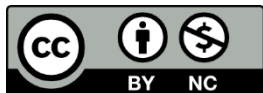


# Talking About Anxiety Without Stress

Complete Facilitation Guide

Preschool-Primary Program

August 2024



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### KEY PLAYERS IN DESIGNING AND WRITING

**The OFF-TRAIL preschool-primary program** was designed and written by: Joelle Lepage (Coordinator, Centre RBC), Marie-Christine Morin (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Annick Maltais (Coordinator, Centre RBC), Sébastien Ratté (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Audrey Guy (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Audrey Dupuis (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Danyka Therriault (Coordinator, Centre RBC), Sonia Vachon (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Émilie St-Onge (APPR<sup>1</sup>, CISSSMC<sup>2</sup>), Caroline Marcoux (APPR, CISSSMC), Valérie Serres (APPR, CISSSMC), Marie-Ève Leblanc-Roy (APPR, CISSMC), Audrey April (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Simon Leduc-Thouin (Research Professional, Centre RBC), Clémence Vandycke (Research Assistant, Centre RBC), Élise Dion (Reading Development Officer, PRÉE project), Natacha Condo (Health Prevention and Promotion Advisor, CISSS de Lanaudière) and Éliane Trudel (Special Educator, École du Versant-de-la-Batiscan). Many activities were also inspired by the *Manuel d'éducation à la santé psychologique*, (a psychological health education manual) created by Marc Belisle (professor, USherbrooke).

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**The mindfulness section was designed and written** by Marie-Christine Morin (kinesiology student, USherbrooke) and Félix Berrigan (professor, USherbrooke).

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<sup>3</sup> AVSEC = School and Community Life Facilitator (Animatrice à la vie scolaire et communautaire)

<sup>4</sup> CSRC = Commission scolaire de la région-de-Sherbrooke (a school board covering the Sherbrooke region)

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE OFF-TRAIL PROGRAM



The mental health of the entire population is an issue of great concern in Québec, across Canada and around the world, which invites us all to make the promotion of mental health a goal to be pursued for the well-being and development of individuals, communities and nations (Mantoura et al., 2017). Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders in young people (Costello et al., 2011). In recent years, many innovations have been implemented in various regions of Québec to prevent these disorders, but they were not being systematically used or implemented (Piché et al., 2017).

The OFF-TRAIL program aims to make a difference in this respect. It is an innovative approach to mental health promotion and anxiety prevention in schools, from preschool to post-secondary. By developing psychosocial skills and promoting psychological well-being, this program makes it possible to develop a consistent continuum of interventions aimed at preventing anxiety disorders, from early childhood through to adulthood.

This introduction to the program is for those of you who have agreed to facilitate the OFF-TRAIL preschool-primary program. THANK YOU sincerely for joining forces with us in our mission to contribute to the mental health of our students. This document is designed to help you understand the governing principles of the OFF-TRAIL program by covering:

- The program's relevance;
- The program's consistency with Québec ministerial guidelines;
- The approach used to develop the program;
- The title of the program;
- The foundations of the program;
- Approaches central to the program;
- The importance of developing students' psychosocial skills;
- The educational approach used;
- The importance of rolling out this program in schools;
- The role of teachers in the program;
- The role of parents in the program.



It also aims to equip you for the preschool-primary component of the OFF-TRAIL program by presenting:

- The objectives of the preschool-primary OFF-TRAIL program;
- Resources available for program coordinators;
- The program's content;
- The workshops' structure.



To comply with USherbrooke writing standards, epicene writing (which equitably recognizes the presence of women and men) was preferred in the development of OFF-TRAIL material. On the other hand, in order to simplify the text and preserve the special meaning of certain words, parentheses are used in certain exceptions: summary sheets given to students, parents and school staff; *verbatim* scripts to be used by facilitators, *PowerPoint*-type presentations.

## GOVERNING PRINCIPLES OF THE OFF-TRAIL PROGRAM

### What is the relevance of the OFF-TRAIL program?

**Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders among young people** (Costello et al., 2011). They occur early in development in childhood or adolescence and cause various functional difficulties that can worsen over the course of their lives (Piché et al., 2017).

