

2019-08-08

# Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreational environment in adolescent emotional safety

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Wong, J. B.-G. (2019). Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreational environment in adolescent emotional safety (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/110708>

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreational environment in adolescent  
emotional safety

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN KINESIOLOGY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

AUGUST, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Afterschool recreational environments are valued for their contributions to adolescent development, and can be especially beneficial in low-income communities. However, attending a program is not necessarily sufficient for effective development. Afterschool programs can be enhanced by ensuring the spaces are emotionally safe, an attribute valued by adolescents. Social relationships and aspects of the physical environment have the potential to influence feelings of emotional safety; however, most of the existing literature on emotional safety focuses on young children and early adolescents. The purpose of this study was to explore adolescents' perspectives of their interactions with their peers and the recreational environment, and how these interactions may contribute to their feelings of emotional safety. A qualitative case study was conducted with afterschool programs in low-income neighbourhoods in Calgary, Alberta. Adolescent experiences of emotional safety were explored through interviews with ten 11-15-year-old adolescents, and ten program staff. Adolescents expressed feeling emotionally safe when they and their problems were understood, not attacked, and did not need to be hidden. Youth expressed that the size of, familiarity with, and materials in a space affected their feelings of freedom and their interactions with peers and staff, which had implications for emotional safety. Youth noted that when messages supporting emotional safety were communicated verbally by staff, or displayed throughout the spaces, they supported their emotional safety. Findings suggest the need for youth to have acceptance from their peers, environments that are home-like, and relationships that provide youth an outlet to share. Recommendations are for staff to communicate with youth using language that facilitates trust, having sports and non-sport activities in programming to prevent division and exclusion, and having private areas that allow

for youth to separate themselves if needed. These recommendations may also have application in informing development of emotionally safe recreational contexts in communities.

Keywords: youth, social relationships, built environment, physical activity

## **PREFACE**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, J. B. Wong. The study reported in Chapters 3-5 was covered by Ethics ID: REB18-0520, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board for the project “Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreational environment in adolescent emotional safety,” on August 27, 2018.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gives me joy and strength, and deserves all of the credit for this work.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Meghan McDonough, who helped me to grow as a researcher and develop my passion for youth-based work, and whom I have great respect for. She pushed me to be better, to strive harder than I have ever done in my work and writing and tirelessly edited and advised me along this journey.

Thank you to my committee members Dr. William Bridel and Dr. Nicole Culos-Reed, who were constant friendly faces around the faculty, and always willing to give advice.

Thank you to Calgary AfterSchool and all of the participants for welcoming me into their space and helping me and allowing me to learn from them.

Thank you to my lab mates, especially Michelle, for being a constant source of support and encouragement during this. I have loved being a part of this journey with you all.

And last but not least, thank you to my parents, my sister, the Parkin family, and my husband Eddy, who encouraged me and supported me through countless late nights, and believed in me every step of the way.

**DEDICATION**

To my dad, who continually inspires me with his love of learning to always ask questions and seek answers, to work hard, and to never give up. Thanks for bringing me on adventures and filling my head with facts and wisdom.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### **Emotional Safety in Afterschool Youth Programs**

Afterschool recreational contexts provide youth with opportunities for growth through unstructured play, academic support, socialization, physical activity, and leadership (Hall, Williams, & Daniel, 2010; The City of Calgary, 2017). Unstructured play, physical activities, and the potential to connect with friends make programs an attractive afterschool option for youth (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003). Youth attendance in afterschool programs has been suggested to lead to decreases in afterschool youth crime (Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000), and decreased likelihood of adolescents engaging in problem behaviours as they age (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003). Low-cost or free programs can be especially beneficial for youth from low-income or high-poverty neighbourhoods, where afterschool programs have been associated with numerous positive developmental outcomes such as increases in perceived physical competence and self-worth (Quane & Rankin, 2006). However, although many afterschool programs have a significant overall positive impact on youth, not all afterschool programs have been found to be effective in producing positive development in youth (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). This suggests that attendance in an afterschool program is not effective in and of itself, and attendance must be considered with the content and context of programs in order to produce meaningful effects in youth.

Fostering physical and psychological safety in programs is important for development of positive outcomes in youth such as good mental health, problem-solving skills, school performance, and positive peer relations (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Youth tend to value environments where they feel respected and safe (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013), and physical and emotional safety have been identified by

elementary, middle, and high school youth as desirable features of afterschool facilities (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). The desire to attend afterschool programs is often higher among youth who perceive that the program will ensure their safety, primarily physically, but also emotionally (Hall et al., 2010; Tuason, Marcetic, Roberts, Stuart, & Rearick, 2009). Research suggests that afterschool programs can help to minimize toxic conditions youth may experience at home, school, or in their other contexts by acting as a buffer (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). Since youth who reside in low-income neighbourhoods often face higher risks to their safety and lower availability of recreational spaces (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, Page, & Popkin, 2006), providing a safe afterschool space where youth can go can be extremely beneficial for them. However, youth in afterschool programs have been found to experience less emotional support from program staff in comparison to youth in other afterschool activities and sports (Kataoka & Vandell, 2013). Thus, there is potential for enhancing the effectiveness of afterschool programs, especially in low-income neighbourhoods, by ensuring emotional safety in these recreational spaces.

Emotionally safe spaces have been described by adolescents as spaces where one feels trusted, secure, accepted, valued, connected, respected, and competent (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Eriksen, 1985; Lee, Borden, Serido, & Perkins, 2009). Since perceptions of emotional safety can differ among age groups, programs should take into account adolescent opinions in order to have a meaningful impact on enhancing emotional safety for the youth they serve (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004). Furthermore, older adolescents are less likely to admit feeling hurt or affected by others in afterschool settings than younger adolescents (Tuason et al., 2009), suggesting that age-specific adolescent perspectives should be considered when studying

afterschool programs. As such, this study focussed on early and middle adolescents, as they are infrequently highlighted in literature surrounding emotional safety and physical activity.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework

#### Defining emotional safety.

While the term emotional safety has resonance in practical settings working with youth, emotional safety is not consistently defined. Studies examining emotional safety conceptualize it as comprising some combination of inclusion, belonging, trust, care, and the absence of bullying and exclusion (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Eriksen, 1985; Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000; Lee et al., 2009). Furthermore, some studies use similar terms such as “psychological safety” or “safety that is more emotional than physical,” to describe emotional safety (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Lee et al., 2009). The concept of emotional safety has been described by adolescents in afterschool programs as feeling secure, accepted, connected, and able to be themselves (Eriksen, 1985; Halpern et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2009). When spaces are emotionally safe, adolescents feel able to talk about difficult experiences, get advice solving problems, and share secrets (Diversi & Mecham, 2005). Feelings of trust, value, respect, and competency were also associated with emotional safety in recreational spaces (Eriksen, 1985). Adolescents have associated emotional safety with feeling like a family: spaces where they have access to resources and support unconditionally (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Halpern et al., 2000). Among youth with gang-related backgrounds, emotional safety in afterschool programs has given them an opportunity to regain some of the childhood experiences that they had lost through their gang involvement (Halpern et al., 2000). Youth have described emotional safety in afterschool locations as being able to feel relaxed and comfortable discussing personal problems (Strobel et al., 2008). The hope is that the findings from this study will confirm and add to these existing descriptions, and add to our understanding of emotional safety with the adolescent population.

**Adolescence, peer relationships, and self-perceptions.**

While chronological age is not a strict marker of development, early adolescents are generally considered as those between approximately 11-13 years old (Harter, 2012). At this stage, adolescents tend to be preoccupied with the opinions of their peers, which can result in fluctuations in their self-esteem. Middle adolescents can be described as those between 14-16 years old. This group tends to show lower self-esteem in comparison to early adolescents due to a greater awareness of how they are perceived by others, and what roles they are expected to play in significant relationships. The tendency for early and middle adolescents to place heightened importance on peer feedback, peer norms, and their own perceptions of what their peers may think, makes it common for adolescents to experience periods of low levels of perceived peer approval and fluctuating self-esteem during this period (Harter, 2012). Since emotional safety can be influenced by an individual's perceptions, examining early and middle adolescents' perspectives on emotional safety can provide specific insight into what impacts their feelings of emotional safety and how afterschool programs can encourage their development. This study will use the terms "adolescent" and "youth" interchangeably to refer to early and middle adolescents.

**Ecological models.**

Ecological models offer a useful framework for exploring adolescent emotional safety in afterschool programs because they explain how human development is a product of the interactions between the individual and the surrounding environment over time. The bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) highlights how development is influenced by an individual's context. This context is described in terms of five nested ecological systems ordered from the individual's most proximal environmental

interactions to the most distal. It encompasses an individual's immediate human and environmental relationships (microsystem), the interactions that exist between microsystems (mesosystem), the indirect relationships that affect a person's immediate environment (exosystem), the cultural and societal norms that surround an individual (macrosystem), and the interaction of these systems with each other over time (chronosystem). This study is informed by the bioecological model, and a similar ecological model adapted to the physical activity domain (Sallis, Floyd, Rodríguez, & Saelens, 2012), which focuses on the influence of the physical activity environment on individual development. To explore each aspect of context in the model, this study looked at youth interactions with peers and with staff (microsystem), the interactions amongst adolescents' peers and staff in the afterschool program context (mesosystem), the institution of the City/Calgary recreation, the physical environment of the program spaces, and the neighbourhoods within which the afterschool program sites were situated (exosystem), and the societal and cultural views towards these neighbourhoods over the course of the study (macrosystem and chronosystem).

The bioecological model suggests that development is influenced by social and cultural environments, community and institutional built environments, and policies. The individual is at the centre of the model, as their biology, psychology, and skills influence how they perceive and interact with the surrounding environment. Due to the reciprocal interaction between the individual and the surrounding environments, changes that influence emotional safety must occur in both the individual level as well as the surrounding environments to be the most effective. Aspects of the environment can be modified to enhance the interactions within the social environment and influence the individual. Afterschool programs can aim to address the modifiable components by taking into consideration the influences on emotional safety and types

of social interactions that exist in the presence of certain built environment characteristics. To increase knowledge on what these modifiable components may be, this study explored how peer and staff relationships and access to and features of built environments work individually and interactively to influence youth perceptions of emotional safety, and how in turn youth's feelings regarding emotional safety influences their social interactions and their use of the afterschool recreational environment.

## **Review of the Empirical Literature**

### **The social and built environment.**

Peer and staff relationships can influence the way early and middle adolescents perceive themselves and interact with their afterschool recreational environment, and thus shape their feelings of emotional safety. Within afterschool and out-of-school programs, positive youth-staff relationships are characterized by openness, encouragement, trust, mentorship, skill-building, and connection through mutual interests (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; McDonough, Ullrich-French, & McDavid, 2018; Strobel et al., 2008; Wright, Alaggia, & Krygsman, 2014). Among peers, belonging and skill-building are traits associated with positive relationships (Riciputi, Boyer, McDonough, & Snyder, 2019). References to positive interpersonal relationships often include descriptions of the program individuals being like a “family” (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Riciputi et al., 2019). Youth tend to look for peers who are nice when developing friendships, and desire staff members to be encouraging, praising, and give them choices (McDonough et al., 2018). Adolescents also valued staff members who spent time with them and were role models or mentors (McDonough et al., 2018; Strobel et al., 2008). In a Canadian afterschool arts program, youth identified important traits in their staff such as honesty, openness, skilfulness, and being easy to talk to and fun (Wright et al., 2014). Staff initiative in including and attempting to build

relationships with youth, mitigating conflict, and not forcing their authoritative roles also helped to foster positive youth-staff relationships.

Conversely, negative interpersonal relationships tend to include conflict and poor conflict resolution, cliques or exclusive friend groups, and teasing (McDonough et al., 2018; Riciputi et al., 2019). Bullying, “...aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance” (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014, p. 328), can also be a contributor to adolescents feeling emotionally unsafe. This definition of bullying emphasizes the intent and proactive nature to harm, which differs from aggression that is reactive and not goal-directed. A consideration of bullying is important in afterschool programs for early and middle adolescents because there is the potential for power imbalances to occur, such as between older and younger youth, which may facilitate bullying, and undermine emotional safety. The intentional, and repeated or intense nature of bullying could make adolescents feel unsafe (Volk et al., 2014). In these instances, negative experiences may be anticipated by youth who are bullying victims, resulting in stronger feelings of not being emotionally safe in a location.

As highlighted in the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), modifiable elements of the built environment can influence and be influenced by interpersonal relationships, which can influence their perceptions towards themselves. In exploring afterschool program recreational facilities, it can be valuable to consider the availability and accessibility of facilities and activity spaces, proximity of activity spaces and structures, and the design and quality of the program and spaces in shaping adolescent social interactions and their feelings of emotional safety. This study will examine the individual’s perceptions on these aspects of the built environment, to learn how the built environment influences adolescent perceptions of their afterschool space and how they choose to utilize it.



