

Talking about anxiety stress-free
Introduction to the program

Exploration program
Secondary cycle 1

September 2022



Centre RBC
d'expertise universitaire
en santé mentale



Université de
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Centre intégré
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INTRODUCTION TO THE HORS-PISTE PROGRAM

The mental health of the general population is raising red flags in Quebec and all over the world, prompting us all to make mental health promotion a goal to work toward, for the well-being and development of individuals, communities, and nations (Mantoura *et al.*, 2017). Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health disorders in young people (Costello *et al.*, 2011). In recent years, a number of innovations have been introduced across Quebec to prevent these disorders, although their implementation and use are not systematic (Piché *et al.*, 2017).



With its innovative approach to promoting mental health and preventing anxiety in schools, from preschool to post-secondary, the HORS-PISTE program is hoping to make a difference in that sense. Through the development of psychosocial competencies and the promotion of psychological well-being, this program fosters the development of a coherent continuum of interventions aimed at preventing anxiety disorders, from early childhood to adulthood.

This introduction to the program is intended for those of you who have agreed to facilitate the HORS-PISTE - Exploration program (universal component). Thank you for joining us on this mission to improve the mental health of your students. The purpose of this document is to help you understand the key principles of the HORS-PISTE program by addressing:



- A. The point of the program;
- B. The program's alignment with ministry guidelines;
- C. The approach used to develop the program;
- D. The program's name;
- E. The program's foundations;
- F. The program's fundamental approaches;
- G. The importance of developing students' psychosocial competencies;
- H. The educational approach used;
- I. The importance of offering this program in schools.

It also aims to equip you for the Exploration component of the HORS-PISTE program by introducing you to:

- J. The objectives of the HORS-PISTE - Exploration program, Secondary cycle 1;
- K. The support offered to the program facilitators;
- L. The educational approach taken during in the workshops;
- M. The program content;
- N. The structure of the workshops;
- O. The role of teachers in the program;
- P. The role of parents in the program.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE HORS-PISTE PROGRAM

A. What is the point of the HORS-PISTE program?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health disorders in adolescence (Costello *et al.*, 2011). They appear during early childhood or adolescence, causing a range of functional difficulties that can worsen over the course of a lifetime (Piché *et al.*, 2017).

The prevalence of anxiety disorders in adolescents is cause for concern. Affecting more than 10% of young people, anxiety disorders are among the most common psychopathologies in children and adolescents (Dumas, 2013), and among those that sometimes appear in early childhood, although most often between middle childhood and middle adolescence (Dumas, 2013). In its latest survey, the Institut de la statistique du Québec (2016-2017) found that 17% of high school students say that they have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder by a doctor or other healthcare professional. Finally, anxiety becomes more prevalent with age, with roughly 21% of adults experiencing an anxiety disorder during their lifetime (Dumas, 2013).



An anxiety disorder during adolescence has consequences that are both significant and far-reaching. In fact, anxiety affects a child's judgment (Tardif, 2008) and working memory (Cassady, 2010), and can cause learning difficulties (APA, 2013), ultimately leading to the child dropping out of school (Lapointe and Freiberg, 2007).

Anxiety can also cause low self-esteem, difficulties with social relationships (Charrette, 2012), depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (APA, 2013; Dubé, 2009), eating disorders (Trudeau, 2006), and depression (Marcotte, 2013). Anxiety disorders can also precede—sometimes by several years—the onset of a panic disorder, depressive disorder, alcohol, drug, or tobacco abuse, and a higher risk of contemplating suicide and committing suicide (Dumas, 2013).

The situation is becoming especially alarming given that most young people with anxiety suffer in silence, isolate themselves, and withdraw socially (Lambert-Samson, 2016). The situation is so dire that 70% of children and adolescents with an anxiety disorder have never received professional help (Bosquet and Egeland, 2006).

B. How does the HORS-PISTE program align with ministry guidelines?

The HORS-PISTE program is fully aligned with MSSS guidelines, including:

- The **2015-2020 Mental Health Action Plan**, because the HORS-PISTE program reinforces the continuum of services for young people (Measure 4), improves access mechanisms and service trajectories to meet the needs of young people (Measure 5), implements promotion and prevention measures in the school setting (Measure 9), and identifies and provides early support and intervention to vulnerable young people (Measure 14);
- The **new ÉKIP reference framework** to promote the health, well-being, and educational success of young people, because the HORS-PISTE program helps to develop the psychosocial competencies targeted by this reference framework as being critical to mental health promotion;
- The **Politique gouvernementale de prévention en santé**, because the HORS-PISTE program promotes the development of personal capacities from an early age (Orientation 1) and promotes the strengthening of preventive actions in the health and social services system (Orientation 4).