**The prevalence of anxiety disorders is a matter of serious concern.** Affecting over 10% of young people, anxiety disorders are among the most frequent psychopathologies of childhood and adolescence (Dumas, 2013). In some cases, they appear early in childhood, but more often between mid-childhood and mid-adolescence (Dumas, 2013). In its latest survey, the Institut de la statistique du Québec mentioned (2016-2017) that 17% of high school students report that a doctor or health specialist has confirmed they have an anxiety disorder. In addition, the prevalence of anxiety increases with age: it's estimated that around 21% of adults will experience an anxiety disorder during their lifetime (Dumas, 2013).

**The consequences of anxiety disorders are significant and far-reaching.** Indeed, anxiety affects a child's judgment (Tardif, 2008), working memory (Cassady, 2010) and can lead to learning difficulties (APA, 2013) that can ultimately lead to dropping out (Lapointe & Freiberg, 2007).

Anxiety can also lead to 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). What's more, anxiety disorders precede, sometimes by several years, the onset of panic disorder, depressive disorder, alcohol, drug or tobacco abuse, and higher risks of contemplating suicide and committing suicide (Dumas, 2013).



The situation is becoming alarming as it becomes apparent that most anxious young people suffer in silence, isolating themselves and becoming socially invisible (Lambert-Samson, 2016). The situation is such that 70% of children and adolescents with anxiety disorders have never received professional care (Bosquet & Egeland, 2006).

### How does the OFF-TRAIL program fit in with ministerial guidelines?

The OFF-TRAIL program is fully consistent with) MSSS<sup>5</sup> guidelines, including:

- The 2015-2020 Mental Health Action Plan, since the OFF-TRAIL program strengthens the continuum of services for young people (measure 4), improves access mechanisms and service trajectories to meet young people's needs (measure 5), deploys promotion and prevention actions in the school context (measure 9) and detecting vulnerable young people by offering them early intervention (measure 14);
- The new ÉKIP reference framework: interacting for the health, well-being and educational success of young people, since the OFF-TRAIL program helps develop several psychosocial skills targeted by this framework as keys to promoting mental health;
- The government's health prevention policy, since the OFF-TRAIL program promotes the development of people's abilities from an early age (guideline 1) and encourages the strengthening of preventive actions in the health and social services system (guideline 4).

The OFF-TRAIL program is also consistent with the Québec Education Program (QEP) of the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ) , since it contributes to developing the axes of development (self-awareness and basic needs, awareness of the consequences of personal choices, active lifestyle and safe behaviour) and certain cross-curricular student skills (structuring their identity, realizing their potential, cooperating, using creative thinking, appropriate communication, problem solving, critical judgment), using information, using information and communication technologies (ICT)).

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<sup>5</sup> Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec (MSSS), Québec's health and social services ministry

## What approach was used to develop the OFF-TRAIL program?

The program was developed by USherbrooke's Centre RBC d'expertise universitaire en santé mentale. Its mission is to foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration and pool the community's expertise to meet the needs of children, adolescents and young adults presenting or at risk of presenting mental health problems. The approach used to develop each of these projects, including the OFF-TRAIL program, is shown in Figure 1.

This approach makes it possible to develop projects that are consistent with needs and that draw on the scientific and experiential knowledge of the players involved in the co-construction and adaptation to the context. It also makes it possible to evaluate the implementation and effects of projects, so that adjustments can be made on an ongoing basis.

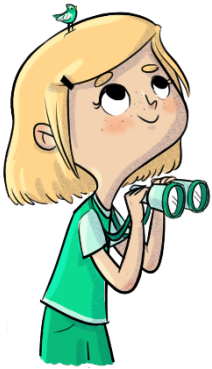
In addition to drawing inspiration from best practices, the OFF-TRAIL program was co-constructed by numerous people participating on various committees (see the Acknowledgements section, above). These committees are made up of parents, students, school principals, representatives of community organizations, professionals and managers from the health and social services network (HSSN), researchers, university students, teachers, school and HSSN workers, etc. The OFF-TRAIL program in particular invites members of the HSSN's education network to join forces to combat anxiety disorders in young people. The OFF-TRAIL program is a special invitation to the players in the HSSN education network to join forces to counter anxiety disorders in young people.



