

Trails Youth Initiatives

“ A Qualitative Study of Youth Experiences”

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BACKGROUND:

Youth Initiative Program: Trails

Trails is a youth initiative program that works with “at risk” youth year round, and introduces its participants to the outdoors to build leadership and life skills. Outdoor activities include: ropes course, canoeing, hiking, camping, snowshoeing, skiing, ice-skating, etc. Ten males and ten females are selected from five middle schools within Toronto’s inner city to join Trails; often nominated by guidance counselors, principals, and teachers. Participants begin Trails when they are twelve years of age and graduate at age sixteen. An optional fifth year is offered - the Leadership-in-Training (LIT) program - where participants have the opportunity to further develop leadership and life skills. Participants can earn up to 3.5 high school credits through the Trails program. Trails hopes its participants will leave the program with the enhanced skills, knowledge, and confidence to become active members of their communities, and to steer clear from a life of poor choices. Each year, participants undergo a progressive sequencing of activities where they are challenged and encouraged to push themselves and try new things. Trails attempts to find young people “*lost in the middle*” – these are not young people previously identified as problem children or as superstars, but instead they are those whose potential is often overlooked.

Overview

Adventure based programs offer a solution and the required skills needed for successful living that are inherent in adventure-based learning – self-esteem, communication, problem solving, responsibility and confidence (Hanson, 2002). The increase of wilderness programs has resulted in a call to better understand their goals and how experiences in the natural environment contribute to the development of human potential (Hendee & Brown, 1988). Current literature proposes that wilderness and adventure experiences for adolescents enhance self-competency through wilderness and adventure-based travel in remote environments in an intense social milieu, which leads to the development of intra- and interpersonal skills strongly linked to the concept of resiliency, which leads to an enhanced sense of hope for adolescents that they can overcome certain challenges in their lives (Russell, Walsh & Allen, 2011).

Adventure therapy uses the group modality as the primary arena for change. It is theoretically consistent with adolescent development, which emphasizes peer group membership and socialization. The adventure component allows young people to engage in appropriate risk-taking behaviours, which are key developmental features of this age group. Furthermore, the group context closely approximates social situations that may be encountered outside the program, and that skills learned in this way may be generalized beyond the program setting (Schell, Cotton & Luxmoore, 2012).

In 1994, a meta-analysis was conducted, with adolescents who participated in a form of adventure programming. By analysing the effects sizes of 43 studies, the authors concluded that 'adolescents who participate in adventure programming are better off than 62% who do not participate' on outcome measures such as self-concept, behaviour, attitude, locus of control, clinical scales, grades and school attendance (Cason & Gillis, 1994). Wright (2000) examined the effectiveness of adventure therapy with a group of delinquent adolescents and found that those who participated in the adventure therapy program had increases in self-esteem and endorsed an internal locus of control compared with the control group. Both of these traits have been identified to have a positive influence on rehabilitation outcomes (Norman & Norman, 1991). In addition, adventure therapy literature indicates that those who engaged in adventure therapy were more likely to have and maintain close relationships (Pommier, 1995).

The literature on the impact of outdoor activities on young people generally suggests positive benefits. In a mixed method study of the impacts of outdoor adventure program participation on urban adolescent self-perception, Garst, Scheider, and Baker (2001) found a significant difference in social acceptance and behavioural conduct among participants that remained significant four months following the experience. Pre-tests, immediate post-tests, and post-tests after four months were completed by 36 of 58 adolescents who participated in 3-day experiential outdoor education adventure trips. Activities included hiking, caving, group discussions, and reflection following each activity. Participants were also given free time to rest and explore the surrounding wilderness area. Participants were divided into groups and given responsibility for the running of the camp-site including cooking, cleaning, and setting up. Researchers also collected qualitative data through interviews, trip leader journals, and the observation of

the principal researcher who attended all trips. Qualitative results indicated that participants appreciated the opportunity to do new and exciting things that they would not otherwise have had a chance to do, as well as appreciated the escape from the city environment. Observations and interviews also showed a positive change in behaviour that was attributed to participants worrying about other's impressions of them. Researchers attributed this change to opportunities to interact socially in positive ways and the positive reinforcement by peers and staff of participants' positive qualities. An important element of programming was the division of responsibilities that made everyone responsible for themselves as well as dependent on others. Observations indicated a focus on the group's needs and an acceptance of each other's differences. Participants indicated that their intense experience in the wilderness with their friends strengthened their relationships because they had to get along for three days and discovered another side of their friends that they didn't see at school. It seems remarkable that such a short program had an impact on behaviour. Not surprisingly, some of the effects that were found decreased during the four months following the trip. This study indicates that the investigation of longer-term programming is needed in order to understand how the impacts of these experiences are transferred to other environments and highlights the promise of qualitative research in this field in understanding how these types of programs impact urban youth.

Long's (2001) qualitative research in outdoor education with 'at-risk' youth explored the perceptions of 'at-risk' adolescent girls associated with experiential education activities and the impact these experiences had on their lives. Study participants were a group of girls with emotional and behavioural disorders who were participating in a residential long-term therapeutic program with experiential outdoor education components including ropes course, canoe tripping, rock climbing, and overnight hiking. The pedagogy of the program was based on a model of long-term wilderness camping, started by Campbell Loughmiller in 1965 as a form of treatment for delinquency. The emphasis was on establishing a balanced and positive group atmosphere and holding youth responsible for their actions and behaviours.

The girls involved in the study ($n=9$) were 14 to 17 years old; five were Caucasian and four were African American. When interviews began, the girls varied in the length of

their participation in the program between one month and eight months. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant at various series of stages of the program, across three months. The girls expressed feelings of success, confidence, honesty with others, and comfort in leadership roles in association with the experiential education activities. They also expressed understanding of the importance of trusting others, supporting others, putting aside selfish goals to embrace goals of the group, and approaching challenge with a positive attitude. Particular emphasis was given to how the process of interpersonal development was facilitated by the ropes course activities. Long (2001) described several phases through which the girls developed trust for the other group members, changed their focus from personal to group success, and developed understanding of experiential education activities as important to their treatment.

STUDY OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of this project was to explore the lived experience of the Trails youth initiative program from the perspective of past and current participants. This was achieved by engaging with Trails participants to understand the program components they identified as important and successful, and elements of the program that could be improved.

More specifically, the goals were to:

1. Evaluate how the Trails program was experienced by youth:
 - a. Impact on personal and social development,
 - b. Program likes and dislikes,
 - c. Recommendations for future programming.

METHODS

i. Research Methods

Qualitative research methods were used, consisting of focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. This approach was used to understand the perspective of participants both current and those who had graduated from the program¹. Two separate focus groups were conducted; the first with the Alumni group and the second with the Year Two's. Twelve questions were generated for the focus group as a guideline to keep the discussion relevant and on topic. Participants were encouraged to discuss any ideas and

¹ Hereafter referred to the Alumni Group and the Year Two's

comments they found significant. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim to identify important themes and ideas, which were then used to create the guideline questions for semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interview questions for Alumni group and Year Two's consisted of approximately twenty guideline questions; and participants were again encouraged to openly discuss their experiences, including what they most liked about the program.

ii. Participants

Eight Alumni and six Year Two's volunteered to participate in the study. Three were involved in the focus group, and seven in the one-to-one interviews. The alumni group consisted of three males and seven females, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-six. All six of the Year Two's were involved in both the focus group and the one-to-one interviews. The Year Two's consisted of three males and three females, all of whom were aged thirteen.

iii. Data Collection

The study was conducted over a 4-month period between February and May of 2012. Research began with the focus group for the Alumni group. Semi-structured open-ended questions were generated prior to the focus group, and were used as a guideline in the focus group discussion. The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus group was transcribed, analyzed, and used to generate questions for the one-to-one Alumni interviews. Semi-structured open-ended interviews with Alumni were conducted to understand participant's perspective of their program experience. Interviews were approximately one hour in length. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The same process was then performed for the Year Two group. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to preserve anonymity.