### **Income Disparity in Recreation/Physical Activity Participation**

Adolescents residing in low-socioeconomic status neighbourhoods tend to be less physically active due to a lower availability of recreational facilities in close proximity to them (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006). Parks situated in low-income neighbourhoods have fewer adolescents participating in vigorous activity, and more incivilities (Coughenour, Coker, & Bungum, 2014). Adolescents without access to a safe park and living in neighbourhoods that are low-income or perceived to be unsafe are more likely to be inactive than those with access who live in high-income or safe neighbourhoods (Babey, Hastert, Yu, & Brown, 2008). Furthermore, one study found that when recreational facilities are present, the programs and activities offered in low-income neighbourhood recreational facilities often charge a higher price (Arbel, Wood, Howat, & Giles-Corti, 2009). This discrepancy in physical activity and access between neighbourhoods based on income presents a disadvantage for adolescents in low-income neighbourhoods, as participation in physical activity can play a role in youth feelings of emotional safety in their recreational environments.

Physical activity can create opportunities for inclusion among youth (McDonough et al., 2018). Physical activity programs such as highly functioning school recesses that incorporate safe, meaningful play and physical activity have been found to increase emotional safety among students (London, Westrich, Stokes-Guinan, & McLaughlin, 2015). Given the importance of play and physical activity in adolescent development, and the established benefits of afterschool recreational programs, addressing the needs of adolescents in low-income neighbourhoods can be particularly beneficial. One potential method of addressing these needs is through peer relationships, since they are very influential to adolescents. Peers have been found to motivate youth to participate in physical activity in afterschool programs (Zarrett, Sorensen, & Cook,

2015). However, this study also found that youth are more likely to take part in sedentary activities with their friends as opposed to physical activity. These findings suggest that manipulating the built environment or providing activities that allow for cooperation in physical activity may be a potentially better way to increase physical activity in afterschool programs. Overall, afterschool recreational programs directed at adolescents in low-income neighbourhoods can play an important role in potentially addressing some of the income disparity associated with recreational facilities, in addition to engaging them in increased opportunities for physical activity, if intentionally designed.

### **The Social Environment**

Relationships can play a role in emotional safety. Positive peer and staff-youth relationships are an important component of successful afterschool programs (Wright et al., 2014). In afterschool centres serving low-income neighbourhoods, supportive relationships with peers and adults have been linked to feelings of physical and emotional safety in elementary, middle, and high school youth (Strobel et al., 2008). Staff members who motivate, help work through conflicts, listen, and who youth feel comfortable confiding in foster emotional safety, suggesting that staff support is important to the emotional needs of adolescents in afterschool programs (Strobel et al., 2008). A study exploring the views of 10-17 year-old ethnic minority youth involved in community-based afterschool programs across the United States found that psychological safety was associated with positive relationships with adult staff and social skill acquisition (Lee et al., 2009). These positive relationships included feeling able to talk to program staff about their personal problems. However, racial and ethnic minority youth may have less access to the effects of these positive relationships, as among the study participants,

Asian or Pacific Islander and Hispanic youth were found to feel the least psychologically safe, while also having fewer positive relationships with adult staff.

In addition, these social relationships can also be important in positively influencing adolescent self-esteem and feelings that are associated with emotional safety (Harter, 2012; Keefe & Berndt, 1996). In out-of-school time physical activity-based recreation programs, supportive relationships with peers and staff have been associated with increases in self-esteem, physical competence perceptions, physical self-worth, motivation for physical activity, and social responsibility (McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013; McDonough et al., 2018; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). Peers can also be pivotal for youth in difficult contexts. During periods of change and stress, the presence of peers can help to decrease feelings of sadness in youth (Uink, Modecki, & Barber, 2017). Among youth who have a distant relationship with their parents, peer acceptance has a protective effect on their self-esteem (Birkeland, Breivik, & Wold, 2014). Peers are especially vital in these youth, who tend to exhibit lower self-esteem (Birkeland et al., 2014). In contrast, negative peer interactions can negatively influence youth's feelings associated with emotional safety. Youth in afterschool programs experience less emotional support from program staff in comparison to youth in other afterschool activities and sports (Kataoka & Vandell, 2013). Instability in friendships can cause youth to show more negative self-perceptions in their physical appearance (Keefe & Berndt, 1996), and negative peer interactions such as bullying can influence the length of time and the way children play on school playgrounds (Parrish, Yeatman, Iverson, & Russell, 2012). However, peer influence depends on the behaviour of the other youth, and can also lead to negative consequences. In one study for example,

positive peer relationships among youth in an afterschool setting were associated with more aggressive behaviour towards peers in school (Kataoka & Vandell, 2013).

Overall, while emotional safety has been associated with social relationships in afterschool settings, research primarily focuses on the impact of program relationships on feelings related to emotional safety. This study aimed to further explore the link between program relationships and emotional safety directly, by expanding on what is known while also aiming to make clear what aspects of social relationships in the afterschool environment specifically influence feelings of emotional safety. As well, existing research highlights the importance of and need to further explore emotional safety among adolescents from low-income families, who may have distant or limited positive relationships in their home and neighbourhood environments and could further benefit from an emotionally safe afterschool program environment. Therefore, this study specifically chose to study programs that served adolescents from neighbourhoods with low socioeconomic status, in order to learn how to best support this population.

### **The Built Environment**

Adolescents are known to desire safety in their recreational environments, and show preference for playing in areas that they feel physically and emotionally safe in (Strobel et al., 2008). However, research is limited on specific environmental features that contribute to perceptions of emotional safety among youth. Children and early adolescents have been found to actively seek out safety and security by creating “homes” and “zones of safety” on the school play area (Meier, Engel, & Taylor, 2010), activities associated with emotional health (Eriksen, 1985). This study found that these safe places were created using their imagination and aspects of the environment such as fallen trees, doorways, and walls to create “homes”. The “homes”

were protected places to pretend to cook and sleep, and were viewed as safe and secure locations where youth were accepted and belonged (Meier et al., 2010).

In addition, physical features in recreational environments have been shown to support feelings that can be associated with emotional safety in children and early adolescents. Positive emotional health in young children has been associated with water, areas that allow for climbing, swings (Frost, Brown, Sutterby, & Thornton, 2004), and “loose parts” (Bundy et al., 2008; Eriksen, 1985), easily transportable and manipulated items with wide-ranging uses (e.g. cardboard box). Outdoor environments were also linked to feelings of confidence and self-esteem in young children (Dowling, 2010), and empowerment in refugee children (Bilton, 2014). Exposure to greenspaces was significantly related to increased emotional wellbeing in early and middle adolescents (Ward, Duncan, Jarden, & Stewart, 2016). Furthermore, the presence of natural elements nearby was found to be a buffer to the impacts of life stress on children and early adolescents (Wells & Evans, 2003), commonly referenced by early adolescents in their “liked places” on the playground (Castonguay & Jutras, 2009).

Altogether, these findings confirm that adolescents want to feel emotionally safe in their recreational environments, and that physical attributes of the environment have the potential to promote feelings that have an impact on emotional wellbeing and safety. The present study adds to the existing literature by exploring if these findings are applicable to early and middle adolescents in afterschool programs, as the majority of these findings were observed in young children.

### **Interaction between the Social and Built Environment**

The built and social environments have been found to interact in shaping adolescent peer interactions and how they understand their environment, which may in turn influence their

feelings of emotional safety. Among young adolescents age 12-13 years, perceived neighbourhood safety has been shown to interact with peer involvement to influence the likelihood of behaviour problems (Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999). Peer relationships can also influence adolescent preferences for specific spaces when taking part in physical activity. 12-14 year-old adolescents have been found to desire playing and spending time in certain locations in their neighbourhood environment when they see their peers present in those locations (Smith, Troped, McDonough, & DeFreese, 2015).

The layout of the built environment and many of the physical features in recreational spaces can also increase peer interactions among youth. There is evidence that cooperative play and peer interactions increase among children and early adolescents when offered sand areas (Barbour, 1999; Czalczyńska-Podolska, 2014), loose parts (Barbour, 1999), physical structures with multiple uses (e.g. tire swings, construction materials, wheeled vehicles), and natural elements like water and greenery (Bell & Dymont, 2006). The proximity of play structures and individual play areas to one another in the built environment can also influence the type of peer interactions that may develop. Play structures and areas that are linked or closely positioned allow for play narratives to flow seamlessly from one area and structure to the next, increasing cooperative play and interactions among children and early adolescents (Barbour, 1999). In contrast, structures emphasizing exercise play in a playground can result in more segregation among youth because peer relationships may be based on similarities in physical competence (Barbour, 1999).

These studies suggest that among children and early adolescents, the physical and social environments can interact to influence where and how adolescents play and interact with their peers, which has the potential to impact their feelings of emotional safety. However, the direct

associations with emotional safety are unclear. As the majority of the existing literature focuses on children, this study also expanded on whether these conclusions are applicable among early and middle adolescents.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore early and middle adolescents' perceptions of their interactions with their peers and the recreational environment, and how they perceive these interactions may contribute to their feelings of emotional safety. This purpose was achieved by exploring adolescents' and afterschool program staff's perspectives on adolescents' (1) relationships with their peers, (2) perceptions of the afterschool recreational environment, and (3) understanding of how these features contribute to adolescents' experiences of emotional safety.

Overall, this study presents the early and middle adolescent perspective of how the afterschool program environment and peer and staff interactions can influence and interact to help adolescents feel emotionally safe. Many aspects of the built environment affect peer interactions, and the quality of peer interactions can influence perceptions and emotions regarding the built environment. By exploring how these contextual elements interact to help adolescents feel emotionally safe, this study aims to make a novel contribution to the literature regarding what it means for adolescents to feel emotionally safe within afterschool recreational contexts, how factors of the social and built environment interact and influence their feelings of emotional safety, and how we might be able to know when adolescents feel emotionally safe. Lastly, through exploring these influences among youth who reside in low-income neighbourhoods, this study provides insight and recommendations from a potentially vulnerable population who may benefit the most from afterschool program improvements that ensure their emotional safety.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

### Methodology

A collective case study (Stake, 2005) was conducted to explore adolescent and staff participant perspectives and lived experiences within an afterschool recreational environment. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of two specific bounded systems or “cases”: two sites of an afterschool program. An interpretative approach was used to explore adolescent’s understanding of their physical afterschool recreational environment, their social relationships in this environment, and any interactions between the two and their feelings of emotional safety (Green & Thorogood, 2014). This approach recognizes that multiple social realities exist, and the way one interacts and interprets different objects and relationships is subjective and based on individual contexts. Therefore, using this approach is important because feelings of emotional safety are dependent on individual perceptions, and adolescent perspectives will differ based on their interpretations of their environment. Hearing adolescent perspectives provided firsthand insight into their feelings of emotional safety as influenced by the afterschool environment and their peer relationships in that environment. A sample of afterschool program staff were also asked to provide knowledge on what aspects of the adolescents’ relationships and the program environment they thought contributed to adolescent feelings of emotional safety. Since staff are present at the facilities on a consistent basis and interact with many of the participants, they have a unique perspective on the needs of the population that attends the afterschool program as a whole.

Youth data was acquired by adopting techniques of photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez, 2012). Photo-elicitation is a method that provides participants with devices to document what they choose and then describe what they have produced and the meanings associated with the photo (Phoenix & Rich, 2016). Photo-elicitation interviews incorporate participant-taken



photographs into interviews as prompts to facilitate discussion and enhance communication (Clark-Ibáñez, 2012). This method is valuable in prompting specific memories and emotions in participants that otherwise might not be conveyed or may have been forgotten, because photos capture representations of experiences so that they can be more easily retrieved (Harper, 2002). Reflecting on captured photographs presents an opportunity for participants to see their environment from a new perspective (Harper, 2002). Due to the interest in hearing adolescent perspectives, this study adopted the techniques of photo-taking and using photographs as prompts. Incorporating these aspects of photo-elicitation interview methodology allowed youth to have a voice in generating photos to facilitate discussion about their feelings regarding emotional safety and the afterschool environment. Utilizing these techniques from photo-elicitation to conduct interviews was particularly useful as the study involved young participants. Using photos participants took to invoke responses may reduce intimidation and improve rapport, as it allows them to actively be involved in interpreting meaning from their photos (Leonard & McKnight, 2015). It also has potential to decrease the researcher-participant and adult-adolescent power imbalance that may affect participant responses, by shifting the attention to the photos instead of the individuals (Carlsson, 2001). However, given policies and privacy concerns surrounding the afterschool program, photos were not utilized as data or analyzed and reproduced here to protect the privacy of the sites and participants involved.

