help me I began to see that people weren’t out there to get me. I was just scared that I was going to be judged or my parents will figure out. Another obstacle I found was I didn’t have the best friend support through what I was going since I found that some people cared and some really didn’t care. I was looking for help and answers in people who really couldn’t help me. Also since I was a bit younger when I was experiencing this, I found that most friends had no idea how to help me. When I got into gr.9 my mental health took a complete toll on my life and I didn’t have any teacher support who could help me or a counselor but I learned which friends to find support from which did make things easier.*

*I would like to say that you are not alone; accept your mental health issue as a part of your life. I feel that when I was younger I had no idea of resources out there during my middle school ages. So I think a beneficial way of providing resources is to educate people about the fact that you are not crazy and that we all suffer a bit but you will make it through. Also the people in your life are not here to judge you or make your life worse rather choose people who will make you better. Remember that your life is not meant to be a mental health illness rather a life filled with love and happiness and that the first step is to admit you can always get better. Also stand up for mental health and make a stand for people who are suffering and you will gain new strength that you would have not known you had. I just believe that those dark times don’t have to take over your life because your life is precious.*

*I really had an amazing time at Shaking the Movers in the sense I was able to open my eyes to different aspects in our world that I don't always take time to think of, like different mental health issues that affect all sorts of people. I gained so much strength from the hope and positive energy from the people of the whole conference. It was really amazing to surround myself with people who strongly believe in something and want to make a stand for others. It was just a great weekend where I was educated on laws that actually affect me. This conference allowed me to go back into the past in a beneficial and positive way that I was able to almost move forward from my past. I had an amazing chance to share my story and just let off baggage that I stopped telling people about. It was really an incredible experience that was so beneficial to me in the way I was educated and found a lot of encouragement."*



On behalf of Shaking the Movers, we feel honoured to share these stories written directly by the youth who attended the conference, and were in the inner circle. These stories represent real young people who have endured some very challenging life circumstances; each one has gone through something unique and has fought to move past. At the conference, when we were listening to each youth share their story, it was very moving; you

couldn't help but listen because it was real, it was in the moment and it was something most of the group had never witnessed before. In speaking with the youth after, many on the inner circle felt a sense of relief – like a weight had been lifted off of their shoulders. In hearing the outer circle's response, they felt empowered by their peers and were inspired to share their own stories.

The biggest lesson learnt at this year's conference, which has been shared several times throughout this report, is that everyone is affected by mental health issues – indirectly and directly.

## Ryerson Student Roles and Experiences

As previously stated the Shaking the Movers VI conference was entirely facilitated by five classes from the Child and Youth Care (CYC) program at Ryerson University. For the majority of the students, this was their first experience with a youth conference. Our intention was to provide real hands on opportunities for CYC students soon to be entering the field. Shaking the Movers is a unique type of youth work, it cannot be taught in a classroom, but needs to be experienced firsthand. The CYC students spent a fair amount of class time preparing for the event and learning about the CRC, but participating in the workshop was essential to gaining knowledge and experience. Several students who facilitated the small group discussions were interviewed. Here is what they had to say:

### Question #1: Did your experience at Shaking the Movers exceed your expectations? Why or why not?

**Student A:** *“Yes, I do not know what exactly my expectations were going into it but I did not think I would enjoy myself as much as I did. I thought that it would be very structured and the youth would have trouble engaging in the material. Yet, the youth were very easy to engage and they were really interested in what was being discussed. Shaking the Movers was somewhat of ‘self-care’ for me as it helped me step away from the books and computer for a while and actually get back to doing what we as CYCs enjoy, engaging with youth. This was refreshing as recently I have been feeling disconnected with our profession.”*

**Student B:** *“Shaking the Movers definitely exceeded my expectations! The youth were amazing! They were so willing to participate in activities and were much brighter than I imagined. They all had very intense personal stories and were so willing to share. They were very supportive of each other and it was really refreshing to see young people being so supportive and being so knowledgeable about mental health.”*

