

Innovation Initiatives: Learnings from culturally responsive innovations

What is the Innovation Initiatives grant program?

The Knowledge Institute's [Innovation Initiatives](#) grant supports innovative solutions to pressing issues in Ontario's child and youth mental health, substance use health, and addictions sector (the sector).

Since its inception in 2019, our program has funded 38 agencies to explore and implement innovative approaches, strengthen service quality, and generate learnings that benefit the sector.

More recently, the program has prioritized culturally responsive programs that support children, young people, caregivers, and families facing systemic inequities. This commitment reflects the Knowledge Institute's strategic priority to strengthen equitable, culturally responsive care across Ontario.

Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

This project is funded by the Province of Ontario. The views expressed herein are those of the Knowledge Institute and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.

Why culturally responsive programming?

[Culturally responsive programming](#) helps reduce barriers to care by ensuring services reflect the cultural identities, strengths, values, and lived expertise of the communities they serve.

How do we support innovation?

Beyond funding, we help agencies by providing support for practical implementation, evaluation, and knowledge mobilization initiatives that can inform future practice and decision-making. These include:

- **Research support:** Literature reviews, resource sharing, and development.
- **Cross-agency collaboration:** Opportunities for networking and shared learning.
- **Consultation:** Tailored guidance to support program implementation and evaluation.
- **Knowledge mobilization and strategic communications:** Sharing learnings through resources, events, conferences, and other activities.

How are culturally responsive programs evolving?

Experiences across funded programs point to a shift in how culturally responsive programs are developed and delivered, moving beyond designing programs for communities toward designing them with communities and creating approaches that better reflect the communities they serve.

To learn more, check out our [Innovation Initiatives](#) and [EDIA-R resource webpage](#).



Key learnings from culturally responsive programs

Funded agencies have shared valuable insights through knowledge-sharing events, final reports, and ongoing conversations.

These insights have generated key lessons about delivering culturally responsive care and supporting communities.



Consider culture in every stage of program development

Programs are more effective when they are built with communities and grounded in the cultural knowledge, frameworks, teachings, and lived and living expertise of children, young people, caregivers, and families. This means moving beyond adapting existing models to embed culture throughout program design, delivery, and evaluation. By recognizing historical and systemic contexts while building on community strengths, programs are better positioned to reflect community priorities and improve their relevance and impact.



Build trust through flexible, relationship-centred approaches

Building trust requires time, consistency, and flexibility. Allowing programs to adapt in response to feedback and changing community needs creates more responsive approaches to care and reduces barriers to participation. Providing flexible scheduling and multiple ways to engage allows for relationship building and helps communities feel supported and willing to remain involved.



Build strong community partnerships from the outset

Strong community partnerships are central to developing relevant and sustainable programs. Designing programs alongside communities from the start helps to build trust and create opportunities for shared ownership. While these partnerships strengthen implementation and long-term sustainability, they also require ongoing investment and dedicated time.



Partner with children, young people, caregivers, and families

Meaningfully engaging children, young people, caregivers, and families throughout the program strengthens implementation and outcomes. Seeing and involving them as active partners in shaping programs reinforces learning and supports lasting change that extends beyond the program.



Strengthen organizational capacity through ongoing learning and reflection

Building organizational capacity through ongoing learning, facilitator training, reflective practices, and continuous feedback helps embed new approaches into practice while strengthening staff confidence. These efforts increase an organization's capacity to sustain culturally responsive approaches over time.

