

# Research Summary: Young People's Experiences of Residential Immersive Life Skills Programs

Centre for Leadership in Participation and Inclusion

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## SHARING OUR WORK

1. Peer-reviewed article now available online (2014): A retrospective study of past graduates of a residential life skills program for youth with physical disabilities.  
*Child: Care, Health & Development*  
doi: 10.1111/cch.12196
2. Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services Conference (2013): *Lessons Learned from Residential Immersion Life Skills Programs for Youth with Disabilities at Three Children's Treatment Centres in Ontario*

## WHO ARE WE?

The Ontario Independence Program Research (OIPR) Team includes researchers and clinicians from three children's treatment centres in Ontario. We are conducting a program of research looking at **Residential Immersive Life Skills (RILS) programs** for youth with disabilities. In RILS programs, youth spend multiple nights away from home in a college or university residence and have the opportunity to develop the skills they will need in their adult life.

## WHAT WAS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

The aim of the study was to learn about the experiences of young adults with disabilities during and after taking part in one of three RILS programs. The programs were **The Independence Program (TIP)** out of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital (Toronto, Ontario), **Moving On** out of McMaster Children's Hospital (Hamilton, Ontario) and the **Independent Living Program (ILP)** out of ErinoakKids Centre for Treatment and Development (Mississauga, Ontario).

## WHAT DID WE DO?

In 2011-12 and 2013, we asked graduates of the RILS programs who had completed the program in the previous five years to take part in a survey about their experiences. The survey informed us about where they were currently living, what their experiences of the RILS program was like, and how they felt the program affected their lives today. We had a good response rate: 130 out of 312 (42%) past RILS graduates who were contacted completed the survey. Fourteen graduates were also interviewed in person to share their experiences of these programs with us.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

From our survey, we learned that many of the RILS graduates regularly used the skills that they learned during the RILS program, such as transportation and navigation. Respondents reported using some topics less often in their lives after the RILS program, such as information on healthy sexuality, internet safety, and nutrition. Overall, the majority reported positive experiences that led to enhanced life skills and new opportunities.

In their interviews, youth described a number of different ways that RILS programs had helped them learn to become more independent. Attending the program was often a ‘turning point’ in their life, when they learned more about themselves. For example:

- ❖ RILS programs helped youth become more independent by supporting them to **take risks**:

*“. . . [It] was a challenge getting used to the thought that no-one was going to jump in and stop you doing things, so if I did something that might not be the best decision, I’d have to live with the consequences, right? . . . [B]ut I think it was a big help because it gave me the chance to experience good and bad, instead of being sheltered from the bad.”*

- ❖ Having a disability can be an isolating experience. RILS programs provide valuable opportunities to **meet people facing similar challenges**:

*“I felt like I was alone...I was the only one with a disability trying to deal with some things like living on my own...I was able to give advice as well as listen to it and people understood me because they could relate...and some of those people I still talk to today.”*

- ❖ RILS programs help youth **build confidence** in themselves and plan for the future:

*“I believed in myself more. Like I knew I wanted to do it and I could do it and I wanted to try everything new, I guess, that came my way. And every time a challenge came my way, I wasn’t afraid and I was ready to take it on... I created new goals for myself from ones I learned at [program] so I can keep going.”*

### TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT:

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RILS PROGRAMS, PLEASE CONTACT:

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### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

In the summer of 2013, we carried out a study with youth attending The Independence Program (TIP) out of Holland Bloorview. Youth and their parents filled out questionnaires and talked to us before TIP started, after TIP, and 2-3 months after that. We observed workshops and activities that they took part in, and participants shared how they had felt as they did those activities. Look out for our next summary of what we learned!

### THANK YOU!

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