### **Positionality**

As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge my previous experiences and background can play a role in the collection and analysis of data. Being older than the youth participants, and some of the staff participants, and coming from an academic perspective, I have certain beliefs about the value of physical activity and emotional safety. This may unintentionally affect my

interviewing technique and cause participants to feel intimidated and pressured to align with my views. Furthermore, my personal experiences with emotional safety have the potential to shape my data interpretations. Lastly, having never resided in the neighbourhoods that the programs serve, my understanding of the situations and feelings the participants describe may be limited. I attempted to be conscious and reflective of each these potential biases throughout my data collection and analysis by using a reflexive research journal to explore my thoughts and biases and how they may impact my data collection and analysis.

### **Program**

Calgary AfterSchool is an afterschool program run in collaboration between the City of Calgary and various community organizations. Programs are held at schools, community centres, churches, recreational facilities, and leisure centres across Calgary. The AfterSchool programs are designed for children and adolescents in grades K-12 (The City of Calgary, 2017). Programs run weekdays from September to June, with the exception of statutory and school holidays and breaks. They are offered free or at a low-cost to Calgary residents, and participants attend on a drop-in basis. The programs provide opportunities for children and adolescents to develop in sports, leadership, arts, and healthy living. Programs are minimally structured, with optional activities and sports scheduled each day that give youth the option of participating if they choose. All programs are supervised by trained staff, with a minimum supervision ratio of one staff to 15 youth. Staff are at least 18 years old, and are required to undertake training prior to employment with Calgary AfterSchool.

Data were collected from two Calgary AfterSchool sites that were selected because they were relatively large, well-attended programs serving youth from low-income neighbourhoods. Both sites are City of Calgary leisure and recreation facilities. The program at both sites is

specifically designed for and open to adolescents between 11-15-years-old, including youth who turn 16 years-old during the school year. Sites feature activities such as sports, swimming, arts, cooking, leadership, music, skating, and healthy living. The first site runs from 2:30 pm to 6:00 pm Mondays to Thursdays and 11:30 am to 5:00 pm on Fridays. The second site runs from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm Mondays to Thursdays and 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm on Fridays.

### **Participants**

Youth participants were ten (5 male, 5 female) 11-15-year-old adolescents ( $M = 13.6$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) involved in one of the two Calgary AfterSchool sites. Five youth were recruited from the first site, and five from the second site. Inclusion criteria were (1) had attended a Calgary AfterSchool program, (2) were between the ages of 11-16, and (3) were English-speaking. Youth participants represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (3 Caucasian, 2 First Nations, 2 South Asian, 2 East Asian, 1 West Central Asian). Years of attendance in Calgary AfterSchool ranged from less than one year to five years ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ).

Staff participants were ten (4 male, 6 female) Calgary AfterSchool program staff involved in the same program and sites as the adolescent participants. Seven staff participants were recruited from the first site, and three were from the second site. Inclusion criteria were (1) a paid employee at one of the two sites, and (2) English-speaking. Volunteer staff members were excluded because they tend to have less consistent interaction with youth than the paid staff. Staff participants were between 20-28 years old ( $M = 22.5$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ) and were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (5 Caucasian, 3 East Asian, 1 East African, 1 Middle Eastern). Years of employment with Calgary AfterSchool ranged from less than one year to five years ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ).

## **Procedures**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (REB18-0520) prior to commencement of the study. Youth and staff members were invited to participate in the study during several brief presentations at the AfterSchool program facilities. Those youth who were interested in participating but who were under the age of 14 were provided with information packages with parental consent and child assent forms (Appendix A, B), which needed to be returned completed and signed prior to participating. Calgary AfterSchool staff assisted with collection of consent/assent forms from youth, which were then given to me when I arrived on site. Youth who were 14 or older and staff who wished to participate were asked to contact me by email or phone or let me know in person at the time of the presentation if they wished to participate, and were given consent forms (Appendix C, D) to complete prior to taking part in the study. Interested youth and staff were screened to ensure they met inclusion criteria prior to being given a consent and/or assent form. Participants who had completed consent and/or assent forms and met the inclusion criteria for the study were invited to participate in data collection.

Data was collected from one participant at a time. Youth participants were given a digital camera during program hours and instructed on how to use the camera. They were asked to take photos of their peers and areas/items at the facility that they associate with their feelings of safety, and instructed to avoid taking photos that include faces or identifying features of program attendees, as per the program's policies. Youth were given up to 20 minutes to photograph areas throughout the facility premises. As requested by the program, I accompanied them to ensure they stayed within the program facility, and to ensure that the privacy of other program attendees was respected when taking photographs. However, I did not otherwise interrupt with their photo-

taking. Any photos taken bearing faces or distinguishing features were erased to protect the privacy of those who had not consented to participate in the study. Immediately following photo-taking, each participant took part in a semi-structured interview where they were asked to describe the photos they took and respond to questions from an interview guide (Appendix E). Youth demographic information was collected using questionnaires (Appendix F) given at the beginning of each interview for the purpose of describing demographic characteristics of the sample. Youth were asked in interviews about their feelings of emotional safety in relation to their peers in the program, the staff members they interacted with, and the program space. An interview guide was utilized to facilitate focusing on the research question; however the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility to discuss topics the participants brought up. Youth were made aware at the beginning of the interview that if they disclosed considerable distress or a desire to cause harm to others or themselves, I would report the disclosure to the program staff, and then the Calgary AfterSchool team would carry out the remaining Calgary AfterSchool crisis protocol, as per the program's policies. During the interview, participants were asked to indicate their top 3-5 favourite photos that show something about what makes them feel more, or less, safe and secure about their feelings in the AfterSchool program, and those were shown on a laptop and served as prompts in talking about their experiences. Youth were asked to share their thoughts and experiences about their peers and the AfterSchool recreational environment as they relate to emotional safety. Interviews took place during program hours in a private room located at the facility, and were audio-recorded and between 5-39 minutes in length.

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with Calgary AfterSchool staff. Staff demographic information was collected using questionnaires (Appendix G) given at the

beginning of each interview for the purpose of describing demographic characteristics of the sample. Staff were asked in interviews to share their thoughts on how they perceive the adolescents' feelings of emotional safety are impacted by the environment and their relationships with other youth. An interview guide (Appendix H) was utilized. Similar to the youth interview guide, questions pertained to the staff views on how youth feelings of emotional safety were influenced by their peers, the staff members, and the AfterSchool environment. Interviews took place in a private room at the facility or in another location of the participant's choosing, and were audio-recorded and between 32-70 minutes in length.

Notes were written shortly after interviews to record any interactions between myself and the participant or between the participant with the environment during photo-taking, and document unspoken cues such as body language that may assist with development of themes during analysis. I transcribed interview audio following data collection. Photos, audio recordings, transcripts, and notes were kept on a secure drive and accessible only by the research team. Participant names were replaced with numbered codes to maintain confidentiality. A key matching names and participant codes was kept in a separate file on the secure drive.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016) was conducted with the interview transcripts and field notes. This analytical framework allows explicit and implicit patterns and themes to be identified from the participants' responses and nonverbal communication, helping to pinpoint which topics are most important to the adolescents. Analysis followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step of familiarizing myself with the data was done through successive readings of the data and making notes of potential ideas in the data. The next step was to generate initial codes. Data was coded into groups based

on similar ideas and patterns, and codes were organized using QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. After coding one transcript, I sought feedback from my supervisor on the coding process prior to proceeding with coding the remaining transcripts. In the third step, I searched for themes by combining similar or relevant codes to reflect potential themes. At this stage, my supervisor reviewed my coding and initial themes, provided feedback on the coding process, and engaged in questioning about interpretations of the data. The fourth step involved reviewing the themes. Themes developed in the prior step were reviewed in relation to their codes and then the data, and then refined. The fifth step is defining and naming themes. After consecutive rounds of refining, themes were given clear definitions and names, and I created a visual model to depict connections among the themes. Feedback and questioning regarding my interpretations was sought again from my supervisor at this stage. The final phase of analysis was writing a description of the themes and their connections, supported by example quotations. I sought feedback from my supervisor regarding the interpretation of data and final written product.

### **Trustworthiness**

This study was guided by a relativist approach to study rigour (Burke, 2016). This approach was chosen in recognition of the unique context, methodology, and ontological and epistemological perspectives adopted in this study. For this study, the selected criteria include: substantive contribution, comprehensive evidence, resonance, credibility, and transparency.

Substantive contribution concerns how a study adds to the reader's understanding of life and societal influences. It is demonstrated in this study through explicating perspectives from early and middle adolescents, informed by theoretical perspectives on ecological models and the extant literature, to provide insight into how youth understand their physical and social

environment to influence feelings of emotional safety in an afterschool program. Judging the comprehensiveness of the evidence provided involves providing multiple illustrative quotations to clearly demonstrate the basis for the findings to the reader. For this study, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure that no parts of the participants' discussions would be missed. I also underwent interview training and practice to ensure quality interviewing and transcription. Several quotations have been provided in the results to support findings, and I have also included excerpts from the interviewer questions in areas to allow readers to verify the conclusions made. I have also suggested alternative explanations where relevant. Resonance recognizes the openness and receptiveness of the researcher to any potential meanings the data may convey. This study demonstrates resonance, by presenting novel and interesting findings on adolescent emotional safety that were unexpected through inductively analyzing the data. In seeking feedback throughout my analysis, I aimed to be receptive to any suggestions that were given. Credibility concerns whether the data accurately represents participants' lived experiences and the reality of the AfterSchool program. To demonstrate credibility, I spent a significant amount of time with participants at both sites of the afterschool program, getting to know the structure of the program and participating in activities to build rapport so youth would feel more comfortable speaking with me about the sensitive topic of emotional safety. During interviews, I checked often with participants by reiterating and summarizing what they said to ensure that I was hearing and understanding their views correctly. In order to ensure transparency, I was aided by the help of a 'critical friend', my supervisor Dr. Meghan McDonough, who questioned my analysis process and interpretations of the data. She was able to give me thoughtful critique around my analyses, while also pointing out if evidence was lacking that supported the assumptions and interpretation I had made.



## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

### **Emotional safety in afterschool programs**

Thematic analysis resulted in four main themes and one subtheme that interact to indirectly and directly shape adolescent feelings of emotional safety within the AfterSchool program (Figure A). The first three themes (comfortable spaces, freedom to choose and separate, protecting and trusting relationships) illustrate three influences on emotional safety described by the participants, while the fourth theme (being understood and not having to hide) encompasses the participants' views on what feeling emotionally safe means to them. These main themes are shown in Figure 1 as large circles, with overlapping areas reflecting interaction and connections among the themes. In 'being understood and not having to hide,' youth described feeling emotionally safe when they feel that they are understood and their problems were understood, and that they would not be attacked or have to hide. 'Comfortable spaces' describes how the size, familiarity, and materials in the afterschool program space can influence adolescents' feelings of freedom and how adolescents interact with and feel about others. 'Protecting and trusting relationships' depicts how protection and trust from friends or staff members helped adolescents to feel emotionally safe. 'Freedom to choose and separate' outlines how adolescent emotional safety was influenced by individual feelings of freedom and whether they felt able to separate themselves when needed. One subtheme (spoken or displayed words) was utilized across all of the main themes, and describes how words that are spoken or displayed can encourage feelings of emotional safety and freedom, and show and help to build trust among individuals.

### **Being understood and not having to hide**

Participants described that feeling emotionally safe is when you and your problems are understood and not hidden or attacked. Several of the adolescents expressed that they felt

emotionally safe when they were not bullied and did not feel the need to hide who they were. For the youth, emotional safety is linked to feeling like they are understood and able to be themselves, and can talk about their problems with people and be understood by them.

Adolescents also associated feelings of emotional safety with feelings of happiness, acceptance, and confidence.

*Um, just like being able to go into a place and not feel like you have to hide. ... Um. It makes you feel like you don't have to like, be somebody that you're not. ... It makes you like, feel open and like, accepted. (Youth, Female, 15)*

*Being emotionally safe is like making sure that you're being like happy all the time and just like either yourself or other people are just making sure that you're not getting harmed emotionally or mentally even. Because there's, they just prevent like things from making you feel a certain type of way about yourself or about other people and like, just like with bullying and stuff, just making you feel good about yourself is like being like emotionally safe. (Youth, Female, 14)*

In contrast, feeling emotionally unsafe was linked to instances where youth felt that they or their family was attacked and they were not defended. This often involved negative comments or bullying, and could cause youth to feel emotions such as sadness or anger.

*But how your feelings get hurt is like someone says something like about your family for example, that really hurts you because that family might not be there for anything, that actually makes you really sad or angry. (Youth, Female, 11)*

Many of the participants also made references to feeling like a family or a home when they talked about emotional safety. The ability to personalize some of their experiences at the program in addition to the presence of their friends and supportive staff creates an environment

for the youth that is felt to be similar to a home or family. Some participants described the AfterSchool program as their “*safe space*” (Youth, Female, 14). The program was a place that adolescents could go to if they had potentially poor or unsafe home settings or family relationships.