Table 1: Alumni Research Participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Number of Years of Participation (Previous to Current)
Christy		F	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Andrew		M	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Amanda		F	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Hayley		F	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Richard		M	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Zoey		F	4 years camper
Brittany		F	4 years camper, 1 year LIT
Derek		M	4 years camper, 1 year LIT

Table 2: Year Two Research Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Number of Years of Participation (Previous to Current)
Justin	13	M	2 years camper
Phillip	13	M	2 years camper
Taylor	13	M	2 years camper
Mary Jane	13	F	2 years camper
Madison	13	F	2 years camper
Amy	13	F	1 year camper

iv. Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted for the purpose of this project as it offers an accessible and theoretically driven approach to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The specific guidelines and the six phases of analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke were followed. They describe thematic analysis at the latent level, going beyond the semantic content of the data and starting “to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (2006, p. 84). As expected, themes or patterns emerged from the data (inductive) as well as from the original aims of the research and guided by the interview questions (deductive). Pope and her colleagues (2000) reiterate this point when highlighting their framework approach for analysis of qualitative data. They note that a deductive overview is employed based on predetermined aims and objectives, yet also acknowledge that the themes will be grounded in the data that reflects the accounts of research participants as well as the perspectives/experiences of researchers and trainees as captured in the reflexive accounts. The analysis team discussed their coding and interpretation of the transcripts in detail in order to refine codes and identify key themes emerging from the data. The original transcripts were then re-read, coded and indexed. The themes were recorded and colour coded. Subsequent to several readings of the findings, the themes were collapsed and reorganized to create nine central themes. The team approach to analysis allowed inconsistencies between the data and themes to be debated, refined, and reflected in the final presentation of the main themes.

Rigor

The research assistant (RA) had a prolonged engagement with the subject matter, which is believed to enhance our findings. The Trails coordinator opened her doors to our research assistant by allowing her to meet the Year Two's over dinner prior to research. This strengthened the relationship between the RA and the Year Two's as there was no ambiguity regarding who would be interviewing them; a sense of familiarity and trust was enhanced. The RA also played a contributing role in identification of the common themes from analysis. This is believed to have also enhanced our overall findings, as she was able to recall on the exact interviews, the emotions, and the social context of the interviews.

RESULTS

Review of textual data revealed ten central theme areas: the notion of 'vulnerable youth'; the enhanced skills and learning experiences that youth attributed to the program, the importance of the Trails environment; a sense of family; the role of the counselors; the LIT Program; perspectives on transitioning out of Trails, self-image before and after Trails; accessing new experiences; and, feeling important, valued, and proud.

(1) *The notion of 'vulnerable youth'*

The term "vulnerable youth," used to describe the participants Trails elicited mixed responses from each Alumni participant. While some perceived themselves to be vulnerable youth, many believed the term "vulnerable youth" did not adequately reflect young people, and was an insufficient term to describe Trails participants.

When you say vulnerable youth you think "okay, they are being abused, there's lots of bad things happening in their life," and that's not necessarily true. A lot of the kids I know in Trails or at least, you know, that I've been friends with, uh, they're not vulnerable to abuse, but you know, they are vulnerable in the sense that, you know, not a lot of attention is paid to them. They're sort of like the "middle kids." You know I was fairly average in middle school, didn't really make a lot of good grades. Um, I suppose "neglected" would be a better term. – Andrew

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² Text box in blue fill indicate the direct quote of an Alumni participant

So many of the youth I knew in the program, and have seen go through it, they were not really vulnerable they were just everyday people. But I know for instance, I was kind of like what you would deem a “vulnerable youth.” So it was kind of like, it can describe some of them, but it should be termed more for like youth in general. Just like, not termed to that cause then people can be labeled, especially with how society is, and there is so much stigma about the littlest of things. I can remember my best friend wanted to go into the program but her mom read that it said vulnerable youth and she automatically thought that it meant people who are mentally challenged or had any form of mental health condition. – Amanda

The Alumni discussed how the term “vulnerable youth” as a term that is not just specific to Trails participants. Many expressed how they believed all young people to be “vulnerable youth” to some extent and not a term that distinguishes Trails youth from non-Trails youth.

I guess every kid could be a vulnerable kid, but um I’ve been thinking about this, that there’s got to be a better way to describe us cause we’re more the forgotten ones. We’re just the middle child of society, where we could either go the really good way, or the really bad way. And Trails keeps us going in the right direction. Richard

I think that all youth are vulnerable...Some are more easy than others. More like, you know, they show that they’re more vulnerable, that they need that extra attention and I think we’ve all been there, like weight issues, we’ve been bullied, you know, it’s a popularity contest, the peer pressure. – Christy

For the Alumni, the term “vulnerable youth” elicited negative connotations, resonating more so with troubled and distressed youth rather than vulnerable. Hayley recalled on a time where her group was in fact referred to as “troubled youth” and how the group responded to this name:

We kind of laughed and we’re just kind of like, “Yeah, you are *troubled*” and kind of like “you’re troubled, but I don’t think I’m troubled.” But yeah people would be like, “yeah, I guess I am pretty *troubled*” but uh, we kind of laughed. I think we were offended but at the same time we laughed and we’re like “yeah, we’re bad ass kids that need help” you know? Like, “we’re so cool we have anger management.” – Hayley

The Year Two's were asked in the interviews why they thought they were selected to participate in Trails, to identify how they describe themselves. Although the responses to this question fell under the thematic category of troubled youth, the Year Two's never used the term to describe it:

I think it was because of the way that I was acting and the way that I was concealing myself and not talking. They thought I could be a better person than the way I was acting – Phillip

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I know that they don't choose people with straight As or straight Ds or straight Cs, they try to go for like the B average, maybe a little bit of Cs, maybe a little bit of As. They want people who have had maybe a little bit of trouble in school but are still good in some areas, bad in others so they can improve on those areas. I think I may have also got chosen cause I'm like dyslexic, so they may have been like "oh he has a learning disability, lets see if we can like do anything to help him, or he can help somebody else." – Taylor

(2) Enhanced skills and learning experiences

The Alumni group described numerous skills that they believed were enhanced as a result of the Trails program. Among the most popular skills developed were: social and communication skills, leadership skills, listening skills, physical skills, confidence, and compassion. Social skills included the ability to make friends, and open up to the group.

Being a leader, being a good team member, giving proper feedback; all sorts of these skills have been taught, and much earlier than they would have been if they just didn't have Trails – Andrew

Leadership skills embraced the ability to take command, help others, and lead others. Confidence skills considered the ability to express oneself, be more outgoing, and stepping out of one's comfort zone. Compassion involved listening and helping others in need. Physical skills included endurance and strength in the outdoor activities².