**Figure 1.** Approach used to develop the program

## Why is OFF-TRAIL the program title?

“Leave the road, take the trails” said Pythagoras! OFF-TRAIL represents that unusual path we want students to take. A trail that few people dare to take, whether skiing or hiking. Taking an OFF-TRAIL path means taking risks, trying new solutions and adopting new ways of thinking! Despite these risks, these trails offer opportunities to make new discoveries, challenge oneself and learn about one's strengths and limitations.



The OFF-TRAIL program is intended to be just this. The workshops invite students to take risks and face their challenges. The workshops encourage them to try new paths, try new solutions to deal with their challenges and problems, recognize their strengths and limitations, and so on. Thanks to your invaluable contribution as a facilitator, the workshops will guide them toward new ways of approaching life with confidence, goodwill and perseverance.

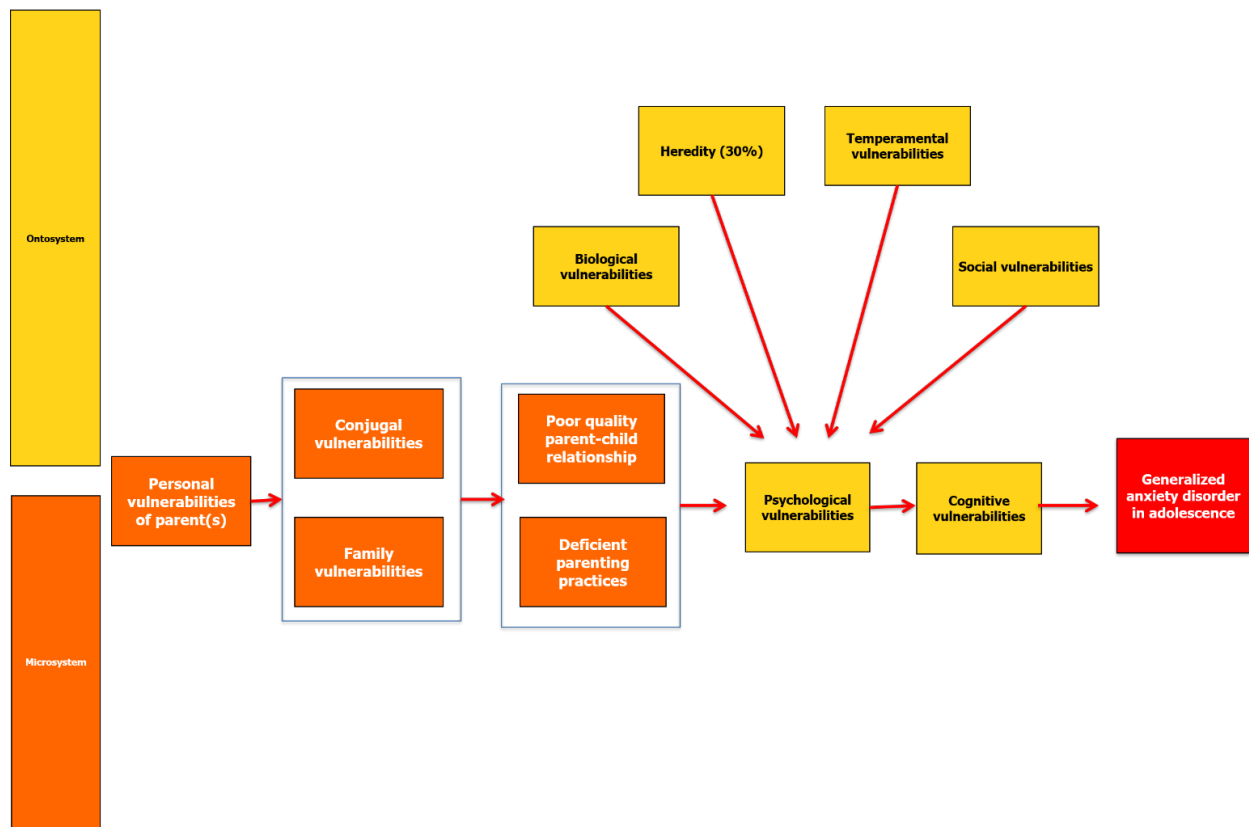
## What are the foundations of the OFF-TRAIL program?

