About TCP

History

The Teen Connection Project (TCP) was originally developed by Dr. Joseph P. Allen, a clinical psychologist and Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. Dr. Allen's research interests include adolescent social development and peer relationships, as well as ways to enhance adolescent social and emotional development.

The inspiration for TCP came from Dr. Allen's experience as an adolescent, as well as his conversations with adolescents. He found that when adolescents were part of supportive peer groups, it benefitted their overall high school experience. He became interested in identifying the ingredients in supportive peer groups and the idea of intentionally creating these groups. Initial development of TCP relied on feedback on the interests and needs of youth from Wyman staff in after-school programs in the St. Louis region and Wyman partner sites in St. Louis, Missouri and El Paso, Texas.

In 2014 and 2015, Dr. Allen wrote the TCP Curriculum and began piloting TCP activities in Virginia and, in partnership with Wyman, in St. Louis. In 2016, funding from the William T. Grant Foundation supported the expansion of TCP as part of a rigorous evaluation study, with Wyman delivering the program in St. Louis area high schools. Feedback from the Wyman facilitators' experience with the program was used to further refine the curriculum and inform implementation structure.

Wyman piloted TCP with 5 National Network partners during the 2019-2020 school year, then used those learnings to design the Training of Facilitators, Training of Trainers, revise the curriculum and refine fidelity and implementation guidance. TCP was introduced as a new evidence-based program available from Wyman in Fall 2020.

In 2021, CASEL (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning) identified TCP as a "SELect Program," their highest designation, in their Program Guide that identifies and rates well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs.

TCP champions have included the University of Virginia's Janet Legro, Alison Nagel, and Rachel Narr; members of the University of Virginia Adolescence Research Group; and DeVonne Bernard, Heather Fullerton, Karen Guskin, Crystal Smith and Allison Williams of Wyman.

TCP Theoretical Framework

The Teen Connection Project is an innovative, evidence-based program that builds social connections among high school age youth. The Teen Connection Project is aligned with Wyman's Framework for Thriving Youth, which depicts Wyman's programmatic strategy to provide high quality, evidence-based and evidence-informed programs. Within Wyman's Framework, caring, responsive and knowledgeable adults build relationships with young people to create engaging and empowering program environments. Through these environments, they support teens as they build skills, develop a positive sense of self and make connections to others and their world. The end result is increased healthy relationships and behaviors, educational success and life and leadership skills.

The Teen Connection Project design is based on several key, research-based factors: 1) the social experiences and social and emotional skills of at-risk adolescents are incredibly strong mediators of their academic and life outcomes; 2) adolescence is one of the most socially-focused stages of the lifespan as teens are biologically and developmentally wired to seek to learn to manage peer relationships; 3) adolescent peer experiences are ripe for change and can lead to powerful social and emotional learning and enhanced life outcomes.

Positive Youth Development

Adolescence is a time of rapid change and growth—physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. It is also a time of great potential—a window of opportunity for young people to learn and practice new skills in safe and supportive environments.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is defined by the federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs as "an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths" (www.youth.gov).

TCP's PYD approach seeks to build young people's peer connections, competencies and skills. PYD emphasizes the importance of engaging and supportive environments and positive relationships with caring adults. These qualities of PYD make it especially important for engaging with youth from disadvantaged circumstances, who are more likely to be marginalized or who have experienced trauma.

For teens served by TCP, the PYD approach guides creation of experiential, engaging and empowering program environments. Caring adults are critical to the process, facilitating programs using practices that are responsive to teens' development.

Social and Emotional Learning

According to the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." (https://casel.org/what-is-sel/)

CASEL identifies five focus areas of SEL. Those areas are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Acquisition of SEL has been linked to critical elements of positive developmental trajectories, such as academic success and avoidance of risky sexual behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

TCP is comprised of lessons that build teens' capacities to give and receive needed social and emotional support to enhance their social and emotional competence, motivation, engagement and achievement. The key idea underlying the program is that for secondary school students, the experience of establishing supportive relationships will be one of the best teachers of social and emotional skills; not only will students learn from one another, but they will also gain a sense of their own efficacy in translating SEL into action.