³ Text box in peach fill indicate the direct quote of a Year Two participant

The Alumni group discussed how these developed skills have led to important learning experiences. For example, many described how skills enhanced through Trails lead to self-development and becoming a better person. Hayley expressed how Trails taught her not to judge people, to have patience, and to be a role model:

I was able to mentor someone my age, you know, like I was able to share my knowledge about how to act in certain situations, and how to deal with it, and how not to deal with it. – Hayley

Andrew discussed the ability to learn the meaning of happiness; that happiness does exist, and there are places to find it. A few Alumni described their realization that there is a better life, identified strategies developed to take care of the self, and to enhance life by getting involved in positive activities.

In the end, you have to take those skills that you learned into yourself and know that you came out a stronger, better version of yourself. Hopefully, at least for me, it did and does that. – Zoey

A frequently mentioned learning experience by the Alumni was the ability to actually see the advantages in applying Trails skills to everyday life. Andrew and Richard touched upon their experiences:

Often times I really take for granted that I can walk onto a stage without jittering. I can talk to a whole auditorium of people without, you know, freezing up, and um a lot of these skills I've used in the classroom where I can help lead discussions, where I've learned how to organize my group members if I'm in a group...these are the things that I sort of take for granted now, but when I look at it you know they really did come out of Trails." – Andrew

Sometimes I'm feeling depressed like, I'm feeling lonely today; I don't have a girlfriend and blablabla. Almost, um, I can also relate, "oh, you know what? This is nothing compared to the night I spent alone in the woods doing my solo." I was like it's okay to be alone just enjoying life. I compare almost any challenge I have in life with something I did in Trails. – Richard

The Year Two's have already begun to experience improvements in particular skills since they joined Trails. Survival skills, leadership, confidence, communication, listening, responsibility, and teamwork were popular examples. Madison discussed how she found confidence through performing high ropes; an activity she feared and didn't think she was capable of doing.³

High ropes is a new think for me, and when we did it, at the end of everything, I felt more confident; and I believed in myself in more things. Madison

Madison also described a couple of her favourite activities "Sardines" and "Tips," and how they've helped her develop teamwork skills:

Sardines like you just get to run around and have fun and you're still like getting that exercise and getting that communication of like, "we have to do this, we have to do that," and same with Tips; like you have to do a lot of teamwork. – Madison

Soccer and canoeing were other popular examples of teamwork building activities. Weekend themes have also helped the Year Two's understand definitions and meanings, which are then used to further build on their skills. Mary Jane explains how this is transpires:

After lunch or whatever, or in the morning, we'll go and we'll talk about whatever our main topic for the weekend is and then we'll just, we'll be there, and we'll share experiences and everything... We'll talk about that and the meaning of the actual word... It helps expand - like that actual meaning expand - and then people start to know what they're talking about a bit more... One that we did was communication, we did all these outdoor activities and stuff for it and it was like a lot better with like us as a group so like we talked to each other better without yelling or anything. – Mary Jane

Furthermore, a noteworthy observation was how the Year Two's have developed advanced and mature problem solving skills. Phillip described how arguments in the group are handled:

Before we'd always just tell one of the leaders but now we just stay calm and talk to each other about the problems and compromise. – Phillip

The Year Two's also discussed how they have learned how to respect others, be understanding, and non-judgmental.

(3) Importance of the Trails environment

It is the Trails environment that truly allows for the youth's experience to flourish. All descriptions of the environment from the participants were positive. The environment was described as a home away from home; friendly, stress free, beautiful, and safe.

I'd probably describe it as one of the most.. probably heartwarming environments I've ever been in, and if I were to describe it to anybody I'd say it would definitely be a home away from home – Amanda

Whatever was happening at home, you didn't bring that up with you because you know your were going to have a good weekend with people who were actually going to have fun, and who were going to listen to you and give you advice. Andrew

The Alumni often described the environment as a supporting and accepting place to be oneself with no judgment, allowing participants a place for self-growth.

Trails in general is very accepting of like any colour, race, size, everything...I really don't know what it is but when like Trails comes to mind, or like anyone I'm sure who's been there, it's just like, I know I can be real, this is who I am. I don't need to hide or border anything up. I wish I could explain why, or how, but there is no real explanation on how it is or how people react to it. It's just when you step into that building it's just a whole coat you take off, and you are your person, you're not hiding behind shadows or masks, It's you. – Zoey

The Year Two's described similar characteristics when describing the Trails environment. Trails was expressed as a stress-free, safe, and accepting space. Phillip explains how Trails offers an environment where he feels secure and sure of himself:

They don't really judge you by the way you look, or your size. They only tell by your personality – if you're a friendly person or you're not so friendly. It's the friendly environment that we have there, just knowing everybody, knowing that you can stay there and knowing that you feel accepted. I think it's just the way Trails changes you to learn how to accept other people. –Phillip

Mary Jane discusses how the environment is a relief from stresses and expectations from life in Toronto:

It feels nice because this is like our way of getting away from whatever is going on at home or at school and stuff...On the weekends when I have to go to Trails like I feel confident that I'm coming to like another community where everybody still respects me...I almost feel like I'm in a different world when I'm here, with people that like don't know about the issues, or they don't really mind it, and when I go back that issue is like there, but I still feel good about what happened like at Trails with my friends and everything. – Mary Jane

Mary Jane also discusses how the environment is one in which the group wishes they can enjoy for longer:

Usually people are saying, "Oh, I wish the weekend was longer," so we could stay here like a day longer or something. The only time people say something negative like, "oh, I really want to go home," is if they're feeling sick, or if they're just really tired, and even then, they usually want to stay – Mary Jane

(4) A sense of family

Participants unanimously described the group as "one big family." The groups have provided a sense of community, love, trust, acceptance, safety, and support. Understanding how the family environment develops was explored in interviews.

Participants expressed the strong bonds they share with each other through undergoing the same fears, hardships, and achievements.

I have always thought that a true family is when you're there for the good times and the bad times and you're able to laugh about it afterwards. Or you know, like, if you have a brother in the family, like you both go through the same experiences, you grow up the same way, and that's why you consider them family no matter what happens – Richard

Brittany explained how the family experience was further defined through the Trails selection process where the youth have no contribution to who is selected:

It comes to be just like I said throwing a whole bunch of people – in a family you have different personalities, different upbringings, um different views and religions. You can have an aunt who is Muslim and you mom's Christian and your Dad's Buddhist and so...And that's Trails. You can't really pick "oh I want him to come to Trails, I want her to come"...you kind of just get put in an environment like a family that you have no power of picking...And then, at the end of that we're all best friends. And it's kind of like a family cause in a family you have your ups and down, you have your arguments, you have your disagreements, you have your clicking. - Brittany

For some of these Alumni, Trails provided a family when they had no other.

I feel that a lot of participants that go there are looking for that family um.. unconsciously they're looking for acceptance, and they're looking for um mainly acceptance and to be welcomed into any group, you know, to feel wanted, to feel needed, and appreciated, and you know just things that a family would give. – Hayley

Family definitely was not something I ever had. Trails is still my family and it's been through Trails that I've met the best people I've ever met in my lifetime, and people that I know will be in my lifetime until I'm like in my deathbed. So I think looking at it that way I never really had family before I started my first year at Trails. – Amanda

Although family environment provided a lot of support and happiness, it did have its setbacks. The tight-knit family qualities sometimes lead to very territorial groups, where

groups were skeptical of newcomers. A tight-knit family quality sometimes made it hard for newcomers to enter the group and feel welcomed.