**A conceptual map was developed, using an ecological approach, based on a review of the literature (Fournier & Pauzé, 2016) on the risk and protective factors associated with anxiety disorders in adolescence (Pauzé, 2017).**

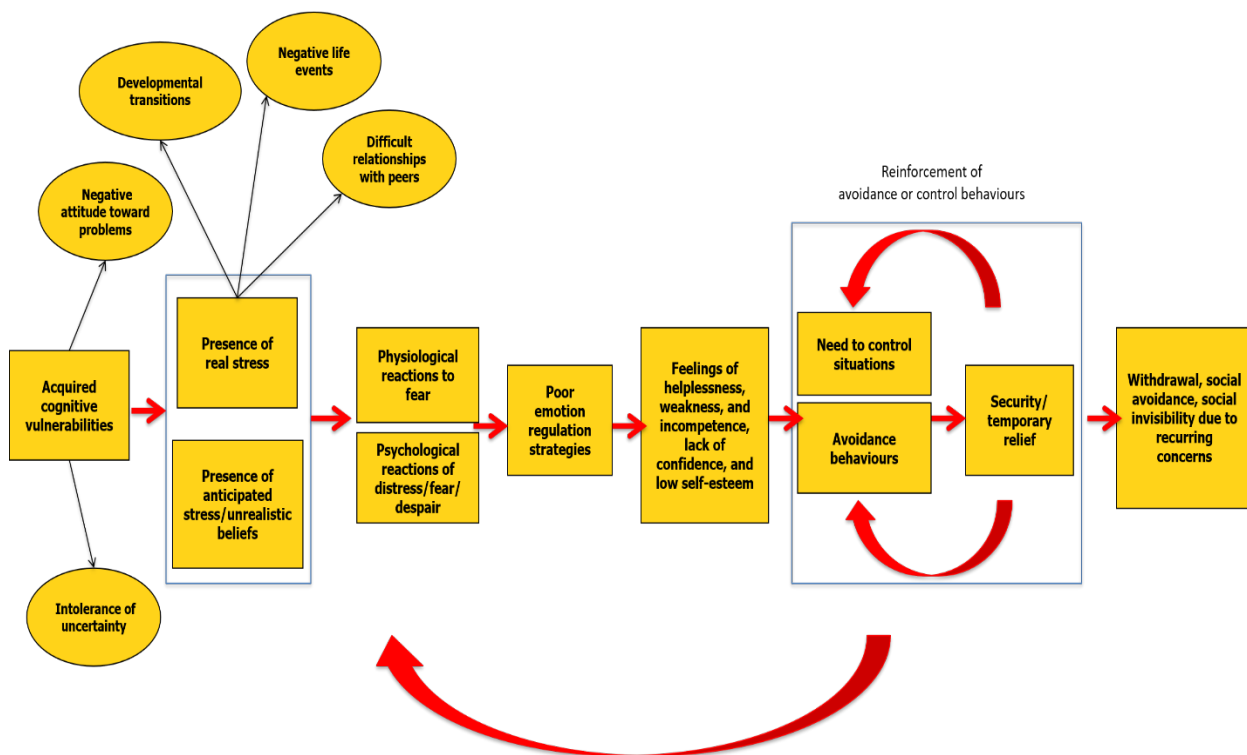
The OFF-TRAIL program was developed with this conceptual map in mind, in order to act on the determinant factors. Although this map is based on the literature on adolescence, it is still relevant to understanding the factors that need to be addressed beginning in pre-school prevention. This conceptual map, developed into several figures, illustrates (see Figure 2, 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.

**This review of the literature also led to a better understanding of the mechanics of anxiety disorders in adolescence (see Figure 3).**

These factors are all targets for prevention, early intervention and specialized intervention programs.