*Cause maybe sometimes like from what we've heard, their home environment may not be the best or they may not have the best life there and stuff like that. So I feel like just having a space that's not home, that's not school but, their own that they can make their own um, yeah kind of makes it feel like a home to them. And then just the leaders being there as family again, just finding that fine line between being a leader and being like kind of like a big family um, yeah. (Staff, Male)*

*... Some of them for sure I think come to have someone, to have an adult to kind of talk to. Like I'll notice sometimes that certain kids you know, who kinda will just follow you around because they just want someone to speak to cause I don't, I don't think they have that at home. (Staff, Female)*

However, not all of the participants felt emotionally safe at the program. Many of the adolescents felt uncomfortable being themselves around others in the program, and chose not to share their personal problems with the program staff or peers due to a fear of being bullied or shamed for sharing. Youth cared about how they were viewed by others, and there was concern that sharing about personal issues could affect how others viewed them, especially if they were gossiped about or not kept secret.

*Interviewer: What about with the other peers here, like do you feel safe talking about like your personal problems with the peers? Youth: I'm gonna say no to that because I feel*

*like I could get shamed for that. Or people could tell other people and just things like that, and I just don't trust them. (Youth, Female, 11)*

Some of the adolescents, especially those who were older, felt that expressing their personal problems would make them appear less “cool” to their peers and chose not to share for that reason. For these youth, they expressed that they never felt comfortable sharing their personal problems.

*I don't feel discussing personal problems anywhere comfortable. ... Nahh I, I'm not into that stuff. (Youth, Male, 14)*

As such, staff were often able to distinguish how emotionally safe youth felt depending on how willing they were to talk to staff members about personal issues and participate in activities. For the staff members, youth who were open and willing to share how they were doing and had high levels of participation were likely to be more emotionally safe in the program.

*I guess they're more open. So uh, I guess you, you can tell when someone's feeling safe around you and someone's not. Um, they want your attention when they're feeling, when they do feel safe. Uh they uh, they participate in a lot of activities, uh they continually come, uh with that positive attitude. (Staff, Male)*

In contrast, adolescents who appeared “closed-off” were an indication to staff that the youth did not feel emotionally safe in the program or with them, especially when it was clear that something was wrong.

*I think often here when like a kid's upset about something and you can, like you can tell when someone's upset, you know they're off in the corner and you go up to them and it's like 'hey, what's wrong?' and 'nothing, nothing's wrong'. I think it's, that's kind of an*

*example of when they're clearly not feeling safe and comfortable and like they don't want to open up to you. (Staff, Female)*

Overall, in order to feel emotionally safe, adolescents emphasized the need to feel comfortable being themselves and not feeling like they had to hide from their peers or be fearful of being attacked. Youth tended to talk more and be engaged and actively participating when they felt emotionally safe, and this helped staff to be able to differentiate between youth who felt emotionally safe and those who did not in the program. While many participants felt safe at the AfterSchool program, others expressed that the program was not emotionally safe for them, and felt uncomfortable sharing personal details and problems with the people in the program.

### **Protecting and trusting relationships**

Feeling protected by and able to trust friends and staff members in the AfterSchool program was important for adolescents to feel emotionally safe in the program. Protection was felt when youth were in groups, or when they were in the presence of friends. In situations where they were verbally attacked, youth felt protected when friends stood up for them by defending them or reassuring them.

*Um, sometimes because I know if I'm like walking around with one of my good friends, like my best friends, if someone does say something to me, then they're gonna like protect me like and be like 'aw no, don't believe that, don't like, don't say anything back, like it's fine, forget about it' most of the time. And it's just like, support which makes me feel more emotionally safe. ... Because it's just like, you have someone to lean on, and you have someone to always like hold you down like talk to you, and like, make you think a different way about things. (Youth, Female, 14)*

*...Cause friends are there to help you. They wouldn't just stand there and watch you get hurt or watch you cry or something because somebody was bullying you. They would actually stand up. (Youth, Female, 11)*

Being part of a group helped adolescents to feel protected and not as vulnerable to attacks because they felt there was “*strength in numbers*” (Youth, Male, 14). The presence of peers was especially important when adolescents were in program spaces that were shared with the public, where they helped youth to feel less nervous and alone when there were more strangers.

*I think it's because like, if you have someone there, either they're gonna help you out and like try and stop it if there's like anything that does happen, or they'll say something. Or it's just like having someone around to be like a witness if or just like, it makes you less approachable when more people are around you because they're not gonna like single you out and like come and say something I guess. (Youth, Female, 14)*

However, peers were also responsible at times for making youth feel emotionally unsafe in the AfterSchool program. Negative verbal comments made by their peers were harmful to their self-perceptions and identity, and hearing such comments made youth feel emotionally unsafe.

*Because when I hear people talking about me, they call me worthless, they call me, they call me a mistake. So, when, that's when I feel unsafe here, when I overhear stuff. And they make sure the staff can't hear them, but they make sure I can hear them. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Several of the staff noted the volatility of the adolescents, and how their emotions and relationships changed frequently, and how this could affect the way youth treated each other. The quick and frequent changes in youth relationships could often lead to negative situations where

youth would make negative comments towards each other or exclude individuals, and could cause youth to not want to come to the program.

*And it, and it, especially with the kids here, it fluctuates a lot. Like one day all the kids are best friends, and then the next day, you know, someone breaks up with someone, and now they hate each other and they're being mean to each other all day. But you never really see where everyone turns on one kid. Or at least I haven't. There's always some support from other youth to help them feel better, even if it's just one other kid that's sticking with him. So, I suppose that's good that, you know they're never not supported but, I would say it's a decent issue that other youth make other youth not feel good and not want to be here. (Staff, Female)*

Participants expected the AfterSchool program to be different from school, so when negative comments were prevalent at the program, it reminded some youth of their school experiences, and made them question whether or not they should continue coming to the program.

*And it would just be like, oh if you're in the gym like you'd walk past and you'd get commented on, or there would be little fights or people would like say things all the time and it just made me feel like really bad about myself and like, oh should I be coming here all the time? Because I'm trying to get away from this since I have to deal with it at school. And so it's like, do I wanna come and have a good time? Or am I gonna come and have a terrible day and just let myself feel worse? (Youth, Female, 14)*

In addition, youth who attended the same schools would sometimes also attend the same program site. This could create an atmosphere in the AfterSchool program where youth felt

uncomfortable talking about their personal or school-related problems for fear of someone from their school hearing.

*I think it's just specific to this facility because they do go to school with a lot of the kids that come from here, or come here. So if they have an issue and maybe they come here with a friend, and like their friend and them like they wanna talk about that, there's no guarantee to the kid that it won't get around to the school or their parents. So I think it's just to do with because they do go to school together and all of that, so I feel like they don't really know cause I think with a lot of the kids like they do see this as an extension of their school day, so they may not really understand or care about the difference between like this place and their school or, their house or whatever. If they just see it as, it's somewhere in my neighbourhood and everybody who's my age goes there, so like they don't, they don't, they don't really get into that stuff because like even some of them will even say like um, they can't talk about something because people from their school are here. (Staff, Female)*

Often the presence of older youth or members of the public contributed to making younger youth feel unsafe, as older youth and strangers were perceived to be capable of hurting them physically and emotionally. These thoughts towards being around strangers was often exacerbated by being in a new or unfamiliar space.

*Like I go in [the workout gym] sometimes, and it's just a little bit awkward cause it's like, either go in there by yourself or you go with a couple of your friends. There's just like adults in there all the time who like workout there cause they have memberships or whatever, but it's like not necessarily like super unsafe, it's just like, mmm like, 'I don't like all these people looking at me', but that could just be a me thing. ... So it's like, it's*



*just a little bit, a little bit uncomfortable, but that's just like me thinking that I feel uncomfortable, not necessarily because of like the room itself, it's just like some of the weird like people in there. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Staff presence also had an important role in helping adolescents to feel emotionally safe. Youth depended on staff members to protect or defend them, and uphold the program rules and discipline or remove aggressors. Knowing there was staff supervision helped youth to feel physically and emotionally safe, even when there were peers present whom they were afraid of.

*The fact that like some of the older kids make me kind of scared because as being only 11 and having 16- and like 17-year-olds here, that makes me a little worried because I'm not quite sure what they're capable of, but I do know that they're a lot stronger than I am. ... But I feel safe because the leaders are there, and the leaders could stop anything or prevent it anything from happening. (Youth, Female, 11)*

In addition, youth appreciated that staff members were watching and aware of what interactions might be happening in program, and would be mindful to check on them in the aftermath of a conflict or if they suspected something might be wrong.

*...if someone is in a bad mood, or they look sad or something, then most of the time they will go up to them and they will ask them what's wrong or if they're in a bad mood and don't want to be talked to, they'll give them their space. (Youth, Female, 11)*

*It's just uh, because like, even like I do-, I had this one guy who always used to like make comments like here, like towards me. And the staff would be like 'yo like, are you okay? Like does that bother you? Do we need to like say anything to him? Are you like ok to be here if he's here?' and I would just be like 'yeah like I'm good, like thank you for asking and noticing' because they pick up on everything. Even when you think they aren't*

*listening, they are listening to make sure that you are safe at all times. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Both peer and staff relationships were built around trust, which was shown primarily through the ability to keep secrets. Youth expressed a desire to be understood when they shared about their lives. Adolescents chose individuals to talk to based on whom they trusted, and the longer they knew someone, the more they felt able to trust them. Verbally communicating to youth that the individual was trustworthy and that youth could talk to them if needed could also help to establish trust between youth and their peers and program staff.

*Like some people don't really understand, and then some people, come with open arms. ... if like, if they kind of like just say "you can talk to us if you want", it just kind of puts up that thing like that you can trust them. (Youth, Female, 15)*

With the exception of close friends, youth felt that they were able to trust staff members more than their peers, because staff were less likely to share adolescents' secrets with others. Youth expected staff members to be different from the other adults in their lives, such as teachers and parents/guardians. Program staff were expected to care more and be less strict than their teachers in many situations, but also not expected to solve problems or worry like their parents. As such, youth-staff relationships became important to many youth as an outlet to talk about what was going on in their lives in a non-obligatory way. The ability to talk to staff members helped several youth to feel emotionally safe in the program.

*And it's just easier to talk to them because it's like less like judgmental. Yeah. ... I mean I just live with my mom like by myself. And it's like, I don't wanna like, put a burden on her all the time, so I can make sure that like she's good and then like her worrying about if I'm good, because it's like, I just like, she's my mom, I don't wanna*

*make her like feel any type of way other than like 'my kid's like happy and like ok'. And that's why if I come here, then I can just talk to them and like sort it out like on my own most of the time, or just like with one of them because it's like, easier to speak to them about it, and because I know that they're not gonna worry. Like they're gonna care but they're not gonna like worry to like fix it fix it. So yeah. (Youth, Female, 14).*

Consistency in program staff and peers was desired among youth, who preferred to spend time with and share personal details and problems with peers and staff members who had been at the program reliably, and who they could count on to stay there.

*I think like just, knowing that you're someone safe to talk to and that you will be like, here again, so like there's a reason to tell you something personal? They're like 'well if I don't think I'm going to see you again' like what's the point? Or like 'can you help me if you don't really know me?' kind of thing? Like if I haven't got to know you like why would I ask for your help about this personal issue or something. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Seeing someone around regularly who interacted with them was enough for some youth, who expressed that they felt able to talk to certain individuals in the program simply because they “knew them” (Youth, Male, 13).

*Trustworthy for me means like, you can see people walking to her. Like I saw my friend walk up to her and talk to her about what's going on. So like people I did not know go up to her and talk to her so it was like really nice. (Youth, Female, 14)*

However, frequent staff changes were problematic, as they could make building relationships with staff difficult at times, causing some youth to feel less comfortable sharing details with new staff members.

*So we get a lot of new staff. Even like last year, I think we had, we had basically five people that stayed consistent, and then we had probably another four people that were in and out of the program. Like they didn't stick around too long, or, kids just had a hard time building a relationship with them. And in that sense, it makes it harder right. A lot of the times they'll, they'll kinda try to avoid where they are, as opposed to, you know somebody they like, they're gonna just go there just because that person's there. (Staff, Female)*

On the other hand, older youth in the program had different needs in comparison to their younger counterparts when it came to their willingness to share personal details and problems. Respect was important to older youth, and was something that they desired from their peers and staff members and needed to have for an individual in order to feel comfortable sharing with them. Respect was most often earned through participating in sports, and had to be “*on their turf*” (Staff, Female). As such, it could be difficult for younger youth or youth less comfortable with sports to earn the older youths' respect when it relied on sports skill and attitude.