We only had one new kid and she did not stay in the program for very long - I think it was about a year and a half. Um and she came in really early so I guess it was more of – I think by that time it was maybe a month in, and groups were forming already, and I guess she just felt sort of left out. – Andrew

I was really protective of the people in my group, and their feelings, and you had to be; we were all so different but yet all so uniquely alike. Um it's one of things where we all put up a defense, like, you can't come in and disrespect or hurt anybody in here. So you have to kind of prove yourself to get in. A lot of people um had to go through some real uphill battles, and I for one can say I was one of those people who made you go through the drills and the tests; I was one of those people. But it's like a defense mechanism you know? You don't want someone to come in and hurt your family. But when that person kind of chiseled their way in, and you let them in, you realize it's just another piece of the puzzle to our family. But to get to show us that you're a piece of the puzzle it was not easy, not easy at all. – Brittany

Some participants described their group as more welcoming than others:

With my group we always accepted a new person in, we would introduce ourselves, we would say, like if they were off by themselves, we would say, "do you want to come sit here and talk with us?" Or one of us, or a couple of us, would go and talk to them, and it was always like we'd try to include them and get them more into it. It was automatically like, "come join!" - Amanda

The Year Two's also expressed their group as "one big family." Participants described the family dynamic as trusting, supportive, and dependable.

Everyone around you will treat you like a family. They'll never let you down, like you can always trust on them. – Justin

The people there are like our family away from our family here in the city. Our relationships bond together with everyone else, and you feel like we need to help each other out with stuff, which our actual family helps us do you know? – Phillip

Taylor and Mary Jane explain that as time continues the family bond seems to grow stronger for their group:

You become good friends, so it's like every single time you go there its not like, "oh I don't really talk to anyone." Every single time you slowly get to know everyone better and better and better – Taylor

Knowing that we have to be with each other for four years, and then some of us if we stay in LIT then five. So like why aren't we gonna open up to them? We're not gonna build up that wall for four years for nothing right? So everyone just kind of became a big like family – Mary Jane

For this group of Year Two's, the family bond has not led to the development of a clique, and has not jeopardized their openness to newcomers:

We're really like welcoming, like when we had [name] and [name] come in as new people, we like greeted them, like we accepted them and not like excluded them from anything... You'll find yourself sitting next to someone on the couch. You pretty much become friends with like everybody, there's no cliques or groups, or anything. Everyone's like one group. – Madison

Amy talked about her experience as a newcomer, describing it as welcoming and positive.

I was like the newcomer cause I was not there in the summer, so I felt kind of odded out. But, still at the same time, people were trying to welcome me. I didn't want to be awkward in the group, so I just stood out, but now I have like a lot of friends at Trails... I feel like I'm not an odd newcomer now. I feel like I fit in somewhere in that whole group. Amy

The Year Two's described their success in becoming one big family through being able to mix with everyone in the group. Justin explained how the family bond has grown much stronger since Year One, since the boys and girls now get to participate in more activities together.

And so like we started talking with the girls a lot, and then we came back to the lodge like a few days later, then we like –instead of like boys and girls – we like kind of like mixed...When that happened we made lots of friends, so like we started talking more, and we wouldn't be shy to say something out loud. – Justin

(5) The role of the counselors

Favourable comments were generally used by the Alumni when describing Trails counselors. Counselors were often described as very calm, caring, and willing to listen and offer advice.

The minute we went to any of the facilitators, they were there in a heartbeat, and they would listen and help us out for however long it took, and they would just always be there – Amanda

An area that elicited mixed reviews was regarding the frequent replacement of counselors. Several Alumni discussed having at least ten to fifteen new counselors in their time at Trails. For some, a flow of new counselors was taken as positive experience, while others found it very upsetting. Andrew described his experience of having at least 10 new counselors as a positive one:

So our counselor roster, sort of just like for our first year, there was maybe three counselor. In our second year there was maybe three counselor, but after that it went really crazy, you know sometimes we'd have a counselor over for maybe three weeks or three weekends and then suddenly a new counselor. Um it was very hectic, by I think it exposed us to new people and forced us to deal with new people in a way that we maybe haven't before. – Andrew

For Andrew, the large number of different counselors taught him that change was okay. The rotation of counselors never seemed to be discussed between the Trails participants and facilitators. Hayley, who expressed having at least 15 counselors in her time, viewed the change in counselors as less positive:

We had a lot of staff that changed a lot – that was one thing I didn't like about Trails because you would create this bond and this family with the staff and then they would leave. But all the staff bring the same skills and values to the table. Hayley

When asked if Trails helped to prepare the youth in case counselors left, Hayley felt there was little communication:

Um, I don't think we ever really talked about it. I think it was more like the girls in the cabin would complain, you know, and then that was it. – Hayley

Other participants also expressed the detrimental affects of the consistent changing of staff:

I think Trails needs to find at least one person who is committed and fully equipped to deal with it because like I said, we did walk in vulnerable, we were a group of vulnerable kids and a lot of them had people walking in out of their life constantly. And I think that kind of sends the wrong image; like even here don't walk in and out, do you know what I mean? I remember from my group when we kind of kept changing counselors, um, cause there's usually four but we usually had only one or two, and the rest just kept fluctuating, so we were like "is there something wrong with us? Are we missing something here?"...I think there should be one person that they get that is there from point a to point b because participants need that. We need that stability...Sometimes what I find happens is that the new councilors will push you further than you can go and they don't get it...Sometimes we're so hard on our self that we don't even realize that we're doing good. Right and we need somebody to let us know and appreciate what we have done. And I think that if you keep changing counselors, they don't see the growth from year one to this, and they don't see how much you've changed, they don't see what's happened, they don't see. They miss out on that. – Brittany

Brittney makes a strong argument as she discusses the vulnerability of Trails participants and how the fluctuation of counselors can hinder youth, making them feel that they are 'disposable'. Britney also brings awareness to the benefits of consistent counselors, as they are able to recognize the growth in the youth throughout their Trails experience. The Year Two's also discussed the positive impact counselors have had in enhancing their confidence, communication, leadership, and teamwork skills. They have played an important role in teaching the youth the benefits from the activities performed at Trails.

They try to give you that motivation and everything and be like, “Okay, but what do you think you can get out of this?” and I’ll be like, “nothing,” and then they’ll tell you what you could get out of something. Be like, “oh, well this can help you later on,” and they kind of make you understand more, and then they try to give you that confidence and that motivation. – Rose

“Challenge by choice” is a practice by counselors that has been successful in building safe and non-judgmental bonds.

If you don’t feel comfortable doing that then they feel totally fine by it, they’ll just be like. “this is challenge by choice, if you feel it’s too much of a challenge then you don’t have to do it.” - Amy

The Year Two’s felt that their counselors listen to their opinions, are encouraging, and are relatable. Phillip described a special bond he holds with a particular leader, when asked how this bond formed he responded:

Cause, well he’s kind of like me in a way too, like the same kind of stuff that we’ve been going through when we were a child. – Phillip

Phillip also discussed how his relationships with counselors grow even stronger over time:

I feel like the relationships between me and the other leaders - we bond a little bit better every time. We just share our feelings with each other. – Phillip

This reinforces the significance of long-term counselors and their impact on Trails youth.

Every time a new leader comes, one of our old leaders always has to leave, and I always feel like I don’t really know this person, and I always feel a little weird around them cause I don’t really know them a lot. – Phillip

(6) The Leadership in Training Program (LIT)

The LIT program was a topic that often emerged in interviews. Most Alumni interviewed were graduates of the LIT program and described it as the next level of Trails; focusing strongly on leadership skills, responsibility, and furthering self-growth.