The HORS-PISTE program is aligned with the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur's *Québec Education Program* (QEP), because it plays a role in building up the focuses of development (self-knowledge and awareness of basic needs, awareness of the consequences of personal choices, active lifestyle and safe behaviour) and certain cross-curricular competencies (constructs identity, achieves potential, cooperates with others, uses creativity, communicates appropriately, solves problems, exercise critical judgment, uses information, uses information and communication technologies [ICT]).

C. What approach was used to develop the HORS-PISTE program?

The program was developed by Université de Sherbrooke's Centre RBC d'expertise universitaire en santé mentale for children, adolescents, and young adults. Its mission is to promote collaboration between disciplines and sectors and to pool community expertise in order to meet the needs of children, adolescents, and young adults diagnosed with or at risk of developing mental health problems. The approach used to develop each of its projects, including the HORS-PISTE program, is shown in Figure 4.

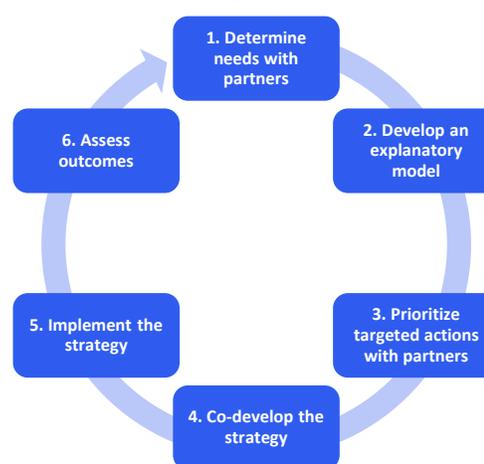


Figure 4. Approach used to develop the HORS-PISTE program

This approach is used to develop projects that correspond to identified needs and that are based on the scientific/experiential knowledge of the stakeholders involved in co-constructing projects and adapting them to their specific settings. It is also used to assess the implementation and outcomes of projects, which can then be adjusted on a continuous basis.

In addition to being based on good practices, the HORS-PISTE program was co-constructed by a number of people on various committees (see acknowledgements section). These committees are made up of parents, school administrators, representatives of community organizations, professionals and managers from the health and social services network (HSSN), school counsellors, teachers, students, researchers, university students, etc. In particular, the HORS-PISTE program encourages stakeholders from the education network and the HSSN to join forces to address anxiety disorders in young people.

D. Why HORS-PISTE as the program name?



Pythagoras once said: “Leave the roads; take the trails.”! HORS-PISTE represents the road less travelled that we want the students to embark on—the trail that few skiers or hikers ever dare to venture down. Taking the road less travelled means taking risks, trying new solutions, and thinking about things from a different angle. Despite the risks, this trail provides opportunities to discover new things, challenge the status quo, and explore personal strengths and limits.

The HORS-PISTE program draws its inspiration from this concept. The workshops encourage students to take risks and face their challenges. The workshops give them an opportunity to explore uncharted territory, to test new ways of dealing with their challenges and problems, to recognize their strengths and limits, etc. With your valuable support as a facilitator, the workshops will help them test new ways to approach life with confidence, compassion, and perseverance.

E. What are the foundations of the HORS-PISTE program?

Using an ecological approach, a concept map was developed based on a literature review (Fournier and Pauzé, 2016) on risk and protective factors associated with anxiety disorders in adolescence (Pauzé, 2017). The HORS-PISTE program was developed based on this concept map, with a view to addressing the determining factors. Although this map was designed based on literature about adolescence, it is still helpful in understanding the preventive factors that need to be addressed as early as preschool. This concept map, comprised of several figures, illustrates (see Figure 1, which shows part of the map): 1) the main categories of associated risk factors; 2) the biological, temperamental, psychological, and cognitive risk factors associated with anxiety; 3) the associated social risk factors; and 4) the associated family risk factors.

