

AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

a violence prevention program



INFORMATION PACKET

WHAT IS AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS?

Authentic Connections is a community-based violence prevention program that utilizes six key principles rooted in improving social connection to support individuals and organizations in addressing, reducing, and de-escalating stressful situations in public settings. Research shows that increasing social connection and belonging while reducing social isolation decreases incidents of violence within communities. Using trauma-informed practices, Authentic Connections aims to increase health equity, decrease social isolation, and strengthen resilience in our communities.

Authentic Connections is designed for implementation in community, non-profit, public, and, even for-profit, organizations. Through ongoing consultation, collaboration, and training, Saint Paul- Ramsey County Public Health supports organizations in creating sustainable change. The six Wakanheza Principles (wah-kahn-ee-zha) provide the basis for strategies and tools organizations can use for their target populations and settings.

The six Wakanheza Principles formed out of a program originally designed for young children and their families. However, these principles are universal for building authentic social connections. By using strategies more specific to different situations, environments, and populations, organizations can create welcoming environments, increase social connection, and reduce stressful situations for their employees, those they serve, and community.

THE WAKANHEZA PRINCIPLES



Environment:

Environments have significant impacts on behaviors.



Bias:

Everyone has implicit bias, which impacts their judgement.



Empathy:

All people have the capacity to understand each other's ideas, feelings and experiences.



Culture:

Culture includes deeply rooted beliefs and values that shape individual and world views that influence our interactions with others. Opening ourselves to the appreciation of all cultures and the opportunity to acknowledge differences and similarities will allow us to better connect with others.



Power:

Power differences exist within systems and are also experienced uniquely by individuals and impact the way that people interact with others and their environment. Acts of violence can arise from feelings of powerlessness.



Connection:

In any given moment we have an opportunity to make remarkable and profound connections with others when we are intentional and choose to do so.

THE STRATEGIES

PREPARE

- Complete the Authentic Connections Audit
- Learn about and acknowledge implicit biases
- Assess physical spaces
- Acknowledge personal and organizational capacity
- Learn about and understand systemic and organizational power dynamics
- Practice self-awareness
- Assess internal and client-facing organizational culture
- Continually build positive social connections within the organization and the community

ACT IN THE MOMENT

- Pause and assess yourself and the environment
- Show empathy
- Distract or redirect
- Find something positive
- Offer encouragement
- Be yourself
- Breathe
- Listen
- Give space
- Know your limits and use your resources
- Be aware of bystanders in the environment
- Ask questions
- Show appreciation

REFLECTION & RECONCILIATION

- Work to reestablish feelings of safety with those directly and peripherally involved
- Assess any need for privacy, break, or space
- Discuss and reflect both individually and as an organization:
 - » Process feelings and actions taken
 - » Discuss potential causes and areas for change or improvement
 - » Provide reassurance and support to staff
- Potentially follow up with clients involved

CONTINUE ON

- Support staff well-being through mutual care and encouragement of self-care
- Seek additional resources or training, for example:
 - » Implicit Bias Training
 - » Trauma Informed Care
 - » Historical Trauma Training
- Make a plan to implement changes discussed in reflection stage:
 - » Organizational policy
 - » Physical Environment
 - » Staffing adjustments
 - » Organizational culture
 - » Staff training
- Ongoing intentional use of Authentic Connections program

IMPLEMENTATION AREAS

Authentic Connections can be used in a wide range of settings that serve a variety of people. Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health can provide expertise and guidance in using the best strategies for your setting and with those you serve. Our partnerships have focused on several areas of implementation:

- Young Children and Families
- Physical Environments (for all ages)
- Youth and Young Adults
- Community Collaborations
- Intergenerational Experiences

While these have been the primary focus, Authentic Connections is not limited to these because the Wakanheza Principles are universal.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

The Authentic Connections program is not a one-size-fits-all program. For each organization, the timeline and implementation will be unique. However, the following steps are generally taken when an organization decides to do Authentic Connections.

