T.E.A.R. Mobile Pilot: Impact & Learning Report

July 2025

Victim Services Toronto

Toronto District School Board

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3
Introduction

4
Method and Approach

5
What We Learned:
Cross-School Insights

8
Observed Program Impact

11
Conclusion and Strategic Insights

12
Acknowledgements

Introduction

The T.E.A.R. Mobile pilot was an adapted version of Victim Services Toronto's core T.E.A.R. program, designed specifically for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

The pilot aimed to deliver targeted, accessible education on healthy relationships, consent, online safety, and human trafficking, in school-based environments.

This report offers an integrated view of what was delivered, what emerged through the sessions, and how these insights might inform future programming. It draws on reflections from program facilitators, debrief meetings with staff, survey feedback from staff and students, and field notes gathered across participating schools. The goal is not only to account for impact, but to surface learning that can strengthen future delivery.

ABOUT THE PILOT

The pilot ran across several TDSB schools serving students with IDD. Sessions were delivered during school hours, led by a pair of trained facilitators with experience in trauma-informed, disability-aware practice. Content was tailored to the needs of the cohort and included videos, games, discussions, and visual handouts.

Program topics included:

- Healthy relationships
- Consent and boundaries
- Online safety
- Exploitation and human trafficking

Each school had different levels of preparation and internal capacity, which shaped the delivery environment. Some sessions required the use of interpreters for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Others included additional accommodations for mobility devices, lower literacy levels, and sensory regulation needs.

Adaptations made during the pilot included:

- Pre-session meetings with school-based staff
- Use of two facilitators in each session
- Introduction of fidget toys, colouring sheets, and snacks to support focus
- Real-time adjustments based on group energy and comprehension

Method and Approach

The evaluation of the pilot program was grounded in a developmental approach, consistent with the needs of a first-time implementation in a complex and evolving school context.

Data was gathered through a combination of educator surveys, program debriefs, facilitator reflections, and student responses during and immediately following session delivery.

The evaluation prioritized learning and adaptation, recognizing the diverse needs of participating students and the varying conditions across school sites. Rather than relying solely on standardized metrics, this approach emphasized rich, contextual understanding and responsiveness to the relational dynamics at play. The findings presented in this report are derived from this layered evaluative process, designed to inform future iterations and deepen the impact of the program within and beyond the current pilot schools.

What We Learned: Cross-School Insights

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

The program created space for students to explore topics rarely addressed in depth within their educational environments. When trust and safety were established—through facilitator tone, classroom structure, and supportive staff presence—students responded with openness, curiosity, and a desire to connect. Many sessions prompted disclosures, stories, and questions that revealed not only comprehension of the material but also a personal connection to the concepts of consent, boundaries, and online safety.

Across schools, facilitators observed strong reactions to content related to bodily autonomy and digital risk. Some students expressed confusion, while others showed signs of concern or recognition. In several cases, students disclosed situations that bore resemblance to known patterns of coercion or exploitation. These disclosures, often spontaneous and peer-supported, highlighted the importance of delivering content in a way that affirms personhood and invites trust.

At the same time, many classrooms revealed behaviours that reflected how students are socialized to think about sex and relationships. Performative comments, such as exaggerated relationship stories or overstated confidence, surfaced frequently. Rather than being dismissed as disruptive, these moments offered valuable insight into the social norms, coping strategies, and unmet developmental needs that shape how students make sense of intimacy and identity. Facilitators used these moments to gently clarify language, redirect myths, and reinforce key messages without undermining the students' voices.

Taken together, these responses underscore the importance of a learning approach that is relational, responsive, and attuned to the diverse ways students process information about their bodies and rights. The program offered a rare opportunity for students to be seen and heard in these conversations—an essential foundation for meaningful learning about consent, safety, and self-advocacy.

VULNERABILITY AND RISK

The program workshops surfaced the diverse and intersecting risks that shape how young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities navigate safety, relationships, and consent. Across schools, students shared experiences that reflected limited prior engagement with structured sex education and the concurrent influence of harmful social norms. Several students expressed uncertainty about boundaries or described interactions that suggested exposure to exploitation, particularly in online contexts.

Facilitators observed that vulnerability often manifested in ways linked to students' developmental profiles. For example, students with Prader-Willi syndrome showed a heightened susceptibility to manipulation involving food, while deaf and hard of hearing students seemed more socially isolated and less familiar with key concepts, potentially due to communication challenges and limited access to appropriate programming.