TCP's approach utilizes the SAFE principles (Durlak et al., 2010, 2011) shown to predict efficacy in SEL interventions:

- **Sequenced:** The program is carefully sequenced such that early activities focus on group formation, and are designed to create a comfort level and sense of shared humanity within the group while minimizing any activities that would create excessive vulnerability (e.g., activities often allow youth to share potentially vulnerable thoughts or experiences anonymously). These are followed by more in-depth community/connection building activities, which, in turn, are linked to efforts to reach out to others that gradually increase in intensity.
- **Active:** The program uses active forms of learning throughout and is premised on the idea that social experiences are a far more powerful teacher to youth of this age than didactic presentations by adults.
- **Focus:** We focus significant time on skill development using real-life experiences to develop empathy, active listening and communication skills.
- **Explicit:** Finally, there are explicit learning goals for each lesson and the program which are presented to youth repeatedly.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. American Journal of Community Psychology, 45, 294–309.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82, 405-432.

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J., & Weissberg, R. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. Child Development, 88, 1156-1171.

Why Connections?

Many programs exist to develop psychosocial skills in adolescents—from bullying prevention to peer counseling to assertiveness skills—but TCP is unique given its primary goal of building a supportive group environment as the main instrument of growth.

TCP intentionally develops environments and communities that allow youth to connect deeply with one another and with key adults in their lives in a supportive peer group environment. Groups are facilitated by caring, knowledgeable and responsive adults who are trained to use the evidence-based curriculum to develop social connections within a small group.

TCP was developed to create connections because research tells us that:
- Humans are hard-wired to fare best when we connect with and attach to one another.
- Our ability to build strong social connections is linked to positive outcomes – including physical health, mental health and academic success.
- Adolescents are at a point in their lives where they are eager for a sense of meaning and purpose.
- When we take the chance to open up to one another, be vulnerable, share deep thoughts and feelings, drop the pretense of having it 'all together' and find support and affirmation from one another, the results can be profound.
- Connection reduces loneliness, isolation and social anxiety and supports the development of self-esteem and social skills.
- When teens form connections, they learn to value those who outwardly appear different from them.
- Once teens have a sense they are valued by peers for who they are, status with peers no longer needs to be sought via risky behavior.
- When teens learn the value of connection, they are then likely to take this knowledge into other settings and seek to build connections in their lives going forward.

TCP Logic Model & Goals

Through the research to practice partnership with the University of Virginia, TCP's effectiveness was studied using a rigorous, randomized controlled trial across 2 years with 600+ youth attending high school in 4 school districts. TCP teens compared to control teens showed improved quality of peer relationships, greater use of social coping, higher levels of academic engagement and lower levels of depressive symptoms.
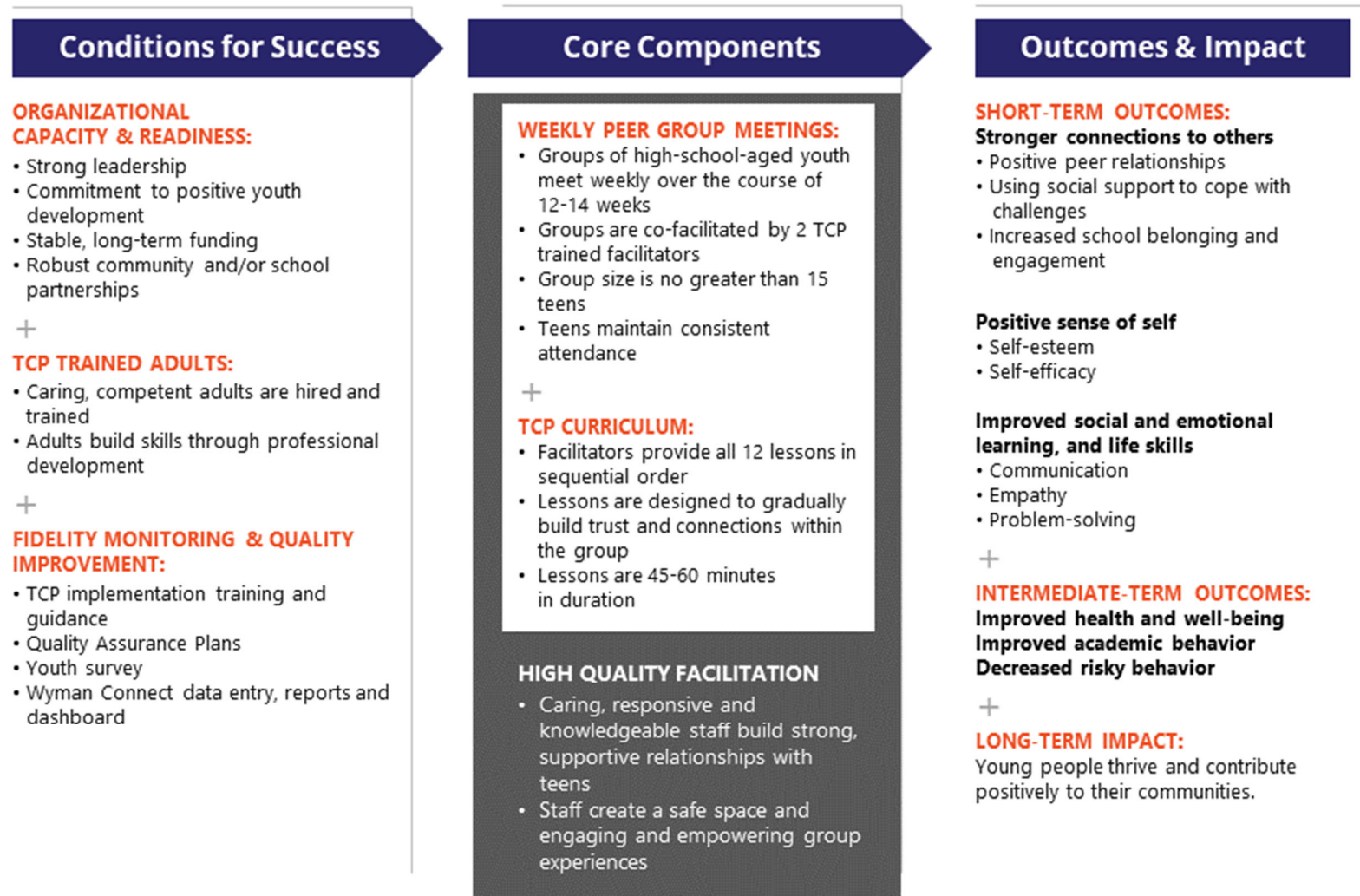
TCP achieves positive outcomes for youth by building a cohesive and supportive peer group that demonstrates the value of deep, caring relationships to teens and supports them in extending these connection skills to others in their families, schools and communities. The program's primary goals are to:

1) **Strengthen connection to others**
2) **Support development of a positive sense of self**
3) **Improve social and emotional learning, and life skills**
4) **Improve health and well-being**
5) **Improve academic outcomes**
6) **Decrease risky behavior**

As the logic model shows, achieving these program goals, depicted as short and intermediate-term outcomes on the logic model, requires specific program delivery components. TCP's core program components include small groups of high school youth that meet weekly over the course of 12-14 weeks and delivery of TCP Curriculum lessons in sequential order—all supported by high-quality adult facilitation.

Allen, J.P., Narr, R. K., Nagel, A. G., Costello, M.A., & Guskin, K. (2020). The Connection Project: Changing the peer environment to improve outcomes for marginalized adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology,* 1-11. doi:10.1017/S0954579419001731

Teen Connection Project (TCP) Logic Model

Teen Connection Project TCP WYMAN

Conditions for Success

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY & READINESS:
• Strong leadership
• Commitment to positive youth development
• Stable, long-term funding
• Robust community and/or school partnerships

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TCP TRAINED ADULTS:
• Caring, competent adults are hired and trained
• Adults build skills through professional development

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FIDELITY MONITORING & QUALITY IMPROVEMENT:
• TCP implementation training and guidance
• Quality Assurance Plans
• Youth survey
• Wyman Connect data entry, reports and dashboard

Core Components

WEEKLY PEER GROUP MEETINGS:
• Groups of high-school-aged youth meet weekly over the course of 12-14 weeks
• Groups are co-facilitated by 2 TCP trained facilitators
• Group size is no greater than 15 teens
• Teens maintain consistent attendance

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TCP CURRICULUM:
• Facilitators provide all 12 lessons in sequential order
• Lessons are designed to gradually build trust and connections within the group
• Lessons are 45-60 minutes in duration

HIGH QUALITY FACILITATION
• Caring, responsive and knowledgeable staff build strong, supportive relationships with teens
• Staff create a safe space and engaging and empowering group experiences

Outcomes & Impact

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES:
Stronger connections to others
• Positive peer relationships
• Using social support to cope with challenges
• Increased school belonging and engagement

Positive sense of self
• Self-esteem
• Self-efficacy

Improved social and emotional learning, and life skills
• Communication
• Empathy
• Problem-solving

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INTERMEDIATE-TERM OUTCOMES:
Improved health and well-being
Improved academic behavior
Decreased risky behavior

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LONG-TERM IMPACT:
Young people thrive and contribute positively to their communities.

