



**Evaluation of
ACC's Mates and Dates:
School-based Healthy Relationships
Primary Prevention Programme Pilot**

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Executive Summary

Background

The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) developed a healthy relationships sexual violence primary prevention programme. This programme, known as 'Mates and Dates', was piloted in eight New Zealand secondary schools in the second half of 2014, with a view to having the programme nationally available in 2015. The programme was designed to be delivered to high school students in Years 9 to 13, with each participant engaging with the programme for five sessions presented over one hour. It incorporates a step-laddered approach, with each year building on the lessons of the previous year.

The objectives of Mates and Dates pilot programme were to:

- provide young people with tools (such as knowledge and skills) to establish and maintain healthy relationships
- change social norms relating to respect, negotiation, and consent in relationships
- teach ethical bystander and intervening skills where risk of violence is identified
- provide young people with help-seeking skills for themselves and their friends if they are experiencing or causing sexual or dating violence
- encourage schools to confirm the components which support a whole school approach, and/or adopt a whole school approach to preventing sexual and dating violence amongst young people, including:
 - policies which support school boards, staff, and school leadership to promote student safety from sexual violence
 - processes in place to deal with disclosures of dating and sexual violence.

Evaluators from Lighthouse Consulting were contracted by ACC to evaluate the Mates and Dates healthy relationships sexual violence primary prevention programme pilot. Evaluation objectives for the pilot programme were to:

- measure the effectiveness of the approach in order to inform future investment decisions
- test materials and delivery methods to ensure their effectiveness for any ongoing delivery.

The evaluation objectives were addressed using a mixed-methods research approach consisting of six separate components (1) a self-complete electronic tablet survey for students, (2) interviews with students, (3) interviews with key stakeholders, (4) observation of programme delivery, (5) four case studies, (6) evaluation of facilitator training.

Comparison of Mates and Dates to best practice

Mates and Dates was compared to a review of international literature about best practice in relation to content and delivery of programmes of this type, and with information on best practice for teaching in New Zealand secondary schools. The overall finding was that:

- **Mates and Dates met best practice standards for the most part when considered in the mainstream paradigm.** This was particularly evident in the course content which focused on developing and practising new skills, and the step-laddered content design of the programme, which ensured age-appropriate materials. The only departure from best practice was the use of facilitators without teaching experience and skills.

When the programme was assessed for its ability to meet best practice in relation to specific groups (i.e. Māori, Pacific peoples, Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI), people with disabilities), the following areas for improvement were identified:

- kaupapa Māori best practice is missing from the programme, although some of the principles are implicit
- there is little acknowledgment of the principles and values of Pacific society, and this needs to be explicitly articulated
- there is sound emphasis on sexual diversity, which meets best practice standards for GLBTI communities, but facilitator knowledge needs to be demonstrated so that they can support these students
- the needs of people with disabilities were not addressed, specifically the accessibility requirements of deaf students and students on the autism spectrum

There are challenges in designing and delivering a programme in a mainstream school setting that meets the specific needs of all sub-groups. Engagement with these particular groups is especially important due to their increased risk of sexual victimisation.

Other areas for improvement in relation to best practice were:

- supporting schools to develop formalised procedures or protocols to handle disclosures
- incorporating more of the principles of secondary schooling including operating within a whole-of-school approach

Implementation of Mates and Dates

Formative and process evaluations are critical to successful implementation of programmes; however, this has been the first opportunity for any evaluation of Mates and Dates. The first rollout of a complex and sensitive programme such as Mates and Dates can reasonably be expected to provide significant learning opportunities

Rollout of Mates and Dates

The rollout of Mates and Dates fell slightly short of initial targets, but was successfully implemented in eight schools around New Zealand, with the programme delivered to over 1,200 students in the second half of 2014.