*Whereas the older kids, they, I don't know, the word I always think of with the older kids is respect. They have to respect you. If, if they're gonna talk to you. So I always think, if on my first day on the basketball court, I think if I would've had a bad basketball day, like I would've went out there and missed every shot, they would've been like no, no respect. (Staff, Female)*

In general, taking part in activities gave youth opportunities to build trust and create memories that promoted trust. Youth recalled fond memories in several program spaces, and their memories were almost always shared with friends and other program attendees. Some of

the participants expressed that sport was a place where there were no barriers between individuals, and it allowed youth of different backgrounds to come together.

*Well, whenever I, like I've been playing basketball for like 3 years now, so whenever I play basketball, it like brings the others together. ... Like say there's people of different places, different sexes, different ethnicities. Uh it doesn't matter, here it's all playing a game. And the yeah, say yeah. ... Yeah. It can bring people together. (Youth, Male, 14)*

Participation in sports helped many adolescents to develop groups based on playing together at the program or being on existing school teams together. Staff noticed that these groups that formed among youth in sports tended to be a “*tight knit clique*” (Staff, Female) and have high group cohesion and strong bonds among group members.

However, some participants felt that the prevalence of sport-based activities at the AfterSchool program led to division among the youth, especially between youth of different skill levels. Division based on skill level often occurred between older and younger youth, and youth who all played on a school team together and those that did not. Girls and younger youth who were less comfortable with sports could be excluded from sports-based activities, leading to the formation of cliques. Several of the staff and youth participants expressed that sports-based groups that had formed comprising of mostly older youth were “*intimidating*” (Staff, Female) and created spaces that were felt to be “*uncomfortable*” (Staff, Female) and less emotionally safe due to the group that occupied it. While intra-group bonds were noted to be strong, there was less mingling among youth of different groups and those in groups with those who were not in groups. This may result from the lack of formal programming, causing there to be a greater range among youth and their interests. As such, the presence of sport-dominated spaces in the program

can cater towards youth who are skilled in sports, and unintentionally lead to the development of sports-based groups.

*I think so much of it is like sport-focused. Like and what if you're not good at sports? [laughs]... Yeah like what if you're not good at sports, and also um, it's not even so much that but I feel like a lot of the girls get left out completely because even if you are like, really good at swimming or like you're really athletic, as a girl, um because the boys come here as like an outlet to their aggression and everything, you don't feel like you would fit in in if you just wanted to say like 'hey I want to join like your hockey game' or whatever, um I feel like a lot of the girls just feel like they'd be rejected like right away.*

(Staff, Female)

Overall, the protection and trust youth felt from their staff and peer relationships played a vital role in their feelings of emotional safety. Youth felt emotionally safe when their peers and staff members were present and able to defend them from negative comments or people that might hinder their feelings of safety. Their feelings of emotional safety were also linked to a feeling of being able to talk to staff and peers that they trusted and respected, and knowing that what they shared would be kept secret. Although activities could help to encourage trust and the building of relationships among youth, they also at times led to division and exclusion among youth when activities were primarily sports-based.

### **Freedom to choose and separate**

Feelings of freedom or autonomy and being able to separate oneself when needed was another influence on whether adolescents felt emotionally safe, and the afterschool built environment and youths' peers played an important role in this. To the adolescents in this study, freedom meant that they had choices in what they wanted to participate in, whether they wanted

to be alone or interact with others and who they wanted to spend time with, whether or not they wanted to talk to or seek help from someone, and when they wanted to come to or leave the program. Hearing phrases from peers and staff that encourage youth to talk when they are ready or if they need to promoted feelings of autonomy and choice among the youth.

*For me, it's, people that um talk like, when you need time, alone, they'll let you have time alone. When you need just time to think, they'll let you have time to think. And, when you don't want to be alone, they will be with you. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Participants also emphasized the importance of feeling capable of separating themselves from situations if needed, and having the necessary room to do so. The AfterSchool program included both indoor and outdoor spaces, with fences or dividers up in some of the areas that were shared with the public. In these spaces, having dividers or fences helped youth to feel physically and emotionally safe knowing that there was a separation between the program space and the public.

*It makes me feel safe cause I know there's not gonna be any strangers that can get in there, cause there's like fenced up. And like, you can run around and if you have like anxiety attack, they let you be by yourself, with like someone that can calm you down, so it's nice out there.... I feel, I'm physically safe and feelings safe at the same time. (Youth, Female, 14)*

*So if there's like people come from the other side of the gym, cause we have a little split um screen. If people come from the other side they won't let them like talk to us or we're not allowed to go on the other side, just so nothing happens. Cause if something happens on either one of the sides, everyone gets in trouble. (Youth, Female, 14)*

However, walls and separations between rooms had the potential to make youth feel restricted or free depending on the layout, and the size of the space could cause youth to feel unable to leave. On the other hand, the drop-in nature of the program contributed to youth feelings of emotional safety by providing them with flexibility and the freedom to decide the length of time they wanted to be at the program.

*It just like that kind of like that feeling like if you want to leave you can go. ... Cause it, it uh, it kind of puts you in a spot in your head like, “kay I can leave when I want to”, and just leave at a certain time. (Youth, Female, 15)*

Unfortunately, some participants expressed that program restrictions around safety and staff supervision often prevented adolescents from being able to separate themselves and find a place to go when they were upset. Some adolescents expressed having nowhere to go to get away from their aggressors or the staff members to sort things out amongst themselves, and wanting staff to stop following them. Even staff members voiced that they found it difficult to find private locations to speak to upset youth due to program restrictions on one-on-one interactions and the inability to let youth return to the program if they had left the premises to take a break. At times, they also felt like their presence was actually a deterrent to youth being able to work things out amongst themselves. Oftentimes, they did not know how they could help youth without violating the program policies.

*So there's not much of an opportunity to get away from what's going on, other than to leave. And then it's also hard too, because if a kid's out there and you can tell that they're upset, you know usually a leader will try and go talk to them, but you know, all the other people are right there, and it's like 'no you guys need to stay over there' but it's*



*an inch away, they can still hear you from right there. So it's, there really isn't great space for that privacy and time you need with a kid I don't think. (Staff, Female)*

In addition to having the freedom to leave the program, having the freedom to attend the program if youth desired was also important. Some staff recounted frustration with situations where youth had to be banned from the program. In these situations, not having the ability to attend the program was likened to removing the child from a space where they could be safe.

*Like one kid, got kicked out. He acts out all the time. He's a good kid, like he obviously has stuff going on at home, like he moved here from another country like, lots of factors going on. And he was kicked out for a week. And he sat next to the basketball court every single day, and sat there. On the ground, next to his backpack, wasn't allowed on the court, but sat there. And I was heartbroken. Cause it's like, that's a perfect example of this is the safe space for him. This is where he goes. And now he can't. And he just has to sit there on the ground, watch all his friends play basketball, and he sits there. And it's like, what are we teaching there? Who are we helping by kicking this kid out? (Staff, Female)*

It was clear from participant discussions that spaces and interactions that encouraged youth feelings of freedom were important to making them feel emotionally safe at the AfterSchool program. Having the ability to interact or be alone, leave the program, or separate themselves from situations that they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in were important factors in making youth feel free. The afterschool built environment and youths' relationships were important determinants in providing spaces and opportunities where youth could feel free or have privacy. However, the size of the space and program policies proved to be a hindrance to

youth feelings of freedom at times, causing them to feel unable to find a private space or return to the program if they needed to.

### **Comfortable spaces**

The size, familiarity, and materials in a space were found to influence adolescent feelings of freedom and how adolescents interacted with and felt about others. Participants felt that the built environment at the AfterSchool program did not directly impact emotional safety. However, the built environment had indirect implications for emotional safety via its effects on experiences of freedom and social interactions. Participants expressed preference for larger and more open spaces, as well as a greater diversity of spaces and activities to accommodate youth of all backgrounds. Larger or more open spaces helped adolescents feel less intimidated when the area was crowded with their peers, and gave them a sense of freedom.

*Interviewer: ...How does [the pool] make you feel more emotionally safe? Youth: Like it gives you more freedom to just uh, move around. ... Just, knowing that I'm not like restricted in like a small room. (Youth, Male, 15)*

Although smaller rooms could be more intimidating, especially when filled with people, they created more intimate spaces, and had the potential to create more opportunities for conversation.

*Well I mean it's the smaller space, it's just uh, you know it's a, it's a more intimate space. (Staff, Male)*

Multipurpose rooms and having a variety of spaces gave youth choices to find locations that were best suited to their needs. Having options of many different activities in separate spaces served to split up large crowds of youth, and helped some youth to feel less anxious.

*Even though I have anxiety I still come in here cause, even though there's like a lot of people, people do their own thing, like in the summer time there's swimming, there's basketball, there's the field house. So everyone's like split up. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Participants were more comfortable in spaces more popularly utilized by the youth. The items present (e.g. couches, foosball table) and décor (e.g. colours of the walls) influenced youth's feelings of comfort in a space. Items like couches were important in creating a space that made youth feel relaxed, and able to talk if they needed to. Bright colours were desirable and associated with positive feelings.

*Yeah like if you're sitting on the couch, or anything, or like, the chair, and like the chair like gets taken from you or anything right, it's also like, it's not there, and yeah you can stand in the room, but it also feels like you've been removed from the room right? (Staff, Male)*

*Like things like um just even having like a kitchen or something, that's like, that's, that's part of what makes it a more intimate space. And one of the things you can look at is like, you can take a look at like the [room name] room, take a picture of it, and you take a picture of a room like this, right, uh, you'd be able to see the things that make it more um, inviting, and making it a more intimate space right? Like there's, there's no artwork in here, right, um, the chairs are what, where you're able to sit down is like you know, in here it's, it's something like this [foldable chairs], where it's like oh let's stack the chairs, it's like that, versus like a couch, versus like different types of seating, versus like a, like I don't know, like different, there's like a stool in there and stuff like that. (Staff, Male)*

*Yeah it's like colourful and that's like my world is really colourful. So it's like when I come here I'm like "ooo colour!" when I see it so. (Youth, Female, 14)*

These items and how they are laid out in the space was useful for creating opportunities for adolescents to participate in activities and create memories and familiarity. These memories would further influence youth's feelings about the space and their preferences to utilize the space.

*Youth: Umm each place has its own like, like, kinda like memories. So like if you're having fun in this room, you'll always have those memories every time you come back in here. And if you go to the kitchen, there's more memories there and stuff. So yeah.*

*Interviewer: So the memories help you to feel safe?*

*Youth: Yeah, just knowing that it's a good place and there's good people here. (Youth, Female, 15)*

Having consistent spaces that youth felt comfortable in and had positive memories associated with helped youth to feel comfortable returning. Youth frequented places that were familiar and held memories to them. In contrast, new or unfamiliar spaces were sometimes associated with youth feeling uncomfortable or anxious, and they preferred not to remain in those places.

*I'm like used to like working out like at school or like at my house, and just doing like my own thing and like when I'm like in a public place with like all these people who I don't know, like I gotta get used to it obviously, but it's just like, 'mmm do I wanna be in here like by myself?' 'Is it like ok? Or should I like bring someone with me?' And that sort of thing, yeah. (Youth, Female, 14)*

Furthermore, murals and signage on the wall helped youth to feel like they belonged at the AfterSchool program, and reassured them that the program would keep them safe. Murals that explicitly expressed that the AfterSchool program was a place where youth could feel like they belonged were seen as “welcoming” (Youth, Female, 15), and gave adolescents the sense that they would not be bullied at the program. Posted rules created feelings of safety in association with staff members, who could be counted on to maintain rules.

*So like this, and I like the #we belong, cause it means that you can, even though you're Black, and you're like, ... and you're like any race of, you can still come here and you won't get, there's no like, bullying of you and everything. I like it. (Youth, Female, 14)*

*It just like makes me feel safe I guess because there's things posted all around both of the rooms including the gym, just about like rules and regulations and like making sure that everyone is all safe at all times. ... But it makes me feel safe because the staff like stick to their word, if it's posted, then it won't happen. (Youth, Female, 14)*

However, physical features of the built environment could also create negative feelings for adolescents. Markings, such as bullet holes at one site that had been left behind from a previous violent event, were reminders to participants of the past, and caused them to feel both physically and emotionally unsafe. Participants also expressed frustration regarding the lack of spaces to go to, areas that were locked or inaccessible to them, and spaces that were too close to the roads, which caused some adolescents to feel forgotten by the city.