### Question #2: Did the activities you planned for the youth take place? If not, what changed?

**Student A:** *“Being there both days, I had the unique and rewarding experience of seeing the conference full circle. On Friday, we had planned to complete a collage with our group in addition to creating a short ‘commercial’ attempting to break down the perceptions of mental health. When we worked with our group they were very interested and engaged in the conversation as a group and we almost ran out of time to complete any activity. The group had come up with an overarching theme of being concerned with other people’s experience with mental health. They expressed a lot of anxiety about how to deal*

with the issues friends and family discuss with them identifying that sometimes other's experience can affect their mental health. They decided to do a skit about baggage as suggested by some of the group members. The youth planned and presented this with very little direction as they were able to work as a team. We decided not to introduce the collage as they were very interested in discussion and seemed to be more interested in presenting small skits than anything else in order to portray what the group had discussed. We did not have the camera to create the commercial we had planned but the group created a presentation that was along similar lines as they created a 'tableaux' with someone narrating the presentation. On Saturday, everyone's plans were changed as the group decided they wanted to continue to partake in the inner and outer circle. The activities that all groups had planned were pushed aside to meet the needs of the group."

**Student C:** "We had suggested activities but the youth were able to create their own activities that were more meaningful to them on Friday."

### **Question #3: What memory stands out for you when you think about your experience at Shaking the Movers this year?**

**Student A:** "The memory that stands out for me the most over this weekend was during the inner and outer circle the second time. During this very intense and emotional group discussion I was taking in the crowd of youth that were located in the outer circle and watching their reactions, emotions, and overall non-verbal expression of what they were feeling. This allowed me to gauge how discussions like these affect others within a group context. It was interesting and meaningful to identify how different dynamics can affect the group as a whole, especially within this type of context. Overall this conference was a unique and amazing experience, and the courage and strength displayed by all the youth present was inspiring and amazing to see."

**Student B:** "There are many memories that stand out for me when I think of Shaking the Movers. Two particular ones that comes to mind were when we were in our small groups, and the youth were taking turns talking about mental health, and ways that mental health has impacted their life. A few of them became very emotional during discussions, it was very touching to see how these youth who had just met everyone that morning, were so eager and willing to share their stories in great depth. Another memory that really stood out for me was when one youth stated how everyone has days when they feel depressed, stressed etc. She also mentioned how people might take a day or two off from school or work because they are physically sick (sore throat) and once they return people ask how they are feeling. However, if someone needs to take a mental health day, and they return saying they were depressed etc., people would tend to be unaccepting and show lack of understanding, which in turn results in stigmas regarding mental health."

From the Child and Youth Care (CYC) student interviews it is clear that their experiences in facilitating the Shaking the Movers conference will be long lasting. When speaking to the students after the conference, the students expressed that they would like to be involved in future conferences. As well they offered to speak to next year's CYC students who will be facilitating in order to share their experiences.

The CYC students were amazing, worked in the moment with the youth and took part in unique youth work. The importance of having CYC students take part in the conference is that not only do they create a safe and trusting space where youth can open up; they also learn so much from listening to the voices of young people.

## Youth Quotes

Throughout the weekend we took note of what the youth had to say through the small group discussions, their presentations, the Shaking the Movers survey and after the conference through Facebook. The youth had a lot to say about the conference and continue to keep in touch via social media. We have created a private Facebook group in order to have the youth keep in touch, share pictures and provide a safe space to continue the conversation on Children's Rights. The site is monitored by the Youth Worker who facilitated the conference and by the CYC students.

Here are some of the quotes shared by the youth attendees:

*"This was my first time getting involved in a youth conference, and I'm really glad I came."*

*"Well Going Back To Sandy tomorrow.....i`m i ready? idk but i really Miss My family :) .....Starting to Miss my Waterloo peeps there funny and coolio and everyone!! new friends .....shout out to miss Sara Hubberstey ...your awesome bra :D thanx for being caring and keep working on your music skills next time we meet i wanna see if you get better then me! and i`ll post my cover on youtube later XD ...and my bro Mauricio Garcia Vidal keep rockin and keep helpin your bud jam next time we meet \m/ OH and Lauren Akbar i can`t thank you enuff for being apart of shaking the movers agin hope i get to go next year :D Thanx miss you to bud :)"*

*"Feels so blessed to have been a part of such an amazing youth event-Shaking the Movers was truly inspirational and such an amazing couple of days!"*

*"About to board the plane back to Thunder Bay, I'm so tired, I cant wait to sleep. Today was awesome, actually told my life story with nobody saying mhm or mine is worse. I couldn't help but cry, everybody was so supportive. I made other people cry too. I felt famous lol a lot of people telling me to sign their stuff. Met some awesome people. Goodnight."*