- Review Information Packet
- Initial contact with Saint Paul- Ramsey County Public Health*
- Completion of Authentic Connections Audit
- Consultation meeting with County staff*
- Internal discussion to determine if implementation of AC fits well with your current vision
- Consider designating an internal Authentic Connections Planning Team
- Follow up with County staff and co-create a Learning & Implementation Plan*
- Internal organization discussion of Implementation Plan
- Facilitated Learning Session with evaluation
- Session and evaluation summary debrief by the planning team
- Identify next steps for imbedding and sustaining AC implementation
- Ongoing evaluation and planning

*These steps are specifically done with or by County staff. However, they are available for support throughout the entire process.

Several of these steps become cyclical over time. As the organization and staff debrief and evaluate, the implementation may be tweaked. New and veteran employees alike may benefit from attending another learning session. As time goes by, the population you serve and issues may change, warranting the organization to revisit the Wakanheza Principles and reassess which strategies they use. Additionally, Authentic Connections is a program for the whole organization and is a team effort. Organizations are encouraged to include everyone in the learning sessions. Everyone has a responsibility for the environment you create, therefore implementation needs to include everyone in every position. Most importantly, this is not a one-time-training, but rather a framework for creating a welcoming, safe, and supportive culture and a connected community.

HONORING OUR ROOTS

Wakanheza (wah-kahn-ee-zha) is the Dakota word for child and translates literally to “sacred being.” Gabrielle Strong, a member of the Dakota Nation, formally gifted the word Wakanheza to Ramsey County in 2004. The formal gifting of the word Wakanheza to Ramsey County was to share the world view of children as sacred, to remind us all of the meaning and power of our words, and to both remember and include the indigenous languages of Minnesota in the work that we do.

The word Wakanheza specifically refers to children between the ages of 0 and 7 years. “The Wakanheza Project” was the founding program for Saint Paul- Ramsey County Public Health in the area of violence-based prevention programs of this type. As the principles of “The Wakanheza Project” expanded to reach broader populations and environments, additional programs such as “Creating Welcoming Environments” and “Making Authentic Connections” were created. Today, we have assembled all of the experience and program components into “Authentic Connections” which can be implemented in various areas, with all ages, using the Wakanheza Principles.

AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS AUDIT

Every organization has the capacity to do Authentic Connections. This audit is meant to be used as a guide in preparation for Authentic Connections implementation for building a more connected community. Understanding your organization’s strengths and areas for growth is key to beginning, evaluating and sustaining this work. We encourage you to use this assessment tool without judgment of yourself or others within your organization. This audit is not a requirement but is offered to facilitate reflection in preparation for planning and discussion regarding your organization’s new or ongoing implementation.

The audit is divided into four main areas. Under each heading, you will find specific behaviors or practices that support the overall area of focus. Some of these may not apply to your organization. Focus on the aspects that do apply to your organization. Remember that this is a guide, not a rulebook, for building a more connected community.

Self-Audit Instructions:

Put a check mark in the box you believe best reflects where you or your organization is currently at. If you are having trouble deciding which applies, consider how others might describe the particular practice. It is useful to have multiple people in multiple roles, complete the audit.

Below is a key to help decipher which column to select in each question.

- **No Current Practice:** Select this if this practice is not happening or is a problem in your organization. This behavior may be not be on your organizations radar yet.
- **Discussion of Practice:** Select this if this practice is being discussed by some or all staff, but no action has been taken to ensure the item is addressed.
- **Practice Needs Improvement:** Select this column if there has been action to address this practice, but there is more work to be done. This could mean that some staff engage with a behavior positively, but not all staff or that action has been taken, but more action is needed to fully address the item.
- **Effective Current Practice:** Select this column if the practice is addressed in a continuous and sustainable manner. This could mean that a physical change has been made and is maintained, or that the entire staff is engaged in positive behaviors.

Does your physical space offer a welcoming environment for all individuals?