They really, really emphasize the leader and training part. Um, as an LIT we are um, we are required to come up with our own programs, um, we are required to critique how we perform in leading...we are required to sit down and talk about okay what we did right, what we did wrong, how can we improve, and you know every single day we are in the LIT program um, we're expected to do, um, to push ourselves to new standards...we have to take what we've learnt and we have to build on that and there's a lot of, you know, responsibility that is granted to us because we are after all, um, leaders. – James

For the Alumni, the LIT program was seen an opportunity to apply their Trails learning and be a role model to the younger years. Amanda even described it as a way to give back to the program.

Finding out I was LIT it was like the most amazing feeling cause I get another year of the program, I get to teach younger years all the amazing things Trails taught me, I get to give back to the program that gave me the most. – Amanda

However, the Alumni believed the LIT program was not suitable to every Trails candidate.

LIT is I guess not for everybody because not everyone you know thrives or wants to be in a leadership role, and a lot of the times, pretty much every time, LIT is you know requiring the participants to do exactly that – it requires the participants to step up, you know, to be in the spotlight, to take charge – Andrew

The Year Two's expressed how they feel safe, comfortable, and confident with the current LITs, and described ways that they can relate well to the LITs being close in age. The current LITs have shown to have positive influence and bonds with the Year Two's. Justin discussed that of all the Trails staff, it is the LITs they feel most comfortable:

Cause they're kind of like - we're like close to their age, so like we feel more confident with them. Cause like with grown-ups we don't really feel comfortable around them. Like, if it's like the LITs, which they're like 16 or 17, you feel like much closer to them. Like we feel more um safe around them and stuff, like we feel more confident...everyone in the LIT group they make us feel more mature. - Phillip

The LITs have not only become role models and confidantes, they also confirm for the Year Two's that their fears and struggles during Trails is not unusual.

The LITs, they're really nice because they like teach us stuff that they have learned, like experiences that they've been through...I know if - like the camping trip that we're doing this summer; I really don't want to go to, but like I'm still gonna go to it, but I feel like if they're there and they lived through it, I think I can make it through one summer doing it. -Amy

(7) Self-image before and after Trails

Each Alumnus described a change in the way they view themselves before their involvement in Trails compared with after the Trails experience. Some Alumni described themselves moving from shy, angry, or close-minded to confidant, optimistic, open, and accepting.

I was a very angry child, and I don't know like it was just my upbringing. I was so angry with my life and it really projected in my school life and stuff like that...then I just realized that, "you know what? my attitude, the way that I am, is not gonna really help my situation"...So that's what really made me change, like Trails gave me the practice and I would bring that back to school and then a lot of people they recognized that once I joined the program that I had changed. - Christy

I'm an only child, it was only my mom and me, so I had to grow up fast. So interacting with people my own age - I wasn't - I didn't feel comfortable, but I never admitted to myself that I was afraid of it and it eventually lead to me just being too much of an independent person. Which I am an independent person, but I am different now, cause at the same time I am independent I know when to ask for help, or when to seek help when needed...I was able to see myself and see that I needed to interact more with people my own age and be more comfortable actually learning my emotions, because I was independent because I was afraid to show my fears. - Richard

Amanda discussed not only seeing a change in herself, but also in her fellow group members:

I've seen other people who have gone from hiding under tables to being the ones on top of the tables, dancing, doing activities, and you know hiding in the corner with books to the ones leading the discussions and it's really kind of like – Trails teaches you how to find your voice and how to use it to the best way that is yourself. – Amanda

The Alumni also discussed how they now see a purpose to activities that once seemed futile, and have taken their learnings from the Trails experience and applied it to their everyday life.

But I mean some people – Trails affects some people after the graduate, like 2 years later they'll be able to reflect back on Trails and be like, "Oh yeah I learnt this," like, "I can apply this now," and now that I'm at a stage in life where I can apply what I've learnt basically...I think I apply it everyday. – Hayley

Many Alumni expressed how Trails has molded them into a better version of themselves, and have Trails to thank for the person they are today.

I kind of walked into Trails as a hard ass you can kind of say, and I walked out of trails open -minded and accepting and understanding...if I didn't come to Trails I think I would have been continued on the same path that I was on and I think eventually it would have caught up to me and screwed me over. Brittany

I definitely would not have the courage or strength that I have. I wouldn't be anywhere near where I'm at. I wouldn't even be probably a quarter of the person that I am right now – Amanda

The current Year Two's indicated that they have already noticed a change in themselves since joining Trails:

I'm a lot more talkative than I used to be. I'm not as shy as I used to be either...I would always just follow what other people say...I'm a lot more confident than I used to be and I'm pretty smart too – Justin

The Year Two's also discussed how Trails has enhanced their lives in school and at home.

I'm doing better in school on my report card. I was really happy because I got four A's, I almost never got an A on my report card. – Taylor

I take initiative in my class and like show people that I know the math and stuff and before I went to Trails I was scared to go up in front of people and talk, but now, like in my class, I stand up and I tell them about this and I present all my projects and stuff – Amy

Like my mom notices it like after the argument between me and my dad I'll go to her and she'll be like, "I realize that you didn't yell back or anything, or that you didn't jump to any conclusions with the conversation"...It feels nice cause like, I feel like I'm a lot closer with my mom that I was, and I feel like my mom's probably my best friend now – Mary Jane

Future Perspectives:

When asking the Year Two's what they plan to get out of Trails they hoped to further strengthen skills such as leadership, listening, confidence, open-mindedness, and academics.

I hope that by the end of this people will like notice, like right away, they'll notice that like I'm a nice person and I'll come off as a good person. – Mary Jane

I hope to be like better at like learning, I want to have a good high school. I'm gonna try to go for LIT too. – Taylor

(8) Transitioning out of Trails

The topic of leaving Trails resulted in a range of responses from the Alumni. Some discussed the experience as one in which they felt ready, while others felt very lost after Trails graduation. Those who didn't feel ready to leave identified themselves as being at a very vulnerable stage in their life, and without the support of Trails they found it very difficult to get by.

After I left Trails, personally for me, I didn't know what to do anymore because like um I basically got kicked out of my house, I was no longer part of Trails cause I graduated. Like, things were very low, yeah, and I was - basically I was working to support myself. – Christy

We didn't think there was going to be an end...I had my wings, but I kind of was just able to flap them, I wasn't able to fly yet,...I did actually go into massive depression cause I was – and I did try to kill myself and that had to do with um, I had to leave Trails and it was also graduation in school so I was left I have no idea what I'm gonna do now. – Richard

Alternatively, Zoey and Brittany believed they were ready to leave Trails. They believed Trails gave them the skills to be independent and successful; but they too discussed a sense of initial loss, and the inability to make use of the Trails skills.