**Figure 2.** Main categories of risk factors associated with anxiety disorders in adolescence



**Figure 3.** Mechanics of anxiety disorders in adolescence.

### **A profile of these young people emerges from our reviews**

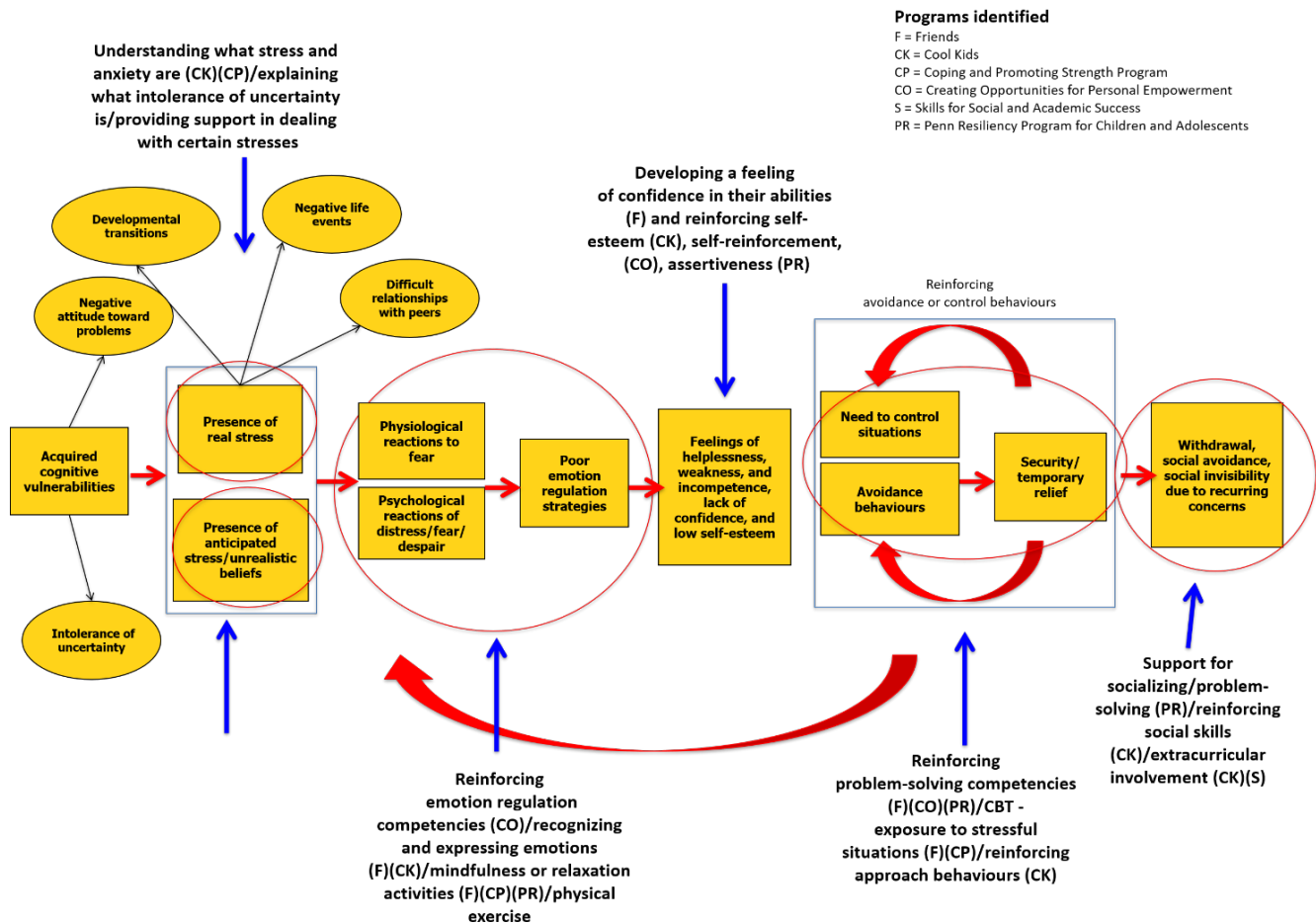
Inhibited temperament, poor emotional regulation ability, insecure attachment, low self-esteem, poor social skills, negative attitude toward problems, intolerance of uncertainty, overprotective parenting and exposure to anxiety-provoking stimuli. Among the main precipitating factors for these disorders are experiencing negative events (accidents, losses, bereavements), environmental stresses, daily and relational difficulties, drug use, and so on.