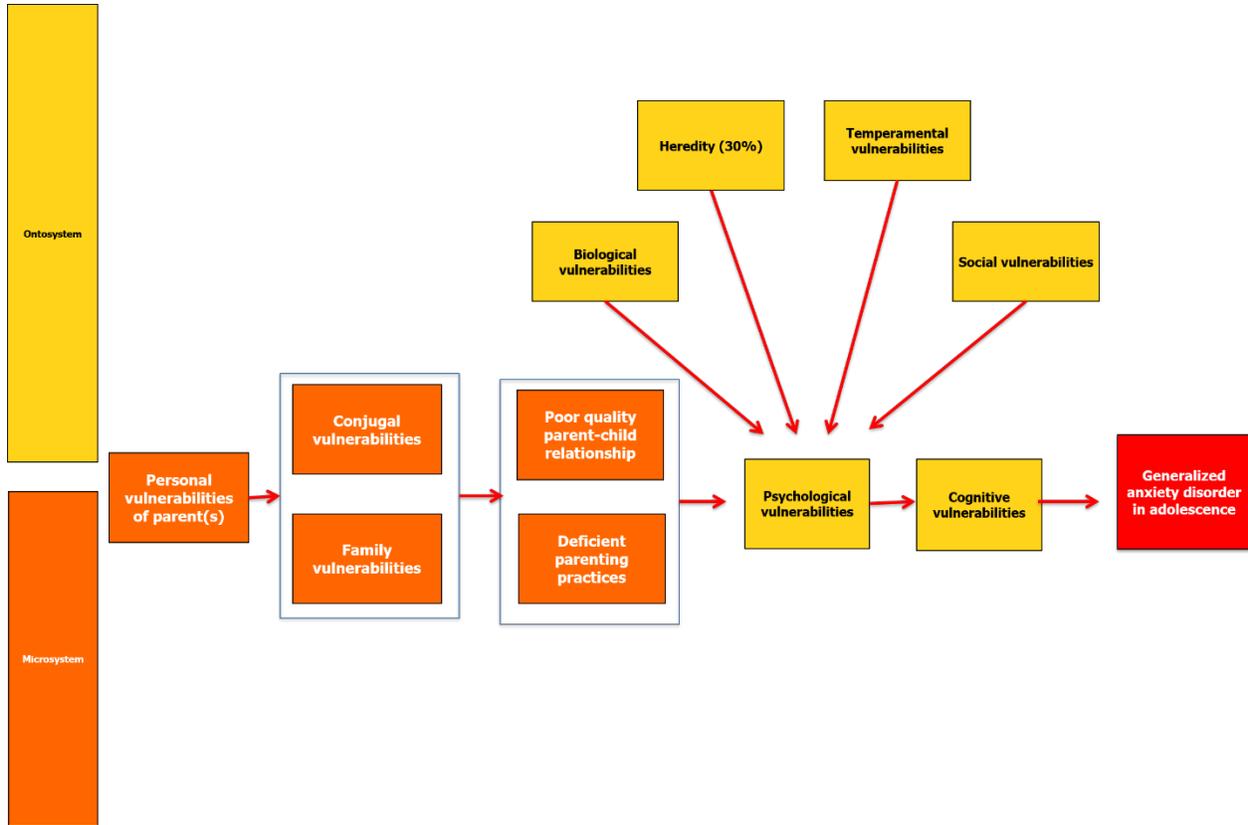


Figure 1. Main categories of risk factors associated with anxiety disorders in adolescence

This literature review also provided insight into the mechanics of anxiety disorders in adolescence (see Figure 2). The factors identified could be considered targets for prevention, early intervention, and specialized intervention programs.