There was considerable variability in the way the programme was implemented across sites (e.g. recruitment of student participants, delivery timeframe for course modules which ranged from one week to ten weeks). While such variability was not intended, it appeared important to

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let the schools have a choice in the best way to run the programme. This flexibility may have been a key factor for some schools agreeing to implement the programme.

Three issues were identified that restricted the total number of participating students:

- schools tended to use **different implementation models** with some schools restricting the programme to Years 9 and 10, or to selected students
- **the consent process** for participation proved challenging and onerous. The programme used an opt-in approach which required written parental consent for student participation. An opt-out approach would probably improve participation rates
- on occasion, individual students or groups of **students were scheduled on other activities** (e.g. choir, cultural activities or clubs) and were unable to attend part or all of the Mates and Dates programme

The programme faced challenges in working within a school environment and the following were identified as problem areas:

- **variable effectiveness of the key contact persons** in each school in promoting and assisting with implementation of the programme. Those who were not in a position of seniority within the school were less able to exert influence e.g. accommodating scheduling requirements
- **insufficient pre-programme support for the implementation** and too short a lead-in time for schools to enable them to adequately plan and prepare. At some schools staff felt that the implementation was rushed which impacted on their ability to prepare for the programme
- **uneven engagement with parents** and the wider school community
- **lack of clarification about the role of teachers** particularly around classroom management during session delivery
- **insufficient training of facilitators** to equip them to manage classroom behaviour
- **lack of alignment of Mates and Dates** in relation to the school curriculum - NCEA credits were not awarded for programme participation.

Delivery of Mates and Dates

The effectiveness of the delivery of Mates and Dates was influenced by how the course content was received, and the effectiveness of the facilitation.

Key findings:

- overall students and facilitators were generally positive about the programme; teachers were supportive of the concept of Mates and Dates but had concerns over the effectiveness of the pilot delivery model
- course materials were rated highly by students across all age, ethnicity, and gender groups. However, teachers raised concerns over the cultural appropriateness and relevancy of some resources
- facilitators and teachers supported the use of role plays in principle, but felt some subjects covered were not appropriate for role-playing, and one role play activity in particular was considered unsafe. Concerns were also expressed regarding the emphasis on written materials - particularly for junior students
- the variable effectiveness of facilitators in managing classroom behaviour impacted on engagement with programme content. This skill set was seen to be a critical factor for the successful delivery of the programme. Teachers in some schools would have also welcomed more collaboration with facilitators
- concerns were raised over the timing, length and appropriateness of the evaluation survey. Facilitators felt that having the evaluation survey so close to programme commencement interrupted programme delivery and was unsafe due to the inclusion of a question on sexual victimisation.

Impact of Mates and Dates

There were programme implementation issues and it is likely that these will have limited the effectiveness of Mates and Dates in achieving its intended outcomes. However, evidence can be found of a desirable impact in some areas.

Short-term impact on students

Comparison of pre and post-programme data assessed short-term changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural intent of students. Overall the programme impacted positively on five out of seven outcome measures, with a small but insignificant decline in one area (ethical bystander intended behaviour). Positive impacts were modest but were statistically significant in relation to:

- attitudes towards rape
- confidence in ability to recognise risky situations and inappropriate sexual behaviour
- confidence in ability to seek help or support for self or others if needed

Interviews with students reflected a more positive view than the quantitative findings, with a wide range of positive impacts reported. However, while these reports were often the majority view they were not always uniformly reported.

There was general agreement amongst teachers that the programme had had a positive impact on students. Some teachers were very positive about that impact and the changes they expected the programme to make to their students and school. Others were tentative and felt that this impact may not be widespread, but would be part of a process of learning that could be supported and built upon as students grow and progress through the different years at school.

Impact on school and wider community

There was limited evidence to draw on when assessing the impact of the programme on the school and wider community. Some students were aware of an impact on other students within the school (e.g. how others in the school thought about issues, students listening more respectfully after the programme and possible impact on how teachers think). However, no students, teachers, other school staff or parents/caregivers had perceived any impact on the school or wider community from Mates and Dates. There was no evidence of change to school policies or procedures in relation to sexual violence and disclosures as a result of the programme.