### **A rigorous review of successful programs to prevent stress and anxiety in adolescence was also conducted by the Centre RBC (Houle, 2017)**

In addition to this review, we also carried out a survey of programs aimed at primary school pupils. This review took a critical look at the programs currently available for the prevention of anxiety disorders in secondary and primary school students in the school environment and led to various findings:

- Programs using the cognitive-behavioural approach are generally those that cover the greatest number of risk and protective factors and whose effectiveness has been best demonstrated;
- Few programs are multimodal, offering activities that involve the young person, their family and their school;
- The majority of programs are offered in groups, during school hours, and almost all of them use breathing and relaxation techniques.

This literature review also identified the main targets of prevention programs, based on the risk factors (see Figure 4). This review was complemented by a review of psychosocial skills development programs. These various reviews were used to draw up the program.



**Figure 4.** Main targets of identified prevention programs.

A population portrait was also produced by the Centre RBC to better align the OFF-TRAIL program with the reality of Québec high school students. A total of 8,690 students, from Secondary 1 to Secondary 5 (grade 7 to 11) and from 14 Québec high schools took part in this vast data collection, at two separate times, namely in winter 2018 and in fall 2018. This data collection was used to draw up a portrait of high school students in terms of their personal, family, social and academic characteristics. It also highlighted the following key facts. Up to 1) 45% of students report experiencing difficulties related to hyperactivity, inattention or emotions; 2) 29% of students report being afraid of the judgment of others; 3) 26% of students report having low self-esteem; 4) 23% of students report having symptoms related to social phobia; 5) 22% of students report having symptoms related to generalized anxiety; and 6) 38% of students report that anxiety has an impact on their school or social activities, or on their daily and family activities.

## What approaches are central to the program?

The OFF-TRAIL program uses a cognitive-behavioural approach in its workshops. The effectiveness of this approach has been demonstrated in the context of prevention and early intervention concerning anxiety issues (Turgeon & Gosselin, 2015; Werner-Seidler et al., 2017). More specifically, the program is inspired by the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of the cognitive-behavioural approach, incorporating a number of mindfulness activities and focusing on young people's awareness of the link between their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. This approach is based on the interaction between these three elements. The techniques used in this approach make it possible to realize that students' fundamental beliefs and their various cognitive processes are at the root of automatic thoughts that in turn influence their emotions and actions (Beck, 2011). In concrete terms, as part of the OFF-TRAIL program, the workshops invite students to:

- Realize that their thoughts are not necessarily a faithful reflection of reality. They are encouraged to develop the habit of observing their thoughts, not immediately jumping to conclusions, and questioning their beliefs;
- De-dramatize and value the exploration of their automatic thoughts and beliefs, especially when they are erroneous.

Mindfulness is central to many workshops. Mindfulness is that awareness that the individual develops by paying attention to his or her experience, at every moment, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). More precisely, living mindfully means being there, present in the different moments of your life. The benefits of a mindfulness practice are manifold: improved communication, development of the senses, better management of stress and emotions, a more favourable learning climate, maintenance of quality relationships (Keng et al., 2011).

## Why is it so important to develop students' psychosocial skills?

The psychosocial skills central to the OFF-TRAIL program are inspired by those proposed by Guerra & Bradshaw (2008), Mangrulkar et al. (2001), the World Health Organization (1993) and those proposed by the new ÉKIP framework – interaction for the health, well-being and educational success of young people – from the MSSS, which takes up the torch from the Healthy School approach.





“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, his/her culture and environment.” (WHO, 1997, p. 1). Fostering the development of these skills in pupils helps to realize every child's right to health and education, so that they can achieve their full potential and participate in society (WHO, 2003).

Psychosocial skills are recognized as determinants of health and well-being (Luis & Lamboy, 2015). Developing these skills in students promotes their overall development (e.g. increased well-being, reduced substance use, less violent behavior, etc.) (INPES, 2015).

In June 2020, in an advisory report to the minister of education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE) reiterated the importance of developing these skills in students to foster social adaptation and subsequent academic success.