In several schools, students described close relationships with adults, including educators and other community members, that seemed to operate without clear protective boundaries. These dynamics were not always recognized as inappropriate by staff or students, but their presence (as observed by the program facilitators) heightened the risk of boundary violations and reinforced patterns of compliance. For this population, the capacity to recognize harm and advocate for safety is directly shaped by how others model relationships, reinforce consent, and enable access to trusted information.

These insights reinforce the program's central aim: to provide youth with affirming, accessible opportunities to learn about their rights, name their boundaries, and develop the skills to navigate relationships with greater agency and safety. The T.E.A.R. Mobile program not only delivered this content but also revealed the systemic and relational conditions that make such programming essential.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND READINESS

The pilot reinforced the ways school climate plays a critical role in shaping student engagement with sensitive content. Across sites, differences in staff cohesion, student confidence, and classroom dynamics influenced how the T.E.A.R. sessions were received and integrated.

Schools across the pilot represented a wide range of learning environments and student support needs. East-end sites such as Heydon Park, Maplewood, and Osler serve students with some of the most complex developmental and behavioural profiles. These schools often carried longstanding responsibilities for supporting high-needs populations, which shaped both the classroom environment and the kinds of relational dynamics observed. In these settings, facilitators noted that students sometimes needed more support to explore unfamiliar concepts, express questions confidently, or apply abstract ideas to real-world situations. Some students were still developing familiarity with digital literacy and consent-related topics, which shaped how they approached discussions about risk and boundaries. Educators and support staff demonstrated deep care for students, working within varied and often demanding conditions.

In other school settings, different contextual factors shaped the tone and rhythm of delivery. Facilitators observed that when school leadership was actively engaged, and staff had the opportunity to participate in pre-session planning or follow-up conversations, students were often more comfortable navigating the material. These conditions supported a more integrated learning experience and allowed students to connect more deeply with the program content. Across sites, it was evident that student engagement was closely tied to how well the program was embedded into the broader school environment, and to the presence of caring adults equipped with the tools to reinforce learning.

These contrasts highlight how deeply school environments influence students' ability to access and benefit from prevention programming. The

content alone is not enough. Its impact depends on the relational and cultural infrastructure that surrounds it—something the T.E.A.R. pilot was able to surface and make visible through practice.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF

The effectiveness of the T.E.A.R. sessions were closely tied to how school staff engaged with the material and with students throughout the program. Educators played a variety of roles throughout the pilot. Many offered thoughtful reinforcement of key ideas and engaged students in follow-up conversations that helped extend learning beyond the session. In some instances, well-intended responses would introduce alternative perspectives or shift focus, highlighting the value of continued collaboration and shared understanding around sensitive content.

Across sites, many staff demonstrated a deep care for their students. Even when classroom dynamics posed challenges, the desire to protect and support was clear. Many educators expressed a need for clearer guidance around how to model safe relational behaviour and how to navigate sensitive or unfamiliar topics with greater confidence. In this sense, the program created learning opportunities not only for students, but also for the adults supporting them.

Pre-session meetings emerged as a valuable point of alignment. When time was taken to clarify goals, preview content, and establish roles, delivery was noticeably stronger. These moments were particularly important in light of broader system dynamics. For example, school social workers bring valuable expertise to this content, and their involvement can significantly enrich program delivery. In many schools, guidance counsellors and vice principals also played important roles, partnering with facilitators and supporting students as they engaged with the material. Their participation contributed to a more integrated and responsive learning environment, reinforcing the value of continued professional development in this area.

This pattern reinforced a central insight: **staff do not need to be experts in the content to support its impact**. What matters most is openness to learning, clarity of role, and a shared commitment to building safe, trusting environments where students can explore complex ideas.

FACILITATION AND ADAPTATION

Facilitators were essential to the successful delivery and impact of the program. They played a central role in tailoring the program to meet the diverse needs of each school and classroom. Across sites, they adjusted tone, pacing, and delivery in real time to respond to students' energy, comprehension, and comfort. Techniques such as humour, repetition, storytelling, and the use of visual aids helped reinforce key ideas and maintain engagement. In settings where sensory tools or snack breaks were introduced, students displayed stronger focus and greater ability to stay present throughout the session.