For me it hit me hard just because I was so used to that and knowing that I could turn to them on that weekend and just venting everything and just being like, this is what happened through the 3 weeks that we've been away from each other or whatever amount of time And for that disappearing it kind of like broke me, I guess, and it took a while to pick up those pieces again and put it together and be like, "No. Yes it is over, but it doesn't mean what I've learnt is over"...Um so for the first like year and a bit it was kind of really rough and I didn't know where to go and I was kind of back in that stage of grade 6 where I was that really pressured girl and I didn't know what to do...But it just takes that one morning you wake up and you realize like what you're doing is you're just going back in the past where you should just move forward and forget what happened and take the good and move on. – Zoey

I was ready to leave Trails because I had what I needed and I gained a whole lot of experience, a whole lot of um self-confidence and self-image and um just how perception of how I just see everything overall and I knew I was ready to leave. Did I want to leave? No...for me it was just like I was still going through that hard time in my life where I was at the end of it but I still needed that um guidance and that support. So it's kind of like, "okay when I leave Trails where do I find it now?" And this is a trust and a friendship I built over 5 years. You know what I mean? So where do I get what I just built for 5 years again after it was taken away from me...it's where do I get the support I had after I leave? It's not really, do I want to leave. I think for a lot of people it becomes, where to I get that support?...But at the same time you start to realize I was equip with everything I need to find those relationships and build those back. Yeah I am going to have to start from square one but I know how to do it now and keep it positive. – Brittany

Keeping in Touch

When asking the Alumni if they remained in contact with their graduate group and counselors, most responded that they did so. The benefits of social media proved to be useful in staying in touch.

Everybody's busy and all over the place but we pretty much - like I have most of them on Facebook, so I kind of stalk their pages to see where they're at and how they're doing and stuff and maybe like once a year you send out, "how are going doing? What's going on?" But we all know that if we need that support we can all go back to each other no problem – Brittany

Although communication may not be as consistent as before, the Alumni still expressed a supportive bond between members of the group.

Yes we all do still communicate, and there are certain people I talk to more than I did with the others, um, but it's one of those things where the program it made us all a family so you know that in the end you'll still have them to turn to. – Zoey

When asking the Alumni whether they would attend a Trails event that brought together past Alumni and counselors they were very interested.

I would definitely go...cause it's like you're getting together with a whole group of people you know, people you haven't seen or spoken to in a while, people that you've heard about from other counselors who may have worked with them, and sometimes family relations of people that you were in groups with or people that you worked with, and it's kind of like everybody coming together, and it becomes one huge group of like positivity and you just get to hear a lot more memories about Trails and so much more, and it just becomes like one big happy moment. – Amanda

I would attend it. I would prefer something more with our group, like the people - my family - I would prefer it more with them. I think that would be a more kind of hit it home, a home run do you know what I mean?...I think it would be nice if we had like um...one more, or not even a weekend, even like a night to just go up there and just sleep as one as a group...I think that would be really beautiful, I think that would be a secret closure to everything because now we realize we've matured, we moved on, we're older, but we still know that it's almost just like saying, "I'm here not matter what." Yeah I think that would be really nice. But even if it's a big thing I'll still attend. – Brittany

(9) Accessing new experiences

Having access to new experiences was identified as a benefit resulting from Trails that the participants appreciated considerably. The Alumni, growing up in inner city Toronto, discussed how Trails provided them with outdoors experiences and activities that they had never expected to experience.

I was raised in Toronto and Toronto is metropolis, its concrete, sidewalks, and parks. Um, having been to places like Georgian Bay to Algonquin Park, its like, um, hearing about somewhere and actually going there; the place doesn't, like, to me, the outdoors seemed like such an abstract concept before I got into a canoe and paddled down you know miles of river where not a single sole can be seen. You know, it's an entirely different atmosphere and something that I can't image, you know, I can't guess this is what the outdoors is going to be like – no it's something that I really had to experience. – Andrew

I know how to camp...I know how to start a fire, I know how to canoe, how to be at the back of the canoe, all these things you know I can go to a cottage with my friends and they wouldn't know how to start the boat from the back, you know, from the back of the canoe and I'll be like "I can." And I have stories to share with people about it, and it's just you're a more interesting person, more experienced. – Hayley

Hayley also reminisced about her trip in LIT to the border of Alaska and Yukon; a trip she'd never imagined taking:

Literally like we climbed a mountain and once you get to the top you're like at the border of Alaska and Yukon. It was breathtaking that was just like super – Hayley

Brittany spoke of her experience canoeing as a visual minority.

I think it was to give us the experience that we might have not gotten and to take us out of those boxes that people might throw us in, and to show them that, “hey, just because I lived here, or just because I live like this, does not mean that I don't do the same thing as you do.” At the end of the day, we're all human and we all find it fun, you know, fun is fun, no matter. You can't put a colour or a race on fun...We tend to categorize things – this sport is only for one group of people. Says who?...Why do we have to put a face on fun? – Brittany

The Year Two's are already appreciating the new experiences Trails offers them.

Since I go up every week, like on the weekends, it's like I get a lot of fresh air. Like here, sometimes I go out depending on the day and during winter I rarely ever go out. Like I'll go out to play with my friends on a nice day with packing snow but other than that I don't go out in the winter – Taylor

Phillip discussed how Trails activities were initially very new, challenging, and frightening.

I was like, “Oh my God I don't want to do this, it's too hard, I'm not used to it.” But then after I started getting used to it, I always wanted to do it – Phillip

Mary Jane explained how the difference in the Trails environment offers a privilege many in the inner city Toronto don't get to experience.

They have more of a negative attitude than the people at Trials cause they don't have that experience so that's what kind of makes them different, the people at Trails are more open...When you're in Toronto, like everything is fast though, like right away you have to do this...Like there is no thinking about your life. – Mary Jane

(10) Feeling Important, Valuable, and Proud

The ways in which Trails has helped their participants feel important, valuable, and proud of themselves are truly touching. Amanda and Brittany discussed how they feel proud of their accomplishments. Amanda explained what it's like talking about Trails to her friends:

Once I tell them I've been through Trails they actually think it's phenomenal what the program is, and tell them things I've learned and different things like that and they're actually amazed that for instance someone like me could go through that kind of program and prosper so much from it. – Amanda

Amanda is proud to share her Trails experience and her achievements with others. Brittany described her new realization of her potential:

In my eyes it's just like "whoa, I never knew that was there, I never knew this was there, I never knew I could do that, I never knew I could do this. So it opens up a whole new site on life, on how far you can go. – Brittany

Amanda and Richard also discussed how Trails allowed them to feel important, valuable, and loved.

I knew there was a lot of things that in truth I needed that I was just not getting, and going through Trails, honestly, I always needed to feel I was loved and things like that and I always got that when I was at Trails. – Amanda

It's actually a big step to not be humble and say, "you know what? I am a really important part of Trails." Obviously it gives me the confidence to say, "you know what? I am part of my community and I am able to have an impact," and that's important. – Richard

The Year Two's have already begun to express pride in their accomplishments at Trails.

High ropes, where you have to go climb up high even though you have a harness and stuff, I'm really freaked out about heights, going up there was even trying to do it was more of a challenge cause I couldn't even look down without getting dizzy. But I still tried and I went up to the tree. And then I was like, "oh my God I can't do this anymore," and they told me it was fine so I can just come back down, and I was like conquered my fear of heights – Phillip

All the Year Two's interviewed expressed feeling proud, important, and unique to have been accepted into Trails.

You were chosen of 1 of the ten guys out of like hundreds and hundreds...I felt like I was really happy. My family was happy too and all of my friends are happy for me – Taylor

Well, I felt like I was special...I felt like, "oh my gosh I got selected but nobody else that like tried got in," and I felt like a million dollars that day – Amy

DISCUSSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Study results indicate that participants are overall very favourable about the Trails program and their experience. Trails works well to provide a supportive learning atmosphere for youth to flourish. The Trails environment, group environment, activities, and the role of leaders have played a vital role in youth's experience and the success of Trails. Although these areas provide numerous advantages for the program there are some areas that warrant attention. The group environment, for example, offers youth support, family, and belonging. However, the tight-knit group has sometimes resulted in the formation of cliques; making it difficult for newcomers to integrate. A "buddy" system could be an effective solution to this issue. The buddy system could select a Trails participant, who holds exceptional leadership and welcoming qualities, to take the newcomer under their wing and introduce them to the Trails lifestyle. The newcomer would follow their buddy for the weekend performing all the same activities. Trails participants may be more accepting to newcomers when having a friend introduce them

to the group rather than an authority. This could be an effective way to ease integration without formality. The buddy system may also provide benefits to the selected “buddy” as it confirms the participant possess important Trails qualities. The honour of being selected could even enhance the participant’s leadership and acceptance qualities, as well as inspire others in the group to follow suit.