### **What is the educational approach used in the workshops?**

To develop psychosocial skills, OFF-TRAIL offers participative workshops. The main aim of the workshops is to resonate with the students' lived experience, mobilizing their life experience, strengths, knowledge and interests around the targeted skill. Workshops are designed to activate knowledge that students have already mastered and to supplement it as needed, to encourage interaction, active participation, reflection and action.

In order for this non-top-down, humanistic approach to be implemented, you are invited to be an empathetic guide in your facilitation by making use of your empathy, active listening, sensitivity to students' lived experiences, benevolence and compassion, which will enable you to encourage other students to share their experiences (IREPS, 2018; World Health Organization, 2003).

Finally, you'll also be responsible for ensuring that young people understand your educational intentions and the importance of each activity in simple, accessible language.

## Why deploy this program in schools?

The school environment is one of the most decisive living environments for developing psychosocial skills. According to the CSE, for pre-school and primary school children, school is certainly a place of learning, a place for instruction; but school and its 'periphery' also constitute a genuine living environment where they grow, construct their identity, develop their values and learn to live in society (2020, p. 30).

What's more, the school environment is an ecosystem conducive to the development of social identity and friendships. It has been shown that the number and origin of friends are both directly influenced by the school environment in which young people grow up (Bernier et al., 1998). The school environment offers opportunities for socialization, since its compulsory nature requires students to socialize with others on a daily basis (Bernier et al., 1998). This underscores the importance of supporting young people's social skills, which are both inevitable and crucial to their well-being at school.

## THE PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY COMPONENT OF THE OFF-TRAIL PROGRAM

### What are the objectives of the OFF-TRAIL preschool-primary program?

The overall aim of the program is to reduce anxiety-related risk factors and strengthen protective factors by promoting mental health and developing psychosocial skills. The OFF-TRAIL preschool-primary program has three components: a student component, a parent component and a school-team component. The short-term objectives for each of these components are as follows.

**Student component:** develop and promote the following psychosocial skills, which are key determinants of health and well-being.

- Know and value yourself.
- Deal with your emotions and stress.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Assert yourself against social influences.
- Use prosocial behaviour.
- Use lifestyle habits that contribute to well-being.



### **Parent component**

- Develop a global understanding of stress and anxiety issues.
- Implement practices that promote their child's well-being.
- Use strategies to help their child manage stress and anxiety.
- Encourage the reinvestment of what has been learned in the workshops.

### **School team component**

- Develop a common understanding and language of stress and anxiety.
- Take consistent actions to promote students' well-being, their own and that of their colleagues.
- Encourage the reinvestment of what has been learned in the workshops.

By encouraging the development and promotion of these skills, **the OFF-TRAIL program aims, in the medium term, to prevent the incidence of**

- Symptoms associated with anxiety disorders (fear of others' judgment, perfectionism, negative thoughts and feelings, intolerance of uncertainty).
- Other issues related to anxiety (cyberaddiction; difficulties related to emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, hyperactivity and inattention, peer problems; mood disorders; impact of anxiety on school, social, daily and family activities).

### **What support is available for program facilitators?**

To facilitate access to all the material needed to roll out the program, a bilingual OFF-TRAIL website is available at (<https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/en/hors-piste/programme-primaire/>). Here you'll find, among other things, workshops to run in class, facilitation slide shows, e-mails to send to parents, and fact sheets on stress and anxiety.

You'll also benefit from a training video that you can view before the start of your animations. This video introduces you to the OFF-TRAIL program materials and prepares you for the animation (currently available in French only).

Finally, a member of the CISSS Montérégie-Centre deployment support team will be available to answer your questions and help you deploy the program, as required.

## What's in the program?

The OFF-TRAIL preschool-primary program includes several strategies. Here's an overview of what's in each of our components.

### **STUDENT COMPONENT**

#### **Participatory classroom workshops to develop psychosocial skills**

- K-4 to Grade 6
- Five workshops per grade level (total 40)
- Duration about 40 minutes per workshop
- Facilitated by teachers or specialists
- Approximately one workshop every two weeks.



#### **Supplemental activity on the benefits of nature**

- A workshop to help students experience the benefits of nature on their well-being
- Tips to facilitate reinvestment in the classroom, in the school environment and at home
- Duration about 1.5 hours
- Facilitated by teachers or specialists who wish to do so.