Having two facilitators in the room proved essential. This structure allowed one person to lead group dialogue while the other provided quieter support, responded to disclosures, or offered clarification to students who needed more individualized attention. The dual facilitation model helped ensure both group cohesion and personal connection, which was especially important in classrooms with diverse learning needs.

Facilitators also brought an observational lens to the work. Their interactions with students and staff offered insight into broader patterns, for example, highlighting who appeared most at risk, how adults demonstrated or disrupted relational boundaries, and where school infrastructure supported or interrupted learning. These observations reflected the facilitators' deep expertise in trauma-informed practice, developmental engagement, and the nuanced ways that vulnerability can show up in educational settings.

As both educators and system-level witnesses, the facilitation team was uniquely positioned to surface critical insights that might otherwise go unnoticed. This dual function of teaching and noticing was a defining strength of the program and a key contributor to its impact.

Observed Program Impact

The evaluation strategy for the T.E.A.R. Mobile pilot was grounded in developmental principles. It prioritized learning, responsiveness, and contextual insight, with an emphasis on understanding how the program unfolded across varied school environments.

The goal was not simply to measure "program effectiveness", but to surface the conditions that shaped engagement, supported impact, and revealed opportunities for future refinement.

A multi-modal feedback structure supported this approach. Data collection tools included post-program educator surveys, structured debriefs with school staff, and facilitator reflections conducted immediately after each session. These were complemented by informal disclosures, observed behaviours, and real-time student reactions, offering a layered, adaptive view into how students encountered the material.

This strategy was intentionally designed to accommodate the complexity of the learning environments. Across the pilot, students' readiness, access needs, and prior exposure to related topics varied widely. In this context, fixed outcome measures would not have captured the depth of transformation or the relational nuance that defined the sessions. Instead, situational awareness and dynamic responsiveness were treated as core evaluation values.

Qualitative indicators of impact appeared consistently throughout the pilot:

- Students voiced disclosures or offered personal reflections that showed connection to the material.
- Facilitators observed students revisiting assumptions, correcting each other's misconceptions, and integrating new understandings.
- Classrooms shifted in tone, with a noticeable increase in comfort, openness, and trust as the sessions progressed.
- Educators reported that the program prompted conversations that had not previously occurred in their classrooms.

These insights reflect the deeper intent of the program: to co-create spaces where youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities can build language, confidence, and tools for navigating relationships. By meeting students where they were and attending closely to their responses, the evaluation approach not only documented program outcomes but contributed to a more expansive understanding of what safe, accessible, and affirming learning looks like.

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORTED SUCCESS

The program surfaced several enabling conditions that contributed to student engagement, program relevance, and effective delivery. These factors were not evenly distributed across sites, but where they were present, facilitators observed stronger learning environments and deeper connection to the material.

- **Pre-session meetings** emerged as a key contributor to program success. When VST facilitators and school staff had time to align in advance—reviewing session content, clarifying roles, and discussing specific classroom dynamics—delivery was smoother and more responsive. These conversations also provided space to flag potential areas of sensitivity, which helped facilitators adapt proactively.
- **Active involvement from school leadership** played an important role. When vice principals, guidance counsellors, or other senior staff were present and engaged, students appeared more focused, and teachers were more likely to support the material both during and after the session. This visible commitment signalled to students that the topics were important and worth taking seriously.
- **Learning environments that incorporated sensory supports, visual aids, food and structured routines** helped students remain regulated and attentive. In several schools, access to snacks or sensory tools supported participation, particularly for students who might otherwise struggle with long periods of sitting or verbal processing.
- **Staff awareness of diagnosis-specific vulnerabilities** also enhanced impact. Educators who recognized how specific conditions might shape a student's relationship to food, touch, trust, or communication were better positioned to respond in ways that upheld safety and dignity. This was especially important in classrooms where students experienced high levels of social isolation or had limited language to express discomfort.
- **Post-session follow-up by educators** helped extend the learning. When teachers or counsellors debriefed with students after facilitators left, they created space for clarification, reflection, and reinforcement. These conversations supported integration and ensured that complex topics were not left unresolved.