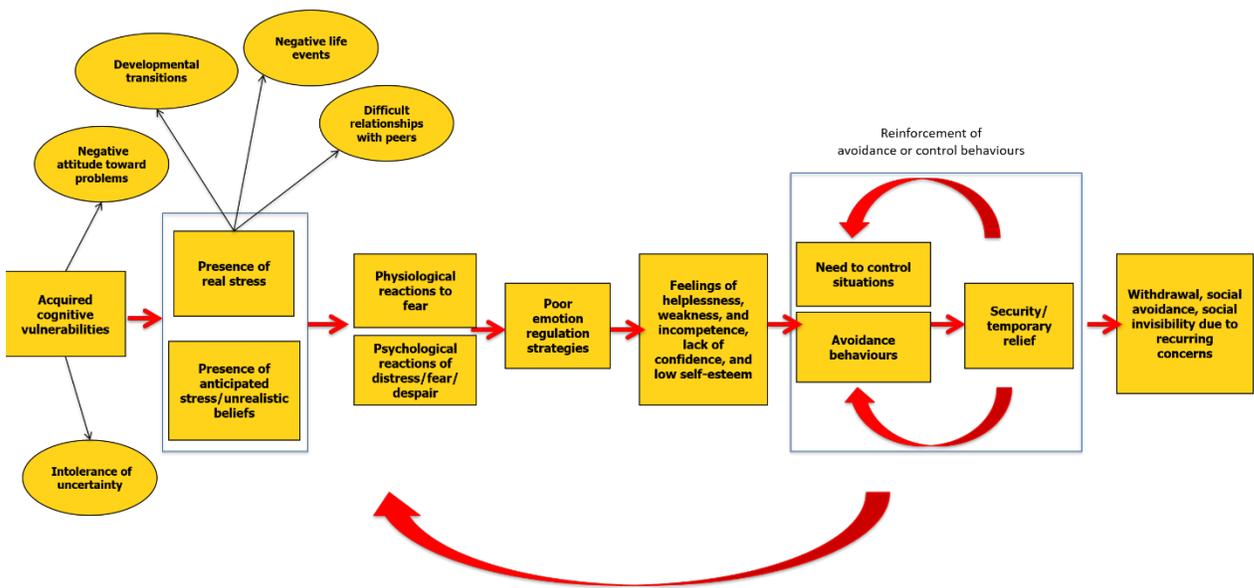


Figure 2. Mechanics of anxiety disorders in adolescence

Based on our literature reviews, we drew up the following profile of a young person: inhibited temperament, low level of emotion regulation capacity, insecure attachment style, low self-esteem, low level of social competence, negative attitude toward problems, intolerance of uncertainty, overprotective parenting practices, and exposure to anxiety-provoking stimuli. The major precipitating factors for these disorders include negative events, environmental stress, day-to-day and relationship problems, drug use, etc.

The Centre RBC also carried out a thorough review of evidence-based stress and anxiety prevention programs in adolescence (Houle, 2017). In addition to this review, a survey of programs for primary school students was also done. This review consisted in a critical survey of the school-based anxiety disorder prevention programs currently available for secondary and primary school students; it led to various findings:

- the programs that take a cognitive-behavioural approach generally address the greatest number of risk and protective factors and are shown to be the most effective;
- few programs are multi-modal and offer activities that relate to the student, their family, and the school;
- most of the programs are offered in group settings, during class time, and almost all the programs identified incorporate breathing and relaxation techniques.

This literature review also identified the main targets of the prevention programs, based on the risk factors (see Figure 3). This review was completed with a survey of psychosocial competency development programs. These reviews served as the basis for developing the program.