*I think they, like they go together. It's hard to feel safe emotionally if you're also scared that you could get shot. Like that's, I don't, to me that's scary. A lot of these kids, that's their reality, so maybe they're more used to it but, I just, I can't imagine shooting and*

*like playing with my friends and like looking at bullet holes every day. That's crazy.*

(Staff, Female)

*And I feel like some kids, helps them feel more safe, but some like, not as much cause we need like a security guard to walk around, they feel like something's wrong with the place or it needs to be kind of more secured in a way, and they're kinda wondering like why we need a security guard constantly walking around, like is something wrong with the area?*

(Staff, Male)

As discussed in the theme 'protecting and trusting relationships,' program spaces could sometimes be uncomfortable if they were shared with the public. In situations where a space felt too intimidating because it was mostly occupied by older youth or the public, staff presence could help youth to still feel emotionally safe. Likewise, feelings of discomfort and fear associated with new and unfamiliar spaces could be combatted by being in a group with their friends, or being among other similar youth.

*And yeah I do feel uncomfortable with guys but if it's like I'm the only girl there, I do.*

*But if there's like a couple other girls I'm fine.* (Youth, Female, 14)

Altogether, participants emphasized the need for spaces at the AfterSchool program where youth could feel emotionally safe by having freedom and the space to interact with their peers and staff members. Although the décor, layout, and size of a space was not directly responsible for youth feelings of emotional safety, they were important factors in helping youth to feel comfortable, and allowing them to develop memories in spaces. Markings and spaces that were shared with the public could cause youth to feel unsafe, as they were unfamiliar or reminded them of past negative events. While these built environment features and aspects only

indirectly influenced feelings of emotional safety, it was clear that they impacted adolescent physical safety.

**Subtheme: Spoken or displayed words**

Words that were spoken or displayed were found to play a role in each of the main themes by influencing or facilitating feelings associated with emotional safety. Spoken or displayed words encourage feelings of freedom, show and promote trust among individuals, and influence feelings of belonging in a space. As discussed in the theme ‘comfortable spaces,’ words displayed on the walls of the program that conveyed belonging or acceptance, along with signage showing program rules were important influences in making youth feel emotionally safe. In addition to words displayed on the wall, participants also took photos of and talked about the presence of words like “staff” on the back of staff vests that made them feel more emotionally and physically safe. These “staff” words and rule signs reminded them that the staff members were present and able to intervene if they needed them.

Youth: *Yeah. There’s one with, like this one with the staff.*

Interviewer: *So the City of Calgary recreation symbol.*

Youth: *Yeah. Or there’s like on the back of the jacket and this other one there’s just like the ‘staff’ on the back. ...Just, that makes me feel safe because there’s always I think like three or four staff in either room to like either like hang out with you, play with you, talk to you, and they’re just there to make sure that nothing bad ever happens. (Youth,*

*Female, 14)*

As discussed in ‘freedom to choose and separate’ and ‘protecting and trusting relationships,’ phrases spoken by friends or staff members that conveyed openness and trust also helped youth to feel like they had choice, and that they had people they could rely on and go to

in times of need. In these phrases “open” language was used that helped youth to recognize that they had freedom and could seek help if desired. Overall, while words themselves were not responsible for producing feelings of emotional safety in adolescents, they were found to help facilitate feelings of freedom, comfort and belonging in a space, and promote trust and communication in youths’ staff and peer relationships.



## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the perspectives of adolescents and afterschool program staff on adolescents' afterschool social and built environment interactions, and how they contributed to youth experiences of emotional safety. Overall, the four themes and one subtheme discussed in this study support the existing literature with younger children and early adolescents and add to the knowledge about emotional safety in adolescent afterschool programs. The findings clarified and elaborated on several of the previously known interactions between the social and built environments by identifying how they specifically interact to promote adolescent emotional safety. The built environment was found to be more of an indirect influence on emotional safety, influencing youth social interactions and feelings of freedom, which in turn contribute to youth feelings of emotional safety.

Built environments are important to adolescent social interactions and help with creating feelings associated with emotional safety. These findings are consistent with this previous knowledge, revealing how built environments play an indirect role in emotional safety by increasing peer interactions and opportunities for physical activity. The various elements of the built environment can serve to create a space that facilitates feelings of comfort, familiarity, and freedom in youth regarding their space and peer interactions, or undermine that emotional safety. While participants discussed both the outdoor and indoor spaces of the AfterSchool program sites, their discussion surrounding the indoor built environment is novel, as studies examining this topic have tended to focus on outdoor spaces. Participants identified several beneficial and desirable aspects of the decor and layout of the indoor AfterSchool spaces, and made links to consistency, familiarity, and the “home” or “family” fostered, in part, by these spaces. This language is consistent with previous findings where children have used language associated with

home and family when describing the security and safety they sought in their play areas (e.g. Meier et al., 2010). Considering that several of the items identified by participants, such as couches, artwork, and kitchens, are features present in many homes, it may be that these remind participants of the comfort they do, or want to, experience in their homes.

The theme of protecting and trusting relationships clarified why and how social relationships contribute to youth feelings associated with and of emotional safety. Given the importance of peer feedback in early and middle adolescents (Harter, 2012), it is not surprising that youth valued and expected their friends to protect them. This finding suggests that being defended by their peers made youth feel like their peers accepted them for who they were, and can be further seen in how some adolescents expressed hesitation in sharing their personal problems with most of the program attendees, due to a fear of being shamed or gossiped about. Supportive and trusting staff relationships were also desired among youth, consistent with past literature (e.g. Strobel et al., 2008). Interestingly, program staff were expected to be different from the adults in youth's home and school contexts. Youth descriptions of their relationships with staff suggest that staff were important as an outlet for youth to express how they felt and what they were going through without repercussions or solutions given. The youths' view of the staff is consistent with their expectations that the AfterSchool program interactions would be different from what they received at school. The AfterSchool program appeared to be a haven for youth to come to, further emphasizing the importance of ensuring emotional safety in these spaces.

Physical activity played an interesting role in the present study in both causing division among youth of different skill levels, while also creating opportunities for trust-building and social interaction among youth. While the program itself was not solely focussed on sports, and

both sports-related and non-sports-related activities were offered, the majority of the AfterSchool program spaces were designed for sports (e.g. skating rinks, basketball courts, swimming pool, soccer field). Without formal programming, adolescents could freely choose what they wanted to do, leading to division among youth who preferred sports and those who did not. Sports-based cliques and friend groups were at times intimidating for youth who were not part of the groups, and contributed to making certain spaces feel emotionally unsafe for both youth and staff participants. However, participants also recognized that activities were helpful for encouraging trust and respect among youth, especially those who were new or first-time attendees. Sports-based groups appeared to show strong bonds and group cohesion, especially for youth who were already on sports teams together in outside contexts. As such, physical activity has clear benefits in bringing youth together and creating comfort, and should not be removed from the afterschool context, but perhaps modified. Fitness-based or non-sports-based physical activities may be a potential alternative to facilitating trust and bonding while also helping those who are not as comfortable with sports to not feel excluded. Further research in this area is required to confirm this.

The importance for youth to feel free and able to separate themselves in order to feel emotionally safe is novel, and not currently established in the afterschool literature. This relationship between freedom and emotional safety can potentially be explained by youth's description of emotional safety as a need to feel understood and accepted. Having the freedom and choice to move around the program and engage in conversations as they please may help youth to feel like they are accepted and that their decisions and choices are valid. It is also interesting to note that the freedom discussed by participants was primarily focussed on the ability to leave the program or specific spaces, and having the choice of whether to participate in

activities or talk to individuals. The finding that feelings of freedom can be influenced by the physical environment is consistent with previous findings showing that certain environments can be more conducive for socialization because youth feel free and able to make choices in larger and more open spaces (e.g. Bento & Dias, 2017). As such, the current findings suggest that continuing to develop spaces that encourage freedom in youth can lead to more social interactions among program participants and potentially opportunities to feel emotionally safe.

The value of spoken or displayed words to adolescent emotional safety was novel. While existing literature had discussed the role of the built environment features and social interactions in feelings of emotional safety, it had only minimally explored the role of written and posted words in feelings of emotional safety. In this study, words were crucial in facilitating several of the trusting relationships between adolescents and their peers and program staff, along with showing them that they had freedom and belonged in the program. Words that conveyed belonging and rules displayed on the walls of the program spaces along with staff symbols were key in making youth feel like they belonged and were safe, and were photographed and discussed by almost all of the youth participants.

Some of the themes had implications for physical safety. While the focus of this study was on emotional safety, the reoccurring mentions of physical safety highlight the importance of physical safety for supporting emotional safety. References to the interplay of both physical and emotional safety were prevalent in staff and youth discussions. For example, participants talked about fences, security cameras, the cleanliness of a space, the presence of bullet holes, and public (non-program) individuals, that either directly or indirectly influenced their feelings of both physical and emotional safety. Additionally, the perceived physical safety of the neighbourhood the AfterSchool program was situated in influenced youth and staff feelings regarding physical

and emotional safety as well as their participation in physical activity. This finding is consistent with other studies that have found that child and parental perceptions of low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods as being physically unsafe can deter physical activity (e.g. Loftson, Muhajarine, & Ridalls, 2012). Therefore, future research and applications looking at adolescent emotional safety would also benefit from considering physical safety and the role it may play in conjunction with emotional safety.

The findings from this study shed light on how the levels of influence in the bioecological model relate to emotional safety. The microsystem was highlighted by youths' discussion of feelings of protection and trust with their peers and staff. Seeing peers trust and spend time with staff helped youth participants to feel more comfortable trusting staff, highlighting the role of the mesosystem. The exosystem was shown by the discussion around the comfort found in program spaces, and how the neighbourhood and structure of the City program influenced youth and staff feelings of safety in regards to the afterschool program. Lastly, participants expressed how the societal views towards the neighbourhood the program was situated in influenced their behaviour and interactions, highlighting the macrosystem.

### **Practical Applications**

The results from this study have practical applications for afterschool programs, and potentially other recreational contexts that cater to adolescents. It would be beneficial to encourage staff members to communicate with youth using language that facilitates trust. Trusting language can include inviting adolescents to talk to program staff if needed, or encouraging staff to share some details from their lives to build rapport and help convey understanding to the youth. Using trusting language empowers adolescents by giving them the option of talking or participating. In addition, modifying program policies to allow for

adolescents who are upset to take time out by either leaving the program and returning when ready, or having a specific place that they can use to be alone or apart from the other youth could create opportunities for enhanced emotional safety. Designing multi-purpose program spaces to suit diverse needs and provide comforts that help make youth feel at home can complement predominantly sports-focussed spaces, and help more youth to find their niche. Furthermore, having programming that encourages large group cooperative play may be a potential avenue to help youth to interact between groups, and create a space that encourages friendships and trust rather than competition and division. By incorporating larger group sports activities that have opportunities for participants at varying skill levels to play together, youth who are less comfortable with sports can be introduced to sports in a way that may be less intimidating.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the drop-in nature of the program, conducting interviews during program time, difficulties obtaining parental consent, age differences between myself and the participants, and the need to supervise youth during photo-taking. The program is designed to give youth the freedom to choose what activities to participate in and when to attend, and parents/guardians are not required to sign up youth. While this policy is beneficial for promoting program attendance and autonomy, it made it difficult to garner interest in participating in the study. Adolescents had the choice to leave whenever they wanted to, and that meant they often chose to only come for an activity they wanted to do, and leave soon after. This choice influenced many of the participants' desire to participate in the study, as they would rather leave the program after they finished their desired activity than take part in the research. I attempted to minimize this limitation by showing up to the program early, to try and recruit youth prior to

their desired activity in order to allow them enough time to complete the study before they would take part in their desired activity.

I chose to conduct interviews during program time given the age of the participants and the drop-in nature of the program. Conducting interviews during program time was advantageous because the drop-in nature of the program meant that participants could choose when they wanted to come, making it hard to schedule interviews on separate dates or times. Furthermore, it allowed participants 14 years of age and older to take part in the study without having to let their parents know, thus further maintaining their privacy. However, conducting interviews during program time also proved to be a limitation because adolescents who wanted to participate in the study had to do it at the expense of missing out on an activity, which most of the youth preferred not to do. Other times, youth participants would want to finish the study early, in order to spend time with friends or take part in an activity. The youths' desire to spend time with their friends could have influenced the lengths of the interviews, and how reflective participants were.

For youth under the age of 14, the need to obtain parental consent was a barrier to participation. Some of the youth who were interested in the study expressed discomfort with giving their parents the forms or asking their parents for permission. As such, these adolescents who wanted to participate in the study were unable to take part due to the inability to obtain parental consent. This was further complicated by the fact that parents did not need to sign their youth up for the program, and therefore there was minimal contact between the program and the parents of the program attendees.

The age difference between the youth participants and I may have also impacted the quality of the interview data obtained. Youth may have had prior negative experiences with adults and those in authority positions, which could have impacted their comfort around me.

