



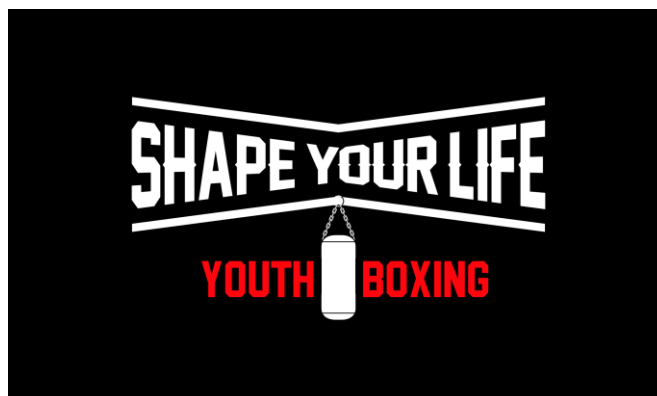
Shape Your Life - Youth

Brock University

**August 1, 2019
March 31, 2022**

Contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada
Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence Website

Exploring the Health Impacts of the Shape Your Life Project on Youth Affected by Family Violence



Final Narrative Report
August 1, 2019 – March 31, 2022
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Partner Organizations: Mentoring Junior Kids Organization (MJKO)
Mountain Plains Family Services
Pathway Family Services
Pathstone Mental Health

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2. Introduction

Shape Your Life (SYL) is a trauma and violence informed, non-contact boxing program supporting the mental and physical health of survivors of family violence. Brock University received PHAC funding (Phase One: 2016-2019) to measure the effects of SYL on the mental and physical health outcomes of women-identified survivors of family violence. Phase One produced a solid evidence-base detailing the ways in which SYL is an effective intervention.

The *goal of Phase Two (2019-2022)* was to adapt and expand SYL to address the physical and mental health needs of youth (aged 13-18 years) who have experienced family violence.

SYL Youth Program Objectives:

- Support the delivery and evaluation of SYL by adapting the program for youth.
- Collaborate with community-based youth organizations to deliver SYL.
- Develop trauma-informed coaching curriculum and training materials in collaboration with each community-based agency for coaches to deliver SYL Youth programming appropriate for the agency's clients.
- Evaluate the program and measure the impact of SYL on the physical and mental health of youth survivors of violence to build the evidence-base about what works for youth engaged in trauma-informed physical activity interventions.

Funding for this project has been made possible through a contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada, as well as in-kind contributions from Brock University, Mentoring Junior Kids Organization, Mountain Plains Family Services, Pathways Family Services, and Pathstone Mental Health.

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3. Background

Leading trauma researchers, Judith Herman (1997) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014), documented that trauma is held in the body. Recovery from violence and trauma requires being able to feel in charge of your own body, in all its visceral dimensions. Too often survivors of violence do not have access to physical, body-based experiences that directly contradict the immobilization, helplessness, collapse, or rage they experienced and continue to experience as part of their trauma (Van Der Kolk 2014).

The SYL intervention engages participants in trauma and violence-informed, non-contact boxing to aid survivor's recovery and healing from violence. As Van Der Kolk outlines, trauma is held *in people's bodies*. To recover from violence, survivors must be able to feel in charge of their own body. SYL provides a physical, body-based experience that directly contradicts the immobilization, helplessness, collapse, or rage experienced as part of trauma and exposure to family violence. In addition, experiencing violence as a child has been linked to being a victim of spousal violence later in life (Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2014 - pub. Jan 2016). Effective treatment and healing from violence and trauma must engage with the whole person, including getting in touch with (often dissociated) bodies. To recover from violence,

abuse and trauma, the body must be experienced as a source of pleasure and comfort (Van Der Kolk 2014).

SYL is based on the premise that people who have experienced violence need to have *physical* experiences to help restore a visceral sense of control. SYL is trauma-informed, which means that we facilitate safety, and provide opportunities for participant control and choice. SYL youth coaches received training in trauma-informed approaches, so they can better understand how trauma and violence can impact the lives of participants.

4. Key Activities and Outputs

The SYL Youth intervention was offered to youth aged 13-18 years old who have experienced family violence. Participants were referred through our partnering organizations who work with youth vulnerable to family violence, including: MJKO - a youth charity in South Parkdale, Toronto; two foster care agencies in Edmonton – Mountain Plains and Pathways; and a youth mental health agency in Niagara – Pathstone Mental Health.