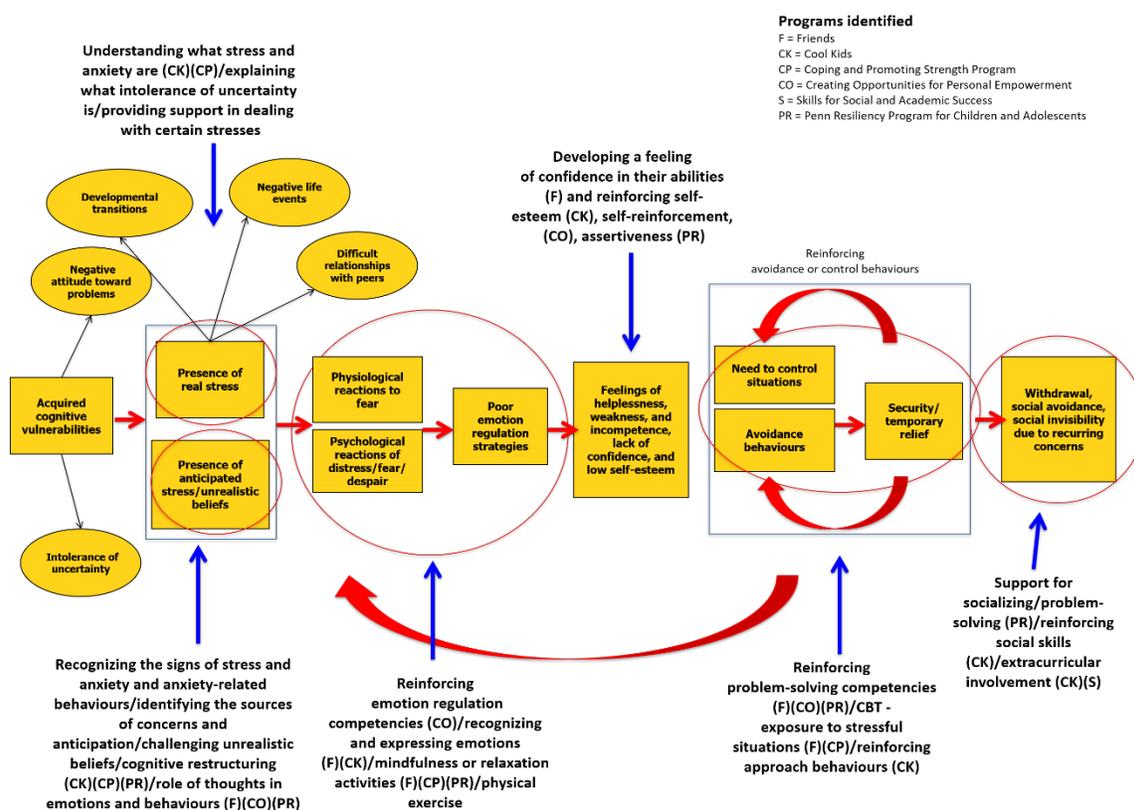


Figure 3. Main targets of the prevention programs surveyed

The Centre RBC also drew up a portrait of the population in order to better tailor the HORS-PISTE program to the reality of Québec secondary school students. A total of 8,690 students, from secondary 1 to 5, and from 14 secondary schools across Québec, participated in this extensive data collection exercise at two separate times, namely in winter 2018 and fall 2018. The data collection was used to draw up a portrait of secondary students in terms of their personal, family, social, and academic characteristics. It also revealed some key highlights. As such, up to 1) 45% of students report having difficulties related to hyperactivity, inattention, or emotions; 2) 29% of students say they are worried about being judged by others; 3) 26% of students say they have low self-esteem; 4) 23% of students report having symptoms related to social phobia; 5) 22% of students say they have symptoms related to generalized anxiety disorder, and 5) 38% of students say that anxiety has an impact on their school, social, daily, or family activities.

F. What approaches is the program based on?

The HORS-PISTE program workshops are based on the cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approach. This approach has been proven effective in anxiety disorders, in terms of prevention and early intervention (Turgeon and Gosselin, 2015; Werner-Seidler *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, the program is based on third-wave CBT approaches, integrating a number of mindfulness activities (among others) and encouraging students to examine the relationship between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. This approach is based on the interaction between these three elements. The techniques used in this approach help the students to realize that their fundamental beliefs and various cognitive processes form the basis of the automatic thoughts that then influence their emotions and actions (Beck, 2011). In concrete terms, the HORS-PISTE program workshops encourage the students to:

- realize that their thoughts are not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality. The students are encouraged to develop the habit of observing their thoughts, not immediately jumping to conclusions, and questioning their beliefs;
- de-dramatize the situation and place more emphasis on exploring their automatic thoughts and their beliefs, especially when they are wrong.

Mindfulness is the central theme of several of the workshops. Mindfulness is “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). More precisely, living mindfully means being aware and fully present for the various moments of one’s life. There are many benefits to a mindfulness practice: better communication, more highly developed senses, better stress and emotional management, more conducive learning conditions, and quality relationships (Keng, Smoski and Robins, 2011).



G. Why is it equally important to develop students’ psychosocial competencies?

The psychosocial competencies at the centre of the HORS-PISTE program are based on those proposed by Guerra and Bradshaw (2008), Mangrulkar *et al.* (2001), the World Health Organization (1997), and the MSSS’s new reference framework *ÉKIP: Health, Well-Being and Educational Success of Young People*, the successor to *Approche École en santé*. “Psychosocial competence is a person’s

ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It is a person's ability to maintain a state of mental well-being and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behaviour while interacting with others, their culture, and environment." (WHO, 1997, p. 7). Fostering the development of these competencies in the students leads to the fulfilment of every child's right to health and education so that they may achieve their full potential and participate in society (WHO, 2003).

Psychosocial competencies are recognized as determinants of health and well-being (Luis and Lamboy, 2015). Developing these competencies in the students is conducive to their overall development (e.g., increased sense of well-being, decreased substance use, decreased violent behaviour, etc.) (INPES, 2015).