Youth may have found it difficult or uncomfortable to fully describe the meanings behind certain photos or to articulate their thoughts verbally due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topic. Although it was advantageous to conduct single interviews given the drop-in nature of the program, any discomfort youth felt with regards to my age difference and my unfamiliarity could have been further exacerbated by conducting single interviews with the participants. Only limited rapport could be built in a single session with youth, which could have caused them to feel uncomfortable discussing their feelings of emotional safety with me. The use of a single interview also limited my ability to further probe answers from participants following analysis or follow-up on ideas that developed. I attempted to minimize this limitation by spending time at the facility prior to and for the duration of the data collection period, playing games with the youth and interacting with them to familiarize myself with the youth and the program. I also chose to use language in interviews that was easy for the youth to understand, clarified or reworded questions that caused confusion for the youth, and clarified meanings with the youth frequently throughout the interview to make sure I had understood them correctly.

Lastly, the need to supervise youth during photo-taking as required by the program may have limited the quality of the photo data. Youth participants may have felt uncomfortable having me follow them around the facility, and this may have influenced the photos they chose to take. I attempted to minimize this by only giving youth instructions at the very beginning when they received their camera, and minimizing any additional instruction or feedback during photo-taking so as to not influence the data collected.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

This study presented the afterschool experiences of early and middle adolescents, along with the staff members who work alongside them. While several novel findings were discussed,



the findings also highlight a need for continued research in this area. Given the methodology used, there is opportunity for future research to consider programs of different formats (e.g. arts-based), and programs in neighbourhoods of different socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. higher income) to see if the results are comparable across youth growing up in different areas. The findings also highlight some subtle differences between early and middle adolescents, and future research targeting middle and older adolescents (between the ages of 16-18) would be beneficial to gain a complete picture of the emotional safety needs of all adolescents. Future research can also look into the role of physical activity, and whether fitness-based or non-sports-based physical activities may be better suited to increase youth interactions without creating division among youth of different ages and skill levels. Having found that freedom was an important factor in youth feelings of emotional safety, it would be useful to delve into why freedom is so important to youth. Lastly, as discussed previously, an exploration of emotional safety in conjunction with physical safety would be beneficial, as features and components important to youth physical safety are also often related to their feelings of emotional safety.

This study aspired to increase knowledge on adolescent emotional safety in afterschool recreational environments, and the role of the social and built environments in influencing emotional safety. Four themes and one subtheme emerged from the youth and staff interviews. These themes reveal the importance of communication among youth and program staff in afterschool programming, and give suggestions for how the afterschool built environment can be modified to better promote feelings of freedom, trust, and emotional safety among adolescents. The findings from this study highlight the need for further research in the area of emotional safety, peer relationships, and the recreational environment. In the community, the results from this study may contribute to future development in afterschool recreational environments, as

these environments were chosen for study due to their broad reach. It may also help inform future developments in afterschool programming to better address the needs of early and middle adolescent populations. Lastly, results may have application in the development of emotionally safe recreational contexts in communities.

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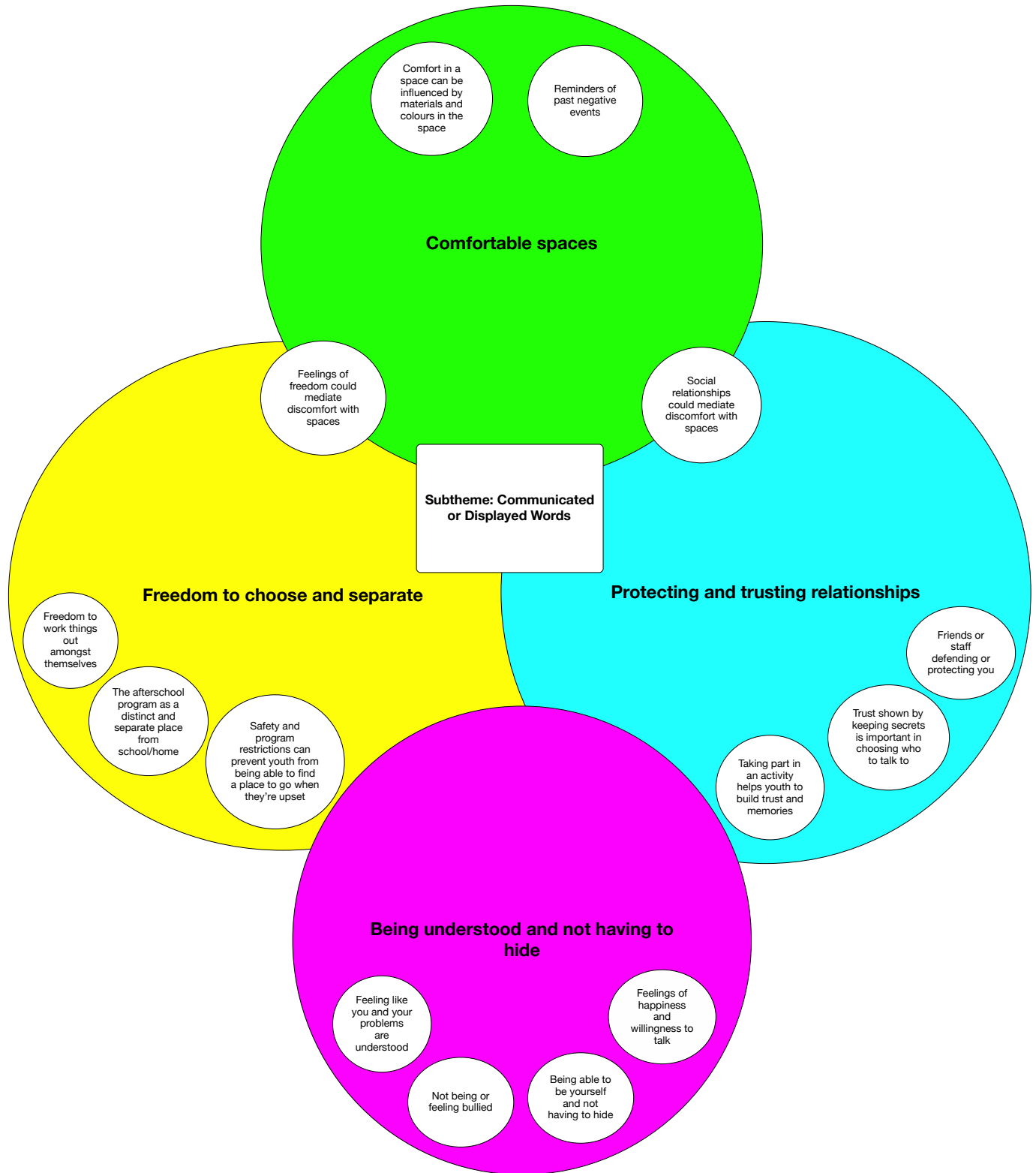
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**Figure A:** Model of youths' perceptions of social and environmental features contributing to emotional safety in an afterschool program.

**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

## **PEDIATRIC CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** Adolescent Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment

**SPONSOR:** University of Calgary, Faculty of Kinesiology

**INVESTIGATORS:** Dr. Meghan McDonough

**MSc STUDENT:** Janet Wong

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your child's participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

### **BACKGROUND**

After school programs can help youth to grow into healthy adults. However, youth need to feel emotionally safe in order for this growth to take place. Emotional safety has been defined as feeling free from psychological harm. This study will look at youth's feelings of emotional safety in an afterschool program. Youth will be asked to take photos in their afterschool program of things that make them feel more or less relaxed and secure about their feelings. They will then be asked to share why they took the photos they have taken. Program staff will also be asked to share about their experiences working with the youth. Youth and staff replies will help us to learn about what is important to youth feeling emotionally safe.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to learn about what helps youth to feel emotionally safe in afterschool programs.

### **WHAT WOULD MY CHILD HAVE TO DO?**

Your child will be given a camera and asked to take photos. We will ask them to take photos of anything that makes them feel more or less relaxed, and secure about their feelings at the afterschool program. The camera will be collected after. Then your child will be asked to take part in an interview with Janet or a member of the research team. They will be asked about their experiences in the afterschool program. They will also be asked to share what is important to them about the photos they took. Everything your child does in this study will take place at the afterschool program. The information your child tells us will help us to learn about the experiences of youth in the afterschool environment.

An information package has been provided to you via your child. The package includes this consent form and an assent form for your child. If you decide to consent to your child's participation, you and your child will need to complete these forms. Please return the completed forms to your child's afterschool program staff member or to Janet by email/phone [REDACTED].

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

There are no expected risks to taking part in this study.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FOR MY CHILD?**

There is no guarantee that this research will help your child. They might learn more about emotional safety. The information we get from this study may help us to improve future programs for youth.

**DOES MY CHILD HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

No, your child does not have to take part in the study. If you decide you want your child to be in the study now, you can also withdraw your child at any time. There will be no consequences. We want you to stay informed as your child is taking part in the study, so feel free to ask any questions you have throughout the study. If there is new information available during the study period, you will be informed as soon as possible.

If you wish to withdraw your child from the study, we will stop collecting data with them. You can withdraw your child from the study by contacting Janet. You can also choose to withdraw your child's data. However, please be aware that data withdrawal is not possible once the results of the study have been published or otherwise disseminated.

**WILL WE BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING, OR DO WE HAVE TO PAY FOR ANYTHING?**

You will not be paid for being in this study. You do not have to pay for anything for your child to be in this study.

**WILL MY CHILD'S RECORDS BE KEPT PRIVATE?**

All of the data we get from you and your child will be kept private. Only the research team, and the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board will have access to this data. However, if your child tells us something that puts them or someone else in danger, we will have to tell the program staff, who may inform you. Your child's data will be kept secure in a database. Any results of the study that are reported will in no way identify those who took part in the study.

**SIGNATURES**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your child's participation in the research project and agree to their participation as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw your child from the study at any time without jeopardizing their involvement in the Calgary AfterSchool program. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Janet Wong [REDACTED]

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a possible participant in this research, please contact the Chair of the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary at [REDACTED].

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Parent/Guardian's Name

---

Signature and Date

---

Child's Name

---

Signature and Date

---

Investigator/Delegate's Name

---

Signature and Date

---

Witness' Name

(Only required if parent/guardian providing consent has a visual impairment)

---

Signature and Date

The investigator or a member of the research team will, as appropriate, explain to your child the research and his or her involvement. They will seek your child's ongoing cooperation throughout the study.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

A signed copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.



**APPENDIX B**

## **Assent for Older Child**

**TITLE:** Adolescent Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment

**SPONSOR:** University of Calgary, Faculty of Kinesiology

**INVESTIGATORS:** Dr. Meghan McDonough

**MSc STUDENT:** Janet Wong

### **What is a research study?**

A research study is a way to find out new information about something. You don't need to take part in a research study if you don't want to.

### **Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?**

We want to learn about what helps youth in afterschool programs to feel relaxed and secure about their feelings. We are asking you to be part of the study because you are in an afterschool program. We want to know how the program and other youth help you to feel relaxed and secure about your feelings. About 15 to 30 youth will be in this study.

### **If you join the study what will happen to you?**

We want to tell you about some of the things that will happen to you if you are in this study:

- You will be in this study for one day. It will take place between September 2018 and March 2019. We will also check with your parents to make sure they are ok with you taking part in the study.
- You will be given a camera and asked to take photos at your afterschool program. Janet or a member of the research team will walk around with you. You will be asked to take photos of anything in the program that makes you feel more or less relaxed and secure about your feelings.
- You will be asked to answer some questions with Janet or a member of the research team. They will ask why you took the photos you did. They will also ask you some questions about things that make you feel more or less relaxed and secure about your feelings at the afterschool program. It will take about 45 minutes to do this.

### **Will any part of the study hurt?**

This study will not hurt you. Some questions might make you feel uneasy. If you don't want to answer any of the questions, you won't have to.

### **Will the study help you?**

This study may or may not help you. You might learn about what makes you feel relaxed and secure about your feelings.

### **Will the study help others?**

Ethics ID: REB18-0520

Study Title: Adolescent Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment

PI: Meghan McDonough

Version number/date: v2/24-Aug-2018

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This study may help us to learn about what makes youth feel relaxed and secure about their feelings. This may help us to make future programs better for youth.

**Do your parents know about this study?**

We have also given you a consent form to give to your parents. This will let them know about this study. You can talk this over with them before you decide.

**Who will see the information collected about you?**

The data we get from you will be kept locked up. Nobody will read it except the people doing the research. It will not be given to your parents. The people doing the research won't tell your friends or anyone else. However, if you tell us something that puts you or other people in danger, we will have to tell the program staff and they may have to tell your parents.

**What do you get for being in the study?**

You do not have to pay to be in this study. You will not get anything for being in this study.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

You don't have to be in the study. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this study. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell us. It's up to you. You can also take more time to think about being in the study.