What we did: Originally, we proposed that we would deliver in person programming and measure (quantitatively and qualitatively) the mental and physical health outcomes of youth participants. However, the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered the delivery of our project and the resultant data that was collected and analyzed. But we persevered!

In the first year of the project [Y1: August 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020] we recruited, hired and trained a staff of researchers in Ontario and a coaching team in Niagara and in Edmonton. We designed and delivered a SYL Youth TVI Coaches Training Program to 31 coaches and youth agency staff/board members in Edmonton and Niagara. After successfully piloting and running our first 6-week SYL Youth session, we began our second session in March and by the second week of classes, we had to suspend all in person programming due to the pandemic.

In April 2020, *Mentoring Junior Kids Organization (MJKO)* officially joined the SYL Youth project as our new community partner and took on the role of leading the coaching of youth online for the remainder of the funding period [Y2 & Y3: April 1, 2020 – March 31, 2022].

- Two SYL Youth Trauma and Violence Informed Coaching Workshops were held for 18 coaches, staff, and board members from MJKO and the South Parkdale community.
- A six part “Beginning Boxing Series” was developed and posted on the MJKO YouTube channel that introduced the coaches and provided basic boxing fundamentals (stance, how to throw a jab, etc.) to enable/empower youth to feel confident to join in the ‘live’ or ‘on demand’ online classes.
- The delivery of ONLINE SYL/MJKO Youth classes (trauma and violence informed boxing and social programs) was launched with 14 online classes (boxing and online social activities) delivered by MJKO staff 5 days (Monday – Friday) a week.
 - Each week 11 boxing classes were offered, as well as 3 social activities/non-sport classes. Of the 11 boxing classes, 10 classes were open to any youth to join in online and 1 was a private class for youth in foster care in Edmonton. All classes (except for the private classes run for youth living in foster care) were posted online and available for youth to take “on-demand”.

- Sept 1 – 30 Orange Shirt Day Art Contest: As many of our Edmonton-based youth participants are Indigenous, we wanted to acknowledge the ongoing impact of residential schools, as well as the responsibility of Canadians and the State to acknowledge and address this injustice. MJKO created an Orange Shirt Day event. Youth participants were asked to draw and submit a picture of what Orange Shirt Day meant to them. A panel of SYL & MJKO staff and youth workers from the foster care agencies were selected to review all the entries. A winning design was selected and shirts were printed and sent to all the participating SYL/MJKO youth so that they would have an orange shirt to wear on Sept 30, The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.
- As outlined in the companion final report in more detail, over the course of the funding period there were numerous provincially imposed restrictions (mandated closures and openings with capacity limits and vaccine passport requirements) which significantly impacted the ability of youth participants to access programming.

Knowledge Dissemination & Exchange Activities:

- SYL Youth Trauma- and Violence-Informed Coaching Manuals (English and French) are free and available for download from the SYL website.
- Conference & Community Presentations: Over the course of funding, there were two virtual conference presentations (Australia & Brussels), the online distribution of SYL Youth classes (on demand), and a community presentation sharing learnings with the executive directors of the two Edmonton-based foster care agencies.
- Scholarly/Research Publication:
 - Gammage, K., van Ingen, C., & Angrish, K. (2021). “Measuring the Effects of the Shape Your Life Project on the Mental and Physical Health Outcomes of Survivors of Gender-Based Violence”. *Violence Against Women*. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211038966> This manuscript is from the Phase One study – published in 2021 – and further details the impact of the SYL project on the health of survivors of violence.

5. Overall Project Outcomes

Quantitative Data:

Numbers reached during the SYL Youth Project:

- 800+ youth participants.
- 46 coaches, youth workers, researchers, and volunteers completed the SYL Youth Trauma and Violence Informed Coaching workshop.
- Social Media Reach/Impressions (April 2021 - March 2022): 1,089,815 [note: this includes #'s of visitors to SYL & MJKO websites and the total # of reach/impressions on several social media/online platforms which cannot be tracked to individual usage].
- 98% of 172 participants surveyed reported changes in knowledge and/or skills since the project start.
- 96% of 172 participants surveyed reported changes in behaviour (i.e., use of knowledge and/or skills learned through participation in the project).
- 98% of 172 participants surveyed reported improved health outcomes (i.e., improved physical and/or mental health).