Questions	No current practice	Discussion of practice	Practice needs improvement	Effective current practice
Does your physical space offer a welcoming environment for all individuals?				
Does security balance welcoming, hospitality, and safety? Is security developed with staff and client input?				
Is the building accessible for people with hearing, visual, or mobility challenges?				
Is the space well-lit (bright, but not jarring)?				
Are spaces are clean and well-maintained?				
Do you have bathrooms that meet the needs of all genders (e.g. single staff bathrooms with locks) and are there changing stations accessible to parents of all genders?				
Does the physical space create a calm atmosphere (music, lighting, color scheme, furniture, etc.)?				
Are there materials available that support trauma and stress reduction, as well as recovery and wellness?				
Does the environment reflect the cultures of clients?				
Are materials and signs available in the language of those served?				
Is there a quiet room or space available?				
Are there materials or activities for children (e.g. toys, books, coloring, etc.)?				
Are materials (including print, music, video, etc.) screened for negative stereotypes and assumptions?				
Do meeting spaces ensure confidentiality?				
Is there access to water, coffee, tea, or snacks?				
Are one-on-one meeting spaces set up in a welcoming and warm formation that allows for the provider and client to face each other and connect?				
Are one-on-one meeting spaces configured to protect the safety of both client/patients and providers?				
Are chairs comfortable?				
Are exits easily accessible from all spaces in the building/facility?				
Is peer support available?				
Is there an avenue for clients to make suggestions?				

Do you work to understand the impact of the social environment, focus on addressing the behavior of individuals to reduce racial, ethnic and cultural inequities and increase social inclusion?

Questions		No current practice	Discussion of practice	Practice needs improvement	Effective current practice
	Is communication conducted in client's preferred language and method?				
	Does staff refrain from making assumptions based on non-verbal language that may differ across cultures?				
	Does staff ask open-ended questions about relevant cultural traditions or customs?				
	Does your organization discuss and encourage examination and recognition of implicit biases?				
	Does your organization address incidents of inequity or social exclusion in a reflective manner and make plans for improvement?				
	Are assessment tools used and interpreted with consideration of their cultural bias?				
	Does staff receive ongoing education about cultural traditions and customs of those they serve?				
	Do you have clearly communicated confidentiality policies?				
	Does staff follow your confidentiality policy?				
	Does your staff discuss with clients the best means of communicating confidential information for them?				

Are your services and information easily accessible?

Questions		No current practice	Discussion of practice	Practice needs improvement	Effective current practice
	Are your hours convenient for your clients (including parents, youth, and those working varying shifts)?				
	Are walk-in appointments available?				
	Is your location accessible to your clients? Are you nearby public transportation? Do you have affordable and accessible parking?				
	Do you have a website that clearly lists information regarding hours, services, fees, and procedures?				
	Do you utilize modes of communication and marketing that work best for your clients (phone, texts, website, etc.)?				
	Are consent forms written in easy to understand language?				

Do you prevent or de-escalate stressful situations, better connect and engage with individuals?

Questions	No current practice	Discussion of practice	Practice needs improvement	Effective current practice
Is there someone to welcome and connect with people when they arrive?				
Are all staff expected to connect with clients through simple gestures such as eye contact, saying hello, or smiling?				
Are staff confident in their ability to recognize a person or situation that is escalating?				
Are staff confident in their ability to connect with clients experiencing stress?				
Do staff connect with individuals with respect and positive regard?				
Do you acknowledge and validate client's feelings?				
Do staff feel they have backup in situations that are beyond their capacity to de-escalate?				
Do staff feel they have the capacity to stay calm in escalated or stressful situations?				

This list was adapted, in part, from the following sources:

- https://www.aucd.org/docs/councils/mcc/cultural_competency_assmt2004.pdf
- http://traumatransformed.org/wp-content/uploads/TI_ENVIRONMENTALSCAN.pdf
- <https://www.qualityinteractions.com/blog/cultural-awareness-in-healthcare-checklist>
- <https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/YF-Assessment-Guide-and-Tool.pdf>

CONTACT

authenticconnections@ramseycounty.us

MORE INFORMATION

ramseycounty.us/authenticconnections