A constant change of counselors is also an area of concern. The result of several counselors can lead to youth feeling rejected and trivial. Participants confessed to feeling at fault for the change in counselors; wondering if they were doing something wrong. However, if handled correctly the change of counselors can be a positive learning experience. Having counselors flow in and out of Trails can teach youth that change is a common life experience, and that change is okay. In order to create a positive experience, Trails authorities could work to be more communicative with the youth when counselors change; to remind them that they are not at fault, and that change is okay. An acceptance to change could also improve the group’s acceptance of newcomers.

Being aware of how Trails youth perceives terminology is also an area of concern. The term “vulnerable youth” is not preferred by Trails participants. It was perceived to have pejorative association with being “troubled” or inferior to other youth. Furthermore, many believed the term “vulnerable youth” does not differentiate the youth in the program from others. Trails could work to be more conscious of the negative effects this terminology can have on its participants. Trails could also review how the program is marketed to lessen the negative associations of “vulnerable youth.”

Finally the transition into life after Trails is an immense challenge. Many youth feel lost and dejected without the support of Trails. The youth admitted to feeling as if everything had come to an end, not knowing where to turn to, and unable to predict their future. Trails could work to ensure the youth are aware that Trails will come to an end, and reinforce how Trails acts as a stepping-stone for the future. If the youth are better able to see how Trails experiences can be useful after Trails they may experience an easier transition into life after Trails. An “alumni survival guide,” given to Trails graduates, could help to remind youth of the usefulness of their learnings, how to cope when feeling lost, and even act as a tangible reminder of support. A mentorship program could also be a very beneficial approach to ease transition. A mentorship program could

provide a space in which new graduates could reach out to past graduates for support. Past graduates, having been in the same situation, can offer advice and guidance. Seeing the success of past graduates could also help to boost the spirits of new graduates and confirm a happy life after Trails. The Trails participants were also favourable towards having an alumni event that would reunite Trails alumni; this could also act as a reminder of Trails support and belonging.

Ultimately Trails has a resounding impact on youth in the program. Analysis supports Trails' success in motivating and inspiring youth to build knowledge, skills, and confidence to better their life. A few changes to Trails can further strengthen their program and provide youth the utmost experience.

It's like we are a flock of birds and you're in that V formation flying in the sky. If someone is injured that one bird will follow you. If the leader gets tired, they will switch. And in the end you will always have these people backing you up and knowing that you can trust people in the world and you don't have to be so self-inflicted. And it's definitely something that makes you grow. – Zoey

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APPENDIX A

LETTERS OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT FOR PAST AND CURRENT PARTICIPANTS

LETTER OF INFORMATION TO: ALUMNI PARTICIPANT

February 11th, 2012

Since 1992, Trails Youth Initiatives has been providing support to vulnerable youth from the Toronto region which allows them to become contributing members to their communities. Programs like Trails focus on system-wide interventions rather than focusing solely on the individual. Offering at-risk youth opportunities that develop the skills necessary to overcome obstacles enables them to build a record of success and to create meaningful choices for themselves.

Dear Trails Youth Alumni:

I am writing to let you know that Trails has agreed to work with *Dr. Bruce Ferguson & Dr. Katherine Boydell of Sick Kids Community Health Systems Resource Group (CHSRG)*, in order to assist us with our efforts to collect information about the Trails Program and model.

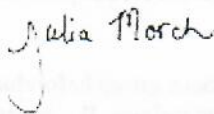
We are inviting 8 Alumni on a first come first serve basis to volunteer to be part of this research project. You will have the opportunity to participate in a focus group moderated by a CHSRG research assistant Hannah Sunderani. The group will be asked to help us generate questions for the research project. This focus group will take about 1.5 hours and will be conducted at 51 Yonge Street, Wednesday February 22nd, 2012 from 5:00 p.m.-6:30 p.m. Next, there will be an opportunity to participate in a follow up one-to-one interview with research assistant, Hannah Sunderani. This interview will take place Wednesday March 7th & Thursday March 8th, 2012 at 51 Yonge Street. These interview slots will be organized collectively and will take place from 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m. will be about 1.5 hours. Alumni can choose to be involved in the focus group or the interview or both.

Participation in this study is voluntary and the decision to participate is you and your child's. If you choose to volunteer you will need to fill out the appropriate consent form included in this package. Trails role is to help facilitate the logistics, and I will act a liaison only and will not be part of the interviews/or focus groups.

If you have any questions, please feel free to give us a call at 905-036-0100 ext. 1.

Yours Sincerely,

Regards,



Julia Morch
Executive Director
Trails Youth Initiatives Inc.
www.trails.ca julia@trails.ca

LETTER OF INFORMATION #2 TO: ALUMNI PARTICIPANT

Dear Trails Alumni:

My name is Hannah Sunderani and I am writing to ask if you would like to participate in a study on your perspectives on your experiences in this program.

This research has the support of Trails and Julia Morch, the Executive Director. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will not affect your role in/ relationship with this program.

There are three goals of this research:

1. To better understand the experiences of youth in this program
2. To find out how these experiences may have benefited them and
3. To find out what parts of the program they think were most effective

To achieve these goals I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group and/or one-one interview that I will conduct. The focus group and interview will take place at the program site at a time convenient to you and will last for approximately one to one and a half hours. Interview questions will focus on your experiences as a participant in the Trails program. The interview questions will be provided to you at least one day in advance of the interview. These interviews will be confidential. I do not foresee any risks involved in your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your position in the program. You may also ask for any or all of your data to be removed at any time.

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into text. Text of the interview will be sent to you by mail or e-mail to read to make sure you are comfortable including everything that is in the transcript. If you prefer, we can meet to review the transcript together. At this time you may change or remove any part of the transcript. The privacy of the people who participate in this study will be protected to the fullest extent possible. These are steps that will be taken to protect your privacy

- Interviews will be audio recorded and then later transcribed. The audio file will then be destroyed.
- None of the data will contain your name or the name or location of the organization.
- Pseudonyms will be used to replace all names in the data to protect your identity and others you might talk about.
- Data will be password protected and kept in a locked office
- The information given in interviews will be published as part of report for Trails, with no identifying information...
- The study may also be presented at academic conferences, but your name will not be attached to the information.

In addition to the interview process, we plan to conduct a focus group beforehand to allow youth a chance to help us to identify the important questions to ask in the interviews. If you are interested in being part of this focus group only or in addition to the interview, we would be pleased to have you do so. The same care to protect confidentiality and anonymity will occur with the focus group component of the research.

CONSENT FORM: ALUMNI PARTICIPANT

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research project

Title: Exploring the Perspectives of Youth involved in the Trails Program

I have read and kept a copy of the letter of information and had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to investigate how this program may have benefited youth and which parts of the program youth feel were most effective.

I understand that my participation will be in the form of interview and/or participation in a focus group, each will involve a time commitment of one hour to an hour and a half.