TCP Fidelity Criteria

These fidelity criteria incorporate learnings from research on TCP, research in the field of adolescent development and Wyman's experience supporting the implementation of positive youth development, evidence-based programs, including the Teen Outreach Program and the Teen Connection Project.

"Required Structure & Design" refers to how TCP is expected to be planned prior to the start of each program cycle. "Fidelity Measurement—Minimum Levels" indicates how criteria will be measured, including minimum levels that demonstrate fidelity requirements have been met.

Required Structure and Design	Fidelity Measurement—Minimum Levels
Partner has a written Quality Assurance Plan (QAP).	Partner has a QAP that covers club observations, professional development, and processes for monitoring teen attendance and survey submission updated each program cycle.
TCP groups are co-facilitated by two facilitators who have each successfully completed Wyman's TCP TOF (Training of Facilitators).	100% of TCP facilitators complete the full TOF led by certified TCP trainers. 100% of groups are led by two trained facilitators.
TCP groups maintain a group size throughout the program cycle that does not exceed 15 teens.	100% of TCP groups do not exceed 15 active teens.
TCP program delivery includes weekly peer group meetings throughout the program cycle.	100% of groups deliver a minimum of 12 meetings during a program cycle. Program cycle should be a consecutive 12-14 weeks, with the exception of holiday, winter and spring breaks that may occur. A group meeting should be at least 45 minutes in length.
TCP teens attend at least 9 meetings offered during the program cycle.	75% of active TCP teens attend at least 9 meetings offered during the program cycle.
TCP groups deliver all 12 lessons from the TCP curriculum in sequential order	100% of TCP groups deliver all 12 lessons from the TCP curriculum in sequential order.

Please note that this is an abbreviated fidelity chart. Trainers and coordinators should refer to the full chart (includes 4 columns) that is available in the TOT binder and Wyman Connect.

Overview of TCP Lessons

TCP includes 12 lessons, summarized below. Lessons must be implemented in order, as they were intentionally designed to progress over time.

In the beginning of the program, youth come together to get to know one another and start to create a group culture. Once the group has been established, lessons focus on trust building and sharing. As lessons progress over time, youth share more about themselves and deepen their level of connection.

Establishing and maintaining a level of trust and connection with peers is a process. TCP does not force trust and vulnerability for personal sharing, but it does provide the context for it to occur.

Title	Goal	Includes
Lesson 1: Introduction to the Teen Connection Project	Increase understanding of the Teen Connection Project (TCP); Begin developing relationships with facilitators and peers	Team Building: The Wind Blows For… Activity: Explaining TCP Activity: Speed Friending
Lesson 2: Creating Our Group Culture	Create group guidelines to develop feelings of safety and comfort in TCP; Explore why connections are important	Activity: Connection Quotes Activity: Establishing Guidelines Team Building: Key Punch
Lesson 3: Exploring Masks	Explore how masks can be a barrier to connecting with others	Activity: Behind the Masks
Lesson 4: Conflict and Communication	Explore how communication styles and responses to conflict can be a barrier to connecting with others	Activity: Communication Discussion Activity: 4 Corners Outreach Challenge: Take What You Need Flyer
Lesson 5: Establishing Trust	Explore trust and how it impacts connections with others	Team Building: Animal Sounds Activity: Trust Statements Activity: Ways to Respond
Lesson 6: If You Really Knew Me	Explore being vulnerable with peers by sharing something personal in a safe, anonymous space	Activity: If You Really Knew Me Outreach Challenge: Candy Messages
Lesson 7: You Are Not Alone	Understand and explore that everyone faces challenges; Reduce stigma around experiencing challenges	Activity: You Are Not Alone Adult Stories Activity: You Are Not Alone Teen Stories

Title	Goal	Includes
Lesson 8: #YouMatter	Explore positive recognition and appreciation of others	Activity: #YouMatter Brainstorm Activity: Creating the #YouMatter Project Outreach Challenge: Acts of Appreciation
Lesson 9: You Don't Know My Story	Share challenging experiences with one another; Explore how these experiences can influence who we are	Activity: Word Association Activity: Writing "My Story" Activity: Sharing "My Story"
Lesson 10: The Struggle is Real	Identify emotions experienced during challenging situations; Explore coping strategies	Optional Activity: Sharing "My Story" Continued Activity: Session 9 Debrief Activity: How Do You Deal With Life's Struggles? Outreach Challenge: The Struggle is Real Flyer
Lesson 11: Seeing Our Strengths	Explore each other's strengths; Share and receive positive feedback	Activity: Sharing Our Strengths
Lesson 12: Reflecting on TCP and Looking to the Future	Reflect on the TCP experience; Explore ways to continue intentional positive connections with others	Activity: Letter To Future Self Activity: Start, Stop, Continue Activity: Connection Stones

Supporting Connections

Youth experiencing connections with one another is the most important dimension of this program. TCP is a place where youth can let their guard down, be their true selves, be real with one another and connect. As participants progress through the program, they will gradually form deeper bonds as a result of the experience.