**What if you have any questions?**

If you have questions, you or your parents can call Janet [REDACTED]. You can ask any questions that you have about the study. You can also take more time to think and talk with your parents about being in the study.

**What choices do you have if you say no to this study?**

This study is extra, so if you don't want to do it that is OK.

**Other information about the study.**

If you decide to be in the study, then please write your name below. You can change your mind and stop being part of the study at any time. All you have to do is tell the person in charge. It's okay. The people doing the research and your parents won't be upset with you.

You will be given a copy of this paper to keep.

**Would you like to take part in this study?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I will be in this research study.      \_\_\_\_\_ No, I don't want to do this.

\_\_\_\_\_

Child's name

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the child

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Person who received assent

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. A signed copy of this assent form has been given to you to keep.

**APPENDIX C**

## **STANDARD CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** Adolescent Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment

**SPONSOR:** University of Calgary, Faculty of Kinesiology

**INVESTIGATORS:** Dr. Meghan McDonough

**MSc STUDENT:** Janet Wong

Janet Wong [REDACTED]

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

### **BACKGROUND**

After school programs can help youth to grow into healthy adults. However, youth need to feel emotionally safe in order for this growth to take place. Emotional safety has been defined as feeling free from psychological harm. This study will look at youth's feelings of emotional safety in an afterschool program. Youth will be asked to take photos in their afterschool program of things that make them feel more or less relaxed and secure about their feelings. They will then be asked to share why they took the photos they have taken. Program staff will also be asked to share about their experiences working with the youth. Youth and staff replies will help us to learn about what is important to youth feeling emotionally safe.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to learn about what helps youth to feel emotionally safe in afterschool programs.

### **WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO DO?**

You will be given a camera and asked to take photos. We want you to take photos of anything that makes you feel more or less relaxed and secure about your feelings at the afterschool program. The camera will be collected afterwards. Then you will be asked to take part in an interview with Janet or a member of the research team. We will ask you about your experiences in the afterschool program. We will also ask you what is important to you about the photos you took. Everything you do in this study will take place at the afterschool program. The information you tell us will help us to learn about the experiences of youth in the afterschool environment.

An information package with this consent form has been given to you. If you want to be in the study, you will need to fill out this form. You can return this form to your afterschool program staff member or to Janet by phone/email [REDACTED].

### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

There are no expected risks to taking part in this study.

### **WILL I BENEFIT IF I TAKE PART?**

If you choose to take part in this study, there may or may not be a direct benefit to you. There is no guarantee that this study will help you. You might learn more about emotional safety. The information we learn from this study may help us to improve future programs for youth.

### **DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

No, you do not have to take part in the study. If you decide to take part, you can also withdraw from the study at any time. There are no consequences for withdrawing. Please feel free to ask questions throughout the study. If there is new information available during the study period, you will be informed as soon as possible.

If you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any point by contacting Janet to have yourself removed from the study. At that point data collection with you will be stopped. You can also choose to withdraw your data. However, please be aware that data withdrawal is not possible once the results of the study have been published or otherwise disseminated.

### **WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING, OR DO I HAVE TO PAY FOR ANYTHING?**

You will not be paid for being in this study. You do not have to pay for anything to be in this study.

### **WILL MY RECORDS BE KEPT PRIVATE?**

All of the data we get from you will be kept private. Only the research team, and the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board will have access to this data. However, if you tell us something that puts you or someone else in danger, we will have to tell the program staff and they may have to tell your parents. Data collected about you will be kept secure in a database. Any results of the study that are reported will in no way identify those who took part in the study.

### **SIGNATURES**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardizing your involvement in the Calgary

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AfterSchool program. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Janet Wong [REDACTED]

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a possible participant in this research, please contact the Chair, Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary at [REDACTED].

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Participant's Name

---

Signature and Date

---

Investigator/Delegate's Name

---

Signature and Date

---

Witness' Name

---

Signature and Date

The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

A signed copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.



**APPENDIX D**

## **STANDARD CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** Adolescent Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment

**SPONSOR:** University of Calgary, Faculty of Kinesiology

**INVESTIGATORS:** Dr. Meghan McDonough

**MSc STUDENT:** Janet Wong

Janet Wong [REDACTED]

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

### **BACKGROUND**

After school programs can help youth to grow into healthy adults. However, youth need to feel emotionally safe in order for this growth to take place. Emotional safety has been defined as feeling free from psychological harm. This study will look at youth's feelings of emotional safety in an afterschool program. Youth will be asked to take photos in their afterschool program of things that make them feel relaxed and secure about their feelings. They will then be asked to share why they took the photos they have taken. Program staff will also be asked to share about their experiences working with the youth. Youth and staff replies will help us to learn about what is important to youth feeling emotionally safe.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to learn about what helps youth to feel emotionally safe in afterschool programs.

### **WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO DO?**

You would be taking part in an interview with Janet. It will be held at the afterschool facility or at the University of Calgary. You will have the option of doing the interview during your work hours (immediately before or after program time), or outside of work hours. We will ask you about your experiences with the youth in the afterschool program. We will also ask you to share what you think helps youth to feel emotionally safe. Your responses will help us learn about youth's feelings of emotional safety.

An information package with this consent form has been given to you. If you would like to take part in the study, please complete this form and return it to Janet [REDACTED].

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

There are no expected risks to taking part in this study.

**WILL I BENEFIT IF I TAKE PART?**

If you choose to take part in this study, there may or may not be a direct benefit to you. You might learn more about emotional safety, but there is no guarantee that this study will help you. The information we learn from this study may help us to improve future programs for youth.

**DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

No, you do not have to take part in the study. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Please feel free to ask questions throughout the study. If there is new information available during the study period, you will be informed as soon as possible.

If you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any point by contacting Janet [REDACTED] to have yourself removed from the study. At that point data collection with you will be stopped. You can also choose to withdraw your data. However, please be aware that data withdrawal is not possible once the results of the study have been published or otherwise disseminated.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING, OR DO I HAVE TO PAY FOR ANYTHING?**

You will not be paid for being in this study. You do not have to pay for anything to be in this study.

**WILL MY RECORDS BE KEPT PRIVATE?**

All of the data we get from you will be kept private. Only the research team, and the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board will have access to the data. Data about you will be de-identified and will be kept secure in a database. Any results of the study that are reported will in no way identify those who took part in the study.

**SIGNATURES**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardizing your employment with Calgary AfterSchool. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Janet Wong [REDACTED]



If you have any questions concerning your rights as a possible participant in this research, please contact the Chair, Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary at [REDACTED].

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Participant's Name

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Signature and Date

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Investigator/Delegate's Name

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Signature and Date

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Witness' Name

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Signature and Date

The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

A signed copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

**APPENDIX E**

## **Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreational environment in adolescent emotional safety**

### **Youth Photo-Elicitation Protocol & Interview Guide**

#### **Photo-Elicitation**

- Thank you so much for helping with this study!
- I'm here today to find out more about your experiences in the afterschool program. We want to learn about what makes youth feel more or less safe and secure about their feelings in programs like this one. We want to learn about what kinds of things at the afterschool program help you feel more or less secure, accepted, valued, and like you can trust other people, or not.
- For this study, I am first going to ask you to walk around the program space, and take pictures about what makes you feel safe, secure, accepted, valued and like you can trust others here, and anything that makes you feel less safe or accepted.
- You will have up to 20 minutes to take pictures in the program space. You can go anywhere that you are normally allowed to go during the afterschool program. I will walk with you as you take pictures, but you are leading. You get to decide where we go, and what pictures you want to take.
- Please don't take any pictures of people's faces. I will have to erase any pictures that have people's faces in them. You can take pictures of people that don't show their faces.
- Remember, I want to learn about your point of view. There are no "right" or "good" pictures. I just want to know your honest thoughts and opinions.
- When you are done, give the camera to me, and then we will talk about the pictures you took.

#### **Interview**

The goal of this interview is so I can hear more about your experiences in the afterschool program. We want to learn about what makes you feel more, or less, safe and secure about your feelings, accepted, valued, and like you can trust other people.

- There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. We are interested in what you think, and want to learn from you.
- If there is a question you don't want to answer, or if you want to stop at any point, just let me know.
- I am going to audio record our interview, so it is easier for me to remember what you said. Only myself and the research team get to hear the recording. We will not use any information that would let other people be able to figure out who you are or what you said. However, if you tell me something that endangers your personal

safety or someone else's, I will have to tell the program staff and they may have to tell your parents.  
Do you have any questions for me before we start?

*Start the recording*

### **Background**

- When did you start coming to the afterschool program?
- How often do you come to the afterschool program?
- Why do you come to the afterschool program?
  - Do you like coming to the afterschool program?

### **Photos**

- Here are the pictures you took. Can you please tell me which are your 3-5 favourite photos that show something about what makes you feel more, or less, safe and secure about your feelings at the afterschool program?
- Can you please tell me about the first picture?
  - What is the picture of?
  - Why did you take this picture?
  - What is important to you about this picture?
  - Why does this picture represent or show how you feel more, or less, safe and secure about your feelings?

[repeat with remaining pictures]

### **Emotional Safety**

- What does it mean to you to feel safe and secure about your feelings?
  - Can you tell me about a time where you felt this way at the afterschool program?
- Are there things that help you feel safe and secure about your feelings when you are here at the afterschool program? Can you tell me about what makes you feel that way?
  - Are there ways in which other kids here help you feel more, or less, safe and secure about your feelings? What do they do that helps you feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?
  - Are there ways in which the staff at the program help you feel more, or less, safe and secure about your feelings? What do they do that helps you feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?
  - Are there places here at the program where you feel more or less safe than others? What is it about these spaces that helps you feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?

- Do you feel comfortable discussing personal problems when you are here?
  - With peers? Staff? Volunteers?
- Is there anything you would add to the afterschool environment that would make you feel more safe and secure about your feelings?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me, those are all of the questions I have for you. Are there any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to add?

Thanks again, have a nice day!



**APPENDIX F**

<b>ID #</b>	
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**Youth Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment:**

*Demographic Questionnaire for Youth*

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Race:**

**How many school years  
have you attended  
Calgary AfterSchool  
(including this year):**


**APPENDIX G**

<b>ID #</b>	
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**Youth Emotional Safety, Peer Relationships, and the Recreational Environment:**

***Demographic Questionnaire for Staff***

**Age:**

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**Gender:**

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**Race:**

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**How many school years have you been employed by Calgary AfterSchool (including this year)?**

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**APPENDIX H**

## **Afterschool dynamics: The role of peers and the recreation environment in adolescent emotional safety**

### **Staff Interview Guide**

#### **Semi-Structured Interview**

Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join me and answer some questions today. The goal of this interview is to hear from staff members like yourself about how you think the youths' feelings of emotional safety are impacted by the afterschool environment and their relationships with other youth. The findings from this interview may help us to understand how recreational spaces are utilized by youth, and how we could potentially prevent youth from feeling unsafe.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you of a few key things:

- The interview will be around 45-60 minutes. If at any point you would like to stop this interview or withdraw from this study, you are able to.
- If there is a question you don't want to answer, just let me know. You have the right to not answer any question.
- Everything stated in this interview will be kept confidential. You will be referred to in any future write-up by a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. We will not use any information that would let other people be able to figure out who you are or what you said.
- This interview will be audio recorded, so it is easier for me to remember what you said. Only myself and the research team will get to hear the recording. All data will be kept on a secure drive.

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

*Start the recording*

#### **Background**

- When did you start working with Calgary AfterSchool? How long have you worked at this specific afterschool program facility?
- What do you like about working with the afterschool program?
- Why do you think youth come to the afterschool program?

#### **Youth Emotional Safety**

- What do you think it means for youth to feel safe and secure about their feelings?
  - What characteristics or actions do you think youth exhibit when they feel safe and secure about their feelings?

- Are there things that help youth to feel safe and secure about their feelings when they are here at the afterschool program?
- Do you think the presence of other youth in the program helps youth to feel more, or less, safe and secure about their feelings?
  - What do they do that helps them to feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?
  - Do you think this plays a role in youth choosing to participate in the afterschool program?
- Do you think the presence of staff in the program helps youth to feel more, or less, safe and secure about their feelings?
  - What do they do that helps them to feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?
- Are there places here at the program where you think youth feel more or less safe than others?
  - What is it about these spaces that helps them to feel this way? Makes it harder to feel this way?
  - Are certain locations in the facility more conducive for youth when they are upset?
  - Are there specific aspects of the facility that help youth to relax?
- Do you think youth feel comfortable talking about their personal problems with their peers at the afterschool program? Why or why not?
  - With staff members? Volunteers?
- Is there anything you would add to the afterschool environment that you think would make youth feel more safe and secure about their feelings?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me, those are all of the questions I have for you. Are there any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to add?  
Thanks again, have a nice day!