Together, these conditions highlight the importance of shared preparation, aligned adult support, and sensory-aware delivery environments in creating meaningful prevention education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

The pilot also highlighted a set of structural and logistical conditions that shaped the delivery environment. These did not reflect gaps in commitment or care, but rather the realities of delivering sensitive, developmental content in systems marked by variability and constraint.

- In some classrooms, **staff practices around boundary-setting or digital literacy were not well aligned** with the program's goals. Facilitators encountered examples where adult behaviours—such as using overly familiar language or modelling inappropriate relational norms—conflicted with the messages being shared with students. These moments created confusion and made it more difficult for students to discern what safe, respectful interactions look like.
- **Disruptions during sessions, often from well-intentioned adults**, sometimes shifted attention away from the content. Spontaneous commentary or lengthy interjections occasionally overwhelmed the planned facilitation, leading to fragmented discussions or reduced clarity. These dynamics reinforced the value of pre-session planning and role clarity among all adults in the room.

- While **social workers were supportive of the program, many held responsibilities across multiple schools and were not always able to attend or provide continuity.** In their absence, guidance counsellors and vice principals frequently stepped in as session partners. Their willingness to engage was a strength, though many expressed a desire for clearer guidance on how to reinforce session content or respond to emerging student needs. This dynamic pointed to the need for wider distribution of knowledge and shared language across staff teams.
- **Technology access was uneven.** In some schools, facilitators brought their own equipment to ensure smooth delivery. Internet connectivity, including inconsistent Wi-Fi access, added another layer of unpredictability. While these workarounds were effective in the moment, they underscored the importance of advance coordination with schools to confirm infrastructure and prepare appropriately to support interactive programming.
- While the T.E.A.R. content was well-received overall, **further adaptation is needed to meet the communication and literacy needs of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, as well as those with limited reading comprehension.** Facilitators used visual aids and simplified handouts where possible, but developing dedicated materials in accessible formats will support deeper engagement in future iterations.

These insights reinforce the importance of shared readiness, aligned adult facilitation, and infrastructure planning when delivering relational and safety education to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

The pilot offers clear guidance for future investment:

1. **Returning to the same schools** would allow content to build in complexity and relevance over time
2. **Offering staff-facing workshops or preparation sessions could reduce session** interruptions and reinforce key principles
3. **Engaging caregivers through tailored sessions** would support continuity at home, especially for students navigating independence
4. **Designing feedback tools that align with students' communication styles** would improve evaluation and accountability
5. **Strengthening partnerships with allied organizations** such as Toronto Public Health would deepen the network of support

Conclusion and Strategic Insights

The T.E.A.R. Mobile pilot provided insight into the relational, environmental, and systemic factors that shape how young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities encounter concepts of safety, consent, and self-advocacy.

By working across a diverse set of schools, Victim Services Toronto facilitators developed a strong understanding of how school conditions, including histories of sex education, staff engagement, and technological fluency, influence student readiness and program impact. These differences affected both the tone of sessions and the types of disclosures and behaviours that emerged.

In schools where staff initiated pre-meetings, joined sessions, and engaged in debriefs, students appeared more comfortable, more open to discussion, and more likely to revisit or challenge prior assumptions. The quality of adult involvement shaped the learning environment and influenced students' ability to process and apply the material.

Victim Services Toronto is uniquely positioned to support and inform this work going forward. As a team embedded in multiple schools, they hold a rare, comparative view of how different student populations, support structures, and school cultures intersect with this content. They have demonstrated the ability to identify not only individual needs, but also systemic patterns, such as the relationship between diagnosis-specific vulnerabilities and external risks, or how school staff's boundaries, beliefs, and practices influence what students internalize.

This perspective offers clear value to the system as a whole. As the program evolves, there is an opportunity to strengthen its infrastructure while using the insights gained to inform broader school-based strategies. Ongoing delivery would support not just students, but the educators, social workers, and administrators seeking tools to navigate this complex, sensitive, and critically important terrain.

Acknow-ledgements

Victim Services Toronto extends sincere thanks to the following schools for their collaboration and commitment in supporting the T.E.A.R.™ Mobile Program:

Heydon Park Secondary School

Maplewood High School

William Osler High School

Eastdale Collegiate Institute

Frank Oke Secondary School

Drewry Secondary School

Central Etobicoke High School

York Humber High School

We also wish to thank Shameen Sandhu from the Toronto District School Board for her guidance and support throughout this project.