In June 2020, in its Notice to the Minister of Education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation stressed the importance of developing these competencies in order to foster social adaptation and students' subsequent academic success.



H. What educational approach do the workshops take?

In terms of the development of psychosocial competencies, the HORS-PISTE program is made up of participatory workshops. The main goal of the workshops is to resonate with the students' lived experience, and to draw links between their life experiences, strengths, knowledge, and interests, and the chosen theme and target competency. The workshops are designed to awaken the students' existing knowledge and to supplement it, as needed, in order to encourage interaction, active participation, reflection, and action.

To implement this bottom-up, humanistic approach, you—as the workshop leader—will be asked to assume the role of an empathetic guide, showing proof of empathy, active listening, sensitivity to the students' experiences, kindness and compassion, encouraging other students to share their experiences (IREPS, 2018; World Health Organization, 2003).

You will also need to make sure the students understand your educational intentions and the importance of each program activity, which you will explain in plain language.

I. Why offer this program in schools?

School is one of the most pivotal settings in which young people develop their psychosocial competencies. According to the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, "For preschool and primary school children, school is certainly a place of learning, a place to be educated; but school and its "peripheral settings" are also a veritable living environment, where they can grow, construct their identity, develop their values, and learn to live in a society" (2020, p. 30).

School is also an ecosystem conducive to the development of social identity and friendships. It has been shown that the number of friends, and where they come from, are directly influenced by the school environment in which the students are developing (Bernier *et al.*, 1998). The school setting provides opportunities for socialization, given that its compulsory nature requires students to socialize with others on a daily basis (Bernier *et al.*, 1998). This underscores the importance of teaching young people how to form social relationships, which are both inevitable and critical to their well-being at school.

HORS-PISTE - EXPLORATION PROGRAM, Secondary cycle 1

As you know, adolescence comes with a number of developmental challenges. Adolescents go through a number of physical, psychological, family, and social changes. This stage of life is characterized by a succession of changes that can spark concerns, stress, and anxiety for both adolescents and their parents. For all these reasons, adolescence is an opportune and crucial time to learn how to deal with uncertainty, especially since it corresponds to the time when anxiety disorders begin to develop (Claes, 2005).

J. What are the objectives of the HORS-PISTE program?

The general program objective is to lessen the risk factors related to anxiety and to strengthen the protective factors through the promotion of mental health and the development of psychosocial competencies. More specifically, the short-term objective of the HORS-PISTE program is to develop and promote the following psychosocial competencies, which are determinants of health and well-being.

1. Adaptation and stress management
2. Self-knowledge and self-acceptance
3. Emotional regulation
4. Assertiveness
5. Communication
6. Problem-solving
7. Empathizing
8. Adoption of prosocial behaviour
9. Critical thinking



By fostering the development and promotion of these competencies, the HORS-PISTE program aims, in the medium term, to elicit effects, including preventing:

- symptoms related to anxiety disorders (fear of being judged by others, perfectionism, negative thoughts and feelings, intolerance of uncertainty);
- other problems related to anxiety (internet addiction, difficulties related to emotional symptoms, difficulties related to behavioural disorders, difficulties related to hyperactivity and inattention, mood disorders, difficulties related to problems with peers, impact of anxiety on school, social, daily, or family activities).

K. What support is offered to the program facilitators?

An HORS-PISTE website was created for quick and easy access to all the program materials (<https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/hors-piste/>). Among other things, you'll find workshops to be given in class, PowerPoint presentations for each workshop (for use as visual aids), printable worksheets, emails to send to parents and teachers, summary sheets for each workshop,

information sheets on stress and anxiety for parents and teachers, etc.

You will also receive a half-day of basic training, in person, before the start of the workshops. The training consists of a detailed presentation of the HORS-PISTE program, and will also prepare you to lead the workshops by explaining the position and tone you should adopt during your presentations. It will also provide you with more information about mindfulness. Depending on your needs, you will also be able to consult a series of webinars along the way. Moreover, throughout the HORS-PISTE program, the implementation support team at the CISSS de la Montérégie-Centre will be available for one-on-one consultations, as needed.

L. What does the program consist of?

The HORS-PISTE - Exploration program, Secondary cycle 1, consists of 10 workshops, usually given over two school years, starting in secondary cycle 1. All the workshops are designed to be given during a 40-to-60-minute class period (depending on the time available at each school).