Qualitative Data:

Participants were invited to provide anonymous feedback in a short online survey. We also interviewed all the coaches and 26 youth participants to garner more in-depth feedback on the program. A few short excerpts are included below:

- *“This (program) makes me feel more confident, like it is a boost. I have improved and am able to answer when coaches talk to me and not crumble during a response, and it gives me an outlet to express myself. I need a safe space to express myself.”* [Participant]
- *“I feel physically, when I exercise during the classes, I’m doing my body a favour, doing something productive. I feel strong, productive.”* [Participant]
- *Another thing I learned to say when instructing is to always repeat things like “do what’s best and comfortable for your body ... This is very important because our job is to make sure that the youth feel safe first when working out. The only person who knows what’s right for their body is themselves.* [Coach]
- *“It has been a pleasure partnering with Shape Your Life. I never thought I would be teaching virtual classes in my lifetime. With the whole world affected by Covid, SYL gave us a lifeline to reach out to a vast number of communities throughout Canada by providing virtual, online boxing classes. I was more cognizant of how I worded my boxing instructions and provided constructive feedback, so that I could create a safe and welcoming environment for everyone. Many times, students were stressed or distracted, and boxing classes and the way we approached them helped to engage and support more youth than I ever imagined. I learned so much ... but I don’t want to coach online anymore, I prefer working with youth in person.”* [Coach]
- *“It has been an incredible journey working with the Shape Your Life Team on this amazing project. I have learned best practices in leading trauma informed boxing classes. It truly made a difference, as it helped me to incorporate new ways in interacting and mentoring youth ... As a team, we were able to understand and take the time to listen to the stories of our youth. Many of the youth that come to boxing have been through challenges and struggles and some are still facing them daily. It is about listening and being able to create a space where they can be themselves and someone and/or a place they can trust. I believe that MJKO was able to accomplish that and will continue to do so. Here youth coming to MJKO should always leave happier than they came in.* [Coach]

We also wanted to draw from our overall learnings to reflect more generally on “what worked (or not) for whom in what contexts” in order to improve health outcomes for survivors of violence in the SYL program. Here are a few additional reflections:

- Youth in the child welfare system (including youth living in foster care) are vastly under-resourced and are often overlooked in terms of access to trauma-and-violence informed physical activity. Family service agencies are well positioned as community partners to help bridge this gap and work in partnership with programs like SYL.

- The online delivery of TVI physical activity-based programming works best when it is no longer than 30 minutes in length, which is much different than face to face programming which is often scheduled for longer. The need for shorter weekly classes grew as participants were spending much of their school and social lives online during the pandemic. We also discovered the importance of offering “social classes” with a wider range of activities for the youth. For example, cooking classes, karaoke, and art classes were also offered online. These “social classes” were an important way for participants and coaches to engage on a more personal level and provided different opportunities to create positive relationships with participants.
- It is also important to note that we also witnessed significant disparities affecting youth during the pandemic. For example, many of the youth who would attend in-person programming (with transportation support, free access to healthy food, etc.) could not participate consistently online often due to lack of Internet access, available space at home, and/or family support. Similarly, once the boxing gym could re-open and we could return to some in person sessions we were required to implement access via provincially mandated COVID-19 vaccine passports. Several youth were unable to participate as vaccine hesitancy in particular segments of the community meant that several children and youth could not return to participate in face-to-face programming when in person programming resumed.

5. Next Steps

The lasting impact of the SYL Youth project includes the training of 46 coaches, staff and volunteers in trauma and violence informed approaches that will continue to broaden the reach of SYL. In addition, there are now four new organizations who have received training and are now more engaged in providing trauma and violence-informed physical activity programming: Mentoring Junior Kids Organization (MJKO), Mountain Plains Family Services, Pathway Family Services, and Pathstone Mental Health.

Over the last three years of running SYL Youth, several individuals and agencies/organizations reached out to inquire about implementing similar programming. As one example, a professor and researcher who works with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma from the University of Melbourne travelled to Toronto in April 2022 to meet with SYL staff and learn about the Shape Your Life project.

SYL plans to return to running (in person) programming in fall of 2022 when (we hope) we will be in a post-pandemic environment and it will be safer to engage in-person activities.