#### **Supplemental mindfulness activities**

- Eight mindfulness activity sheets
- Duration 10 to 20 minutes per activity
- Facilitated by teachers or specialists who wish to practice more mindfulness with the students.

#### **Primary-secondary transition tool**

- A checklist for grade 6 students on strategies for a successful transition to high school.

## **PARENTS' COMPONENT**

- A reinvestment sheet for each in-class workshop, designed to increase parents' knowledge of the content covered and suggest ways to encourage reinvestment at home. An audio version of these cards can also be sent to parents (translation coming).
- An awareness-raising workshop designed to develop parents' knowledge of stress and anxiety and help them acquire strategies to help their child manage stress and anxiety.
- Web capsules recounting the content of the awareness workshop that they can listen to at their own pace.
- A summary fact sheet on stress and anxiety for parents.
- A tool to help parents support their child's transition to secondary school.

## **SCHOOL TEAM COMPONENT**

- An interactive workshop to equip school-team members to take care of themselves.
- A workshop to equip school team members to practice mindfulness in their own lives and with their students.
- A workshop designed to develop school team members' knowledge of stress and anxiety, and to help them acquire strategies for supporting their students in managing stress and anxiety.
- A summary fact sheet on stress and anxiety for teachers.
- A reinvestment guide for each grade level, for teachers who have received workshops in their classrooms.

### **What is the structure of each classroom workshop?**

The workshops offered to students in class all have the same structure.

- First, you'll find a table outlining the target skills and general objectives of the workshop. Each workshop develops one or more psychosocial skills, as well as one or more cross-cutting QEP skills.
- Next, you'll find a review of the previous workshop's challenge. In this section, you can discuss with your students the challenge you presented and how they achieved it.
- Then you'll find a scenario featuring an adventure involving the program's two star characters, Leo and Charlie. This scenario introduces the workshop theme in a simple, fun way.

- The “Instructions” section outlines all the steps you need to take to complete the workshop.
- The “Did you know...” section gives you some theoretical background on the concepts covered during the workshop. This section is designed to provide you with the knowledge you need to run your workshops, and is not intended for students.
- The “Challenge” section presents the challenge presented to your students at the end of the workshop. You can pay special attention to carrying out these challenges and encourage students to achieve them.
- In the “Enabling Reinvestment” section, you'll find strategies to help you facilitate reinvestment of learning. Implementing these strategies increases the scope of the workshops.
- The “Reading Suggestions” section features children's literature that can contribute to the development of the psychosocial skills addressed in the workshops.
- The “Supplement Sheets” present in some workshops give you additional content to complete the workshop.
- The “Printable Sheets” are intended for students and suggest visuals to support the activity or strategies to keep in mind.



### What is the role of teachers in deploying the program?

Teachers have a key role to play not only in developing academic skills, but also in developing students' psychosocial skills. The quality of their relationship with their students, as well as their teaching, assessment and classroom management practices, have a significant impact on student well-being (CSE, 2020).

Teachers can play two key roles in the deployment of the program. Some will be actively involved in leading classroom workshops. The previously established relationship between the teacher and their class encourages the students' active participation in the workshops. What's more, leading workshops enables teachers to develop their knowledge of the content covered, discover new strategies for supporting students, and encourage the reinvestment of learning by reusing the content and strategies covered in various everyday activities. Other teachers will also be able to participate in the reinvestment of learning and the generalization of acquired knowledge. In this way, they can provide an active presence during workshop facilitation, become familiar with the workshop content and use this learning in supporting their students.

## What role do parents play in the roll-out of the program?

In their June 2020 brief to the minister of education, the CSE stresses the importance of acting in concert with parents to foster the development of psychosocial skills, including stress and anxiety management. It reminds us that parents are the most important adults in a child's life, and the ones primarily responsible for his or her development (CSE, 2020, p. 33), and that collaboration between parents and the school team must be of the utmost importance.

After each workshop, you'll send a reinvestment sheet to the parents. This sheet informs them of what their child has learned during the workshop, provides information on the theme and suggests ways to encourage reinvestment of learning.