*"Being at this conference made me see that mental health is not something you can see...I mean it's not physical, it can be anything. I never considered depression to be related to mental health, but this weekend made things a lot more clear for me. I want to tell my friends at school all that I have learned."*

*"Just leaving the conference, I am sad to go now but so happy that I made so many friends here. The biggest thing I learned...I have a voice."*



*"I came to this conference not knowing what to expect, just thinking it was going to be a boring couple of days having people talk to us about children's rights and learn something about mental health. That is not what this conference was at all. I spoke more than I listened, we got to teach each other about mental health, I learned from my friends I made at the conference and I think some of them learned from me too."*

*"It was so nice talking and connecting to other youth who have experienced mental illness and understands what it's like to be misunderstood!"*

*"I learned that I have a voice! J And there are genuinely caring youths out there that want to make a difference."*

*"Shaking the movers was the first conference I have attended, it changed my*

*perspective on so many things and allowed me to see things that I never knew existed. I was really appreciative of the youth who spoke out about their experiences, I have never spoke in front of an audience so to see them do it made me think I could do it one day. I really liked shaking the movers and hope that I can come again next year or maybe volunteer."*

Sharing these youth quotes is important to capture their words about the conference in general. Youth are so willing to share, if they are provided with the space to do that – space not being physical but being mental or emotional. Hearing what the youth had to say about the conference is what continues to motivate change; youth unfortunately don't always get heard, which could prevent them from speaking out—but seeing their quotes shows that this was not the case.



## Lasting Impressions

The youth at Shaking the Movers VI conference were incredibly insightful, willing and open to share their stories, and most significantly, respectful of what their peers had to say. This year's conference was unique in the fact that the content was quite heavy and there were even moments of grave intensity. As a facilitator observing the conference, yet also taking part in the activities it was amazing to see the youth from the beginning to the very end.

The youth from the conference almost entirely came from outside of the Greater Toronto Area; this was due to the fact that we received the majority of our applications from other parts of Ontario. Youth came from Waterloo, London, Kingston, Niagara, Mississauga, Thunder Bay, Sandy Lake, Cambridge, Toronto and Montreal. It was incredible to witness the youth coming from all different places from across Ontario, plus coming from different races, religions, cultures and ethnicities, yet all coming together as a unified group.

Looking back to last year's conference, although it was powerful too, the content was quite different since it was about youth justice. Although the issue of mental health arose last year and this is why we chose the broader theme of the rights of children and youth with mental health concerns for this year's workshop. All of the youth related to this topic in their own way. Many youth disclosed their personal stories and shared some very deep moments in their life; thus it was so important that we had many child and youth workers present and able to support the youth in the moment. We also connected the youth to supports after the conference in order to ensure they are receiving adequate care.

When the conference was finished there was several youth who had a late evening flight and a late bus, so we decided to all go to the Eaton Centre, have dinner and shop. For some youth this was their first time in Toronto and it was a great way to end the weekend. Shaking the Movers 2012 created a Facebook group to allow the youth to stay connected, post about the event (pictures, etc.) and have an avenue for future youth events and opportunities. To see youth interacting on Facebook, some of whom may have never met, was incredible. In fact, youth expressed over Facebook interest to organize a reunion over the summer and asked the facilitator if this would be possible. This was a special conference, as all of the organizers, facilitators and involved supporters were touched by the children and youth, the lessons learned at this conference are from within and will never be forgotten. What the young people shared will be spread as broadly as possible thanks to the many individuals and organizations who have committed themselves to better outcomes for all young people by supporting them through difficult times.



Shaking the Movers would like to thank all of our supporters, including Ryerson University, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, the Landon Pearson Resource Centre and the Public Health Agency of Canada and most importantly all of the youth who attended the conference and opened our eyes and hearts.

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Landon Pearson Resource Centre  
for the Study of Childhood  
and Children's Rights

A735 Loeb Building  
Carleton University  
1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6  
Phone: (613) 520-2600 extension 1453  
[www.landonpearson.ca](http://www.landonpearson.ca)



Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, Ontario M5B 2K3  
416.979.5000

**Provincial Advocate  
for Children & Youth**

**L'intervenant provincial**  
*en faveur des enfants & des jeunes*

401 Bay Street, Suite 2200  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 0A6  
Phone: (416) 325-5669  
Toll-free: 1-800-263-2841  
Fax: (416) 325-5681  
[advocacy@provincialadvocate.on.ca](mailto:advocacy@provincialadvocate.on.ca)

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