The chart below details how TCP Curriculum lessons support connections among participants.

Participants understand that, despite external appearances/behavior and pre-conceived notions, all people have a great deal in common "beneath the surface" and can relate to one another.
- Lesson 1: Participants learn that they have more in common than they initially thought.
- Lesson 3: Participants acknowledge that we all have thoughts/feelings that we don't share with others, due to societal pressure to act in certain ways.
- Lesson 6: Participants anonymously explore experiences and emotions that group members hold 'beneath the surface.'
- Lesson 7: Participants hear relatable stories from older people and share stories with younger people about hard experiences they have had and how they survived.
- Lesson 8: Participants think about adults in their lives and how they may have invisible things going on and would really like to be appreciated by the group.
- Lesson 9: Participants explore the difficult experiences that shape us and help us to grow, that others may not know about or be able to see just by looking at us.
- Lesson 11: Participants share strengths that the group has learned about one another through TCP.

Participants explore barriers that can keep us from connecting with one another (hiding our feelings, conflict management, poor communication, lack of trust) and practice overcoming these obstacles within the group.
- Lesson 3: Participants explore masks: the way we act vs. the way we feel and social pressures to act in certain ways based on social expectations.
- Lesson 4: Participants explore things other people do that we like/dislike in communication and explore the ways that we/others handle conflict.
- Lesson 5: Participants explore trust: how much do we tend to trust people, how trustworthy are we, and how does that affect our ability to have close relationships with others?
- Lesson 6: Participants anonymously disclose personal attributes, one which is easier to share and one which is slightly more personal.
- Lesson 7: Participants share with a younger student something they've been through and learned from.
- Lesson 9: Participants share a difficult experience that has shaped who they are and helped them to grow.
- Lesson 11: Participants identify and share strengths they see in others.

Participants learn from the different perspectives and experiences that group members bring to the group.
- Lesson 3: Participants discuss times when they might have used masks/been affected by masks, as well as the societal pressures that led them to do so. Participants consider how different people use different masks in response to similar underlying feelings or situations.
- Lesson 4: Participants hear others' perspectives about helpful/unhelpful ways to communicate, as well as explanations of why other people might handle conflict differently.
- Lesson 5: Participants are exposed to different beliefs about trust/effects of trust in others' lives.
- Lesson 6: Participants hear anonymous disclosure of a variety of experiences from their peers.
- Lesson 7: Participants read/share stories about the ways that older people, they themselves, and their peers have handled challenges.
- Lesson 9: Participants explore that we don't know others' stories just by looking at them and learn about what others have gone through and what has shaped them.

Participants have a positive experience with vulnerability, in which they feel heard and valued by their peers.
- Lesson 2: Participants define what the group needs in order to feel comfortable/safe sharing.
- Lesson 3: Participants share about how masks have affected their lives.
- Lesson 5: Participants share about their experiences with trust.
- Lesson 6: Participants anonymously share things others might not know about them.
- Lesson 7: Participants share their "You're Not Alone" story.
- Lesson 9: Participants share their word association/symbols about their earlier lives and their story about overcoming hardship.
- Lesson 10: Participants share about difficulties in high school and emotions/coping.
- Lesson 11: Participants hear others describe each group members' strengths without the group members having/needing/getting to minimize or discount these about themselves.

Participants practice seeking social support from and providing social support to peers.
- Lesson 5: Participants discuss the ways in which they want their peers to provide them with support when they discuss difficult things.
- Lesson 6: Participants respond to "If You Knew Me"/"If You Really Knew Me" statements.
- Lesson 7: Participants write/share "You Are Not Alone" stories to support younger youth going through situations they've already made it through.
- Lesson 8: Participants practice valuing others through #YouMatter projects.
- Lesson 9: Participants support those that share their stories.
- Lesson 10: Participants make/share a poster about how to cope with difficult feelings.
- Lesson 11: Participants practice valuing peers through Seeing Our Strengths.

Participants feel a sense of belonging by allowing them to have this experience of deeper connection with peers that they might not have without the group.
- This theme runs throughout all of the lessons/activities.