Implications for a wider rollout of Mates and Dates

Mates and Dates has been well designed and meets many of its goals. It has been generally well received and has had a significant impact on students' help-seeking behaviour and some impact on knowledge and attitudes. However, the pilot rollout has not been without issues, and these will need to be addressed if the programme is expanded.

The recommended programme changes are:

- review of the selection, training and supervision of facilitators for Mates and Dates. Facilitators are critical for programme effectiveness and require teaching skills as well as subject area knowledge
- Kaupapa Māori principles need to be explicitly articulated in course materials. There must be acknowledgement and inclusion of the needs of Pacific participants. The needs of deaf students, students on the autism spectrum and students with other disabilities must also be acknowledged - course design should be improved to enable access, engagement, and learning. Resources need to reflect their audience if they are to resonate and have meaning
- review and re-consideration of role-plays and continuums is recommended; emphasis on written material (e.g. worksheets) should be reduced and replaced with interactive content - particularly for junior classes
- the consent process needs to change to an opt-out model
- ACC needs to select senior and well respected school staff to act as school champions and work with them to schedule Mates & Dates at each site -to ensure regular and even programme delivery
- facilitators need to work more closely with teachers to keep them informed and use their knowledge to identify and support student needs, strengths, existing knowledge, and learning style. Improvements in role clarification for both parties is also required
- schools need more support around programme implementation and a longer lead-in time so staff can plan and prepare for delivery. ACC needs to play a lead role in this. Pre-programme information needs to be provided and done so in a consistent way
- schools need to be provided with clearer guidelines on selection criteria and procedures for programme participation, with minimum requirements made explicit. However, schools should also be allowed flexibility in deciding how best to implement the programme in their school

- the programme needs to operate on a whole-of-school approach. A focused review is required to identify how Mates and Dates can operate as intended within a whole-of-school approach and how schools can be supported to develop and implement policies around disclosures
- ACC needs to work with the Ministry of Education to consider options for aligning the programme with the curriculum and getting credit for programme participation
- future and on-going evaluation is required to accurately assess programme impacts and outcomes over time, whilst building on its strengths and addressing perceived weaknesses. The survey instrument needs to be revised.

Final comments

Mates and Dates is a significant and important programme in terms of educating young people about sexual and dating violence, and healthy relationships. It does, for the most part, meet best practice standards for courses of this type when considered in the mainstream paradigm. It has been generally well received and has had significant impacts on students' help-seeking behaviour and some impact on knowledge and attitudes.

It cannot, however, be expected on the basis of a time-limited pilot to change what are complex and entrenched beliefs and behaviour systems. It must also be noted that this evaluation has identified varying levels of effectiveness in the delivery of the programme which will have directly affected programme impacts and, ultimately, outcomes. Students participating in the pilot were only exposed to one year of the programme. It is designed to operate across five years. It is likely that longer-term exposure to programme messages may have an effect on more entrenched attitudes and behaviours, but this remains to be seen.

There are a number of programmes covering similar areas in the New Zealand environment, and schools are regularly offered a variety of choices in terms of these programmes. Some are evidence-based best practice programmes and some are not. If ACC and the Ministry of Education could agree on supporting an evidence-based programme such as Mates and Dates, this would ensure both consistency of messaging and delivery of best-practice programmes in schools. Schools themselves are often not in a position to decide which programme is best. ACC and the Ministry of Education are better placed to make such a decision. This would also ensure cost-effective expenditure in the sexual violence prevention area.

In conclusion, this evaluation has identified a number of areas where improvements to the programme and its delivery are needed. Once these changes have been made, on the basis of this evaluation the recommendation is for continuation and expansion of the Mates and Dates programme in New Zealand high schools and colleges, but with on-going annual monitoring and evaluation