Each workshop addresses a main theme, which usually relates to a challenge or an issue encountered during adolescence, and which is tied into one or more specific competencies to be developed. Here are the workshop topics:



Workshops 1-5

1. Coping with my stress
2. Dealing with my anxiety
3. Learning to manage my emotions and ask for help
4. Coping with comparisons by looking inward
5. Dealing with peer pressure by learning to assert myself

Workshops 6-10

6. Building my self-esteem by figuring out who I am
7. Fighting judgment with tolerance and compassion
8. Preventing conflict by communicating clearly
9. Maintaining healthy friendships through prosocial behaviour
10. Using social media wisely thanks to my critical thinking skills



M. How is each workshop structured?

All of the workshops are structured in the same way and include:

- a summary table of the targeted competencies (ÉKIP, WHO), cross-curricular competencies (QEP), and overall objectives of the workshop;

- a section indicating the total duration of the workshop and a section on the material and preparation.

The next section marks the beginning of the workshop with the presentation of the first activity. The estimated presentation time (in minutes) is indicated for each workshop activity. You can take more or less time, depending on how your presentation is going and how much time you have available.

Generally, the first workshop activity is a warm-up (icebreaker). The topic is often introduced in a funny way, in an attempt to break through the taboos and engage the students.

The goal of the second activity is generally to establish links between the first activity and more theoretical knowledge, which the students need to acquire. In some places, the theoretical concepts are accompanied by bubbles in the margins labelled “Digging deeper.” This is extra information to help you better understand the theory or to explore the concepts in more detail with certain groups of students, when you feel this is appropriate.

After that, you’ll find the central workshop activity, which is often highly participatory, allowing students to put the theory into practice. This is when you will encourage the students to make connections between the theory, the targeted competencies, and their own lives. This is a pivotal step. Making connections with their own experiences allows the students to solidify the theory and fully master the targeted competency. The activities in this section are varied: role playing, scenarios, group discussions and debates, videos, etc.

This is followed by an empowerment activity, where you ask students to identify strategies for dealing with the topic at hand. A list of strategies is generally provided to supplement the students’ strategies.

Finally, the workshop ends with the “HORS-PISTE challenge.” This is when you ask the students to think about a real-life situation related to the workshop topic and to come up with strategies for dealing with it.

Since September 2021, videos starring our two main characters, Sacha and Nadège, have been incorporated into the HORS-PISTE workshops. The purpose of these videos is to introduce the workshop theme in a fun way that captures the students’ attention and piques their interest by portraying a common issue during adolescence. They are also meant to help the facilitators understand and present the material by summarizing the theoretical information. The HORS-PISTE challenges are also presented to the students in the videos.

Mindfulness, as mentioned earlier, is introduced in a cross-curricular manner in all the workshops, without necessarily being the subject of a formal activity. Depending on how each workshop unfolds, the principles of mindfulness are sometimes used to get students to take a step back, breathe, and consider their experience from the perspective of the activity in progress (especially in workshops 1-5), and sometimes to engage in a more concrete meditation exercise (especially in workshops 6-10).



O. What role do teachers play in implementing the program?

Teachers play a key role in the development of students’ academic competencies, but also in their psychosocial competencies. The quality of their relationship with the students, and their teaching,

evaluation, and classroom management practices have a significant impact on the students' well-being (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2020).

Teachers can play two crucial roles in delivering the program. Some will be actively involved in presenting the workshops in class. The existing relationship between the teacher and their students will encourage the latter to actively participate in the workshops. Giving the workshops also helps the teachers to improve their knowledge of the content, to learn new strategies for helping students, and to reinvest the knowledge by reusing the content and strategies covered in various day-to-day activities. Other teachers can also play a role in reinvesting and generalizing the knowledge by reading the workshop content (e.g., the summary sheets) and sharing what they learned with their students.

P. What role do parents play in implementing the program?

In its June 2020 Notice to the Minister of Education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation stressed the importance of working with parents to develop students' psychosocial competencies, including stress and anxiety management. It reiterated that "parents are the most important adults in a child's life and the primary stewards of their development" (p. 33) and that cooperation between parents and the school should be of primary importance.

At the very beginning and very end of the program, an information email will be sent to the parents of the students participating in the program, outlining the program objectives and workshops (topics covered and competencies to be developed). Parents will also have access to certain sections of the website if they would like to find out more about what their children are learning and be able to reinvest the knowledge.