I understand that these interviews will be audio recorded.

I understand that confidentiality will be protected to the fullest extent possible by appropriate storage and access of data and by the use of a pseudonym (a name that I can choose).

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences and can ask for all or part of my data to be removed.

I understand that I can contact _____.

Please sign a copy of this Consent Form and return it to Hannah Sunderani.

Please keep one copy for your own records

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Name of Alumni (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____ Telephone number _____

LETTER OF INFORMATION: YEAR TWO PARTICIPANTS

February 11th, 2012

Since 1992, Trails Youth Initiatives has been providing support to vulnerable youth from the Toronto region which allows them to become contributing members to their communities. Programs like Trails focus on system-wide interventions rather than focusing solely on the individual. Offering at-risk youth opportunities that develop the skills necessary to overcome obstacles enables them to build a record of success and to create meaningful choices for themselves.

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian and Trails Youth Participants:

I am writing to let you know that Trails has agreed to work with *Dr. Bruce Ferguson & Dr. Katherine Boydell of Sick Kids Community Health Systems Resource Group (CHSRG)*, in order to assist us with our efforts to collect information about the Trails Program and model.

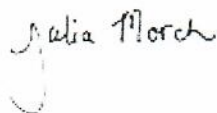
We are inviting 8 participants on a first come first serve basis from Year 2 Program to volunteer to be part of this research project. Your son or daughter will have the opportunity to participate in a focus group moderated by a CHSRG research assistant Hannah Sunderani. The group will be asked to help us generate questions for the research project. This focus group will take about 1.5 hours and will be conducted at the Trails site Saturday March 10th 2012 from 6:30-7:30 p.m. Next, there will be an opportunity to participate in a follow up one-to-one interview with research assistant, Hannah Sunderani. This interview will take place between March 19th-April 12, 2012 after school or on a weekend at a mutually convenient location (home, local library etc). These interviews will be about 1.5 hours. Participants can choose to be involved in the focus group or the interview or both.

Participation in this study is voluntary and the decision to participate is you and your child's. If you choose to volunteer you will need to fill out the appropriate consent form included in this package. Trails role is to help facilitate the logistics, and I will act a liaison only and will not be part of the interviews/or focus groups.

If you have any questions, please feel free to give us a call at 905-036-0100 ext. 1.

Yours Sincerely,

Regards,



Julia Morch
Executive Director
Trails Youth Initiatives Inc.
www.trails.ca julia@trails.ca

LETTER OF INFORMATION #2: YEAR TWO PARTICIPANTS

Dear participant:

My name is Hannah Sunderani and I am writing to ask if you would like to participate in a study on your perspectives on your experiences in this program.

This research has the support of Trails and Julia Morch, the Executive Director. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will not affect your role in/ relationship with this program.

There are three goals of this research:

1. To better understand the experiences of youth in this program
2. To find out how these experiences may have benefited them and
3. To find out what parts of the program they think were most effective

To achieve these goals I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group and/or one-one interview that I will conduct. The focus group and interview will take place at the program site at a time convenient to you and will last for approximately one to one and a half hours. Interview questions will focus on your experiences as a participant in the Trails program. The interview questions will be provided to you at least one day in advance of the interview. These interviews will be confidential. I do not foresee any risks involved in your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your position in the program. You may also ask for any or all of your data to be removed at any time.

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into text. Text of the interview will be sent to you by mail or e-mail to read to make sure you are comfortable including everything that is in the transcript. If you prefer, we can meet to review the transcript together. At this time you may change or remove any part of the transcript. The privacy of the people who participate in this study will be protected to the fullest extent possible. These are steps that will be taken to protect your privacy

- Interviews will be audio recorded and then later transcribed. The audio file will then be destroyed.
- None of the data will contain your name or the name or location of the organization.
- Pseudonyms will be used to replace all names in the data to protect your identity and others you might talk about.
- Data will be password protected and kept in a locked office
- The information given in interviews will be published as part of report for Trails, with no identifying information..
- The study may also be presented at academic conferences, but your name will not be attached to the information.

In addition to the interview process, we plan to conduct a focus group beforehand to allow youth a chance to help us to identify the important questions to ask in the interviews. If you are interested in being part of this focus group only or in addition to the interview, we would be pleased to have you do so. The same care to protect confidentiality and anonymity will occur with the focus group component of the research.

CONSENT FORM: YEAR TWO PARTICIPANTS

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I understand that I can contact _____.

Please sign a copy of this Consent Form and return it to Hannah Sunderani.

Please keep one copy for your own records

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Name of current participant (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____ Telephone number _____

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE FOR PAST AND CURRENT PARTICIPANTS

Interview Questions for Alumni and Year Two Participants

1. Tell me what you think are the main purposes of the Trails program?
2. What do you think are the best things about the program? Why? Can you describe specific examples?
3. What are things about the program that aren't so good? that you think can be done differently? better?
4. What do you think are the most important lessons that youth leave the program with?
5. In what ways has your involvement in Trails impacted you? (positively and/or negatively)?
6. If you had to tell someone else about the program, what would you say? How would you describe it?
7. What personal qualities have been brought out or emphasizes from your participation in the program?
8. Describe your leaders in the program what are they like, how have they influenced you?
9. How has the program affected your relationships with others?
 - a. Inside the program
 - b. Outside the program
10. If you weren't in the program how would you be different? What do you think you would be doing in that time that you're usually at trails?
11. Why do you think you were selected to participate in the trails program?
12. What questions do you think we should ask other kids in the one-to-one interviews?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ALUMNI AND CURRENT PARTICIPANTS

Interview Questions for Alumni Participants

1. Can you tell me a little bit about the Trails environment? How would you describe it if someone who had never heard about it asked you?
2. How do you feel about the phrase “vulnerable youth”? Does this describe Trails kids? Do you believe that you were a “vulnerable youth” when you joined Trails?
 - Describe the kind of person that is best suited for the Trails program? Why is this type of person suitable?
3. Can you describe the individual skills and qualities that are enhanced from participating in Trails?
4. Trails is often described as “one big family.” Can you expand on this description? How does this come to be? What was your role in the “family”?
5. Describe your most memorable activities. What did you gain from them?
 - Were there any activities you didn’t see a point in doing?
6. If there was a day where you weren’t feeling your best, feeling agitated, or angry, how was it handled by your peers and leaders?
7. Were you in the L.I.T program? If so, what was your experience? How would you describe it or recommend it to younger kids in the program?
8. When do you find your experiences at Trails useful?
9. Do you still communicate with people in the program? Peers, leaders, or both? How often do you communicate with them?
10. Did Trails influence the ways you treat others? How do you treat people differently now? How do others treat you differently?
11. If Trails set up an Alumni event and invited past leaders and alumni would you go? Would you find it beneficial?
12. How would you be different if you never went to Trails?
13. Do you feel differently about the arts and outdoors after participating in Trails? In what ways?
14. How do you think Trails should promote and educate kids about their program?
15. What happens to you after Trails? Did Trails prepare you for life after you graduate the program? Did you feel ready to leave the program?
16. Did you (or do you know anyone who) revert back to old habits and qualities after graduating? What do you think would/could stop that from happening?
17. Are there any criticisms you have about how Trails runs the program? Is there anything you would change?
18. What do you think Trails ultimate goal is?

Interview Questions for Year Two Participants

1. Can you describe the trails environment?
 - a. How is it different to other places you hang out (school/home)
2. Trails are often described as one big family. Can you tell me a bit about this? How does this come to be?