

PROGRAM REPORT 2019

A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a blue baseball cap and a dark shirt, is smiling and holding a white baseball. The baseball has red stitching and the words "I AM UNSTOPPABLE" printed in blue capital letters. The background is a blurred green field. The image is framed by a blue diagonal banner at the top left and a white diagonal banner at the bottom right.

Program Map

Youth Champions and Local Mentors from the following communities participated in the James Bay Girls At Bat program in 2019:



15 Local Community Mentors

18 National Mentors

15 Community Visits were conducted by Mentors and staff

12 Ryerson University Student Volunteers visited 2 fly-in communities for week-long programming

10 Youth Champions were recognized as Exceptional Leaders in the program earning more than 5,000 points throughout the year

70 Youth Champions reached their goals in order to attend bi-annual retreats

152 Youth Champions were connecting regularly on-line with National and Local Mentors year-round

How Did James Bay Girls At Bat Start?

In 2016, Mushkegowuk Council released a report that revealed that approximately 600 children and youth in First Nations communities west of James Bay considered or attempted suicide between 2009 and 2011. On April 9, 2016, after 11 attempts of suicide occurred in a single day in Attawapiskat, the Chief responded by declaring a state of emergency. Youth suicide has devastated Northern Ontario; and James Bay has been an area particularly affected. Youth from communities in and around James Bay have attended forums, focus groups and sharing circles

to offer their insights and recommendations for overcoming the suicide crises affecting their peers and their communities. James Bay Girls At Bat is an initiative that launched in September 2016 with the support of the Ontario government. It is a program designed to respond to youth requests and recommendations, and specifically targets girls in communities along the James Bay Coast who will benefit from additional supports and opportunities.

What is the James Bay Girls At Bat Program?

Since September 2016, Jays Care Foundation and partners have been working together on the James Bay Girls At Bat program (JBGAB). The program works with Indigenous females in communities that have been struggling with increasing rates of suicidal ideations and completions among their youth populations. The program has been noted by Indigenous Leaders, mental health workers and front-line staff as a program that reaches unreachable youth and provides the supports required not only to prevent tragedy, but also to promote healing, hope and positive future orientation.



How Was the Program Designed?

Working to support the design and delivery of the program are a long list of passionate and experienced community members from each of the following communities:

Moose Cree First Nation, Missanabie Cree First Nation, Taykwa Tagamou Nation, Fort Albany First Nation, Kashechewan First Nation, Attawapiskat First Nation, Chapleau Cree First Nation, Wahgoshig First Nation, Peawanuck First Nation and Timmins.

In addition, a Program Design Committee made up of experienced advisors from a wide variety of Indigenous, charitable and non-profit organizations, as well as government ministries have teamed up to help ensure that the design and delivery are sound and culturally responsive.

“We underestimate the wisdom of our youth. What they have experienced in their childhood is more than other people will ever experience.”
- Rick Wabano, Mushkegowuk Council

What Are the Core Design Principles?

The program has been designed since inception as a life promotion program and all facets of the program are trauma-informed. Life promotion sets the goal of helping young people find that place where they are able to flourish despite the challenges they face. Life promotion doesn't focus on reducing suicidality as much as it focuses on cultivating the strongest possible safeguards against it. Jays Care reviewed more than 60 published reports, manuals and research articles regarding best practices for life promotion and trauma informed programming and consolidated these into a required reading kit for all designers, mentors and facilitators involved in the program. This research helped to inform the program design.

Jays Care conducted more than 90 interviews with community members from participating communities. This included conversations with local youth, Elders, front-line workers, Chief and Council members and local change-makers. Insights from these interviews helped identify adults in the community who could champion the program, as well as approaches for the program design and delivery that would ensure local relevancy.

How Does the Program Work?

James Bay Girls At Bat is designed based on the understanding that children and youth who have significant and consistent positive adult mentors, positive peer groups and a wealth of opportunities to learn, grow and develop, have improved outcomes. Here's how it works:



STEP 1

Communities apply annually to participate in the program. The application requires one local adult to be the community liaison and three approved chaperones for travel-specific aspects of the program.



STEP 2

Approved applications are followed by a partnership agreement that is signed and endorsed by Chief and Council.



STEP 3

Female youth in the community aged 11-18 are referred into the program by the school social worker, community probation officer, community liaison and community mental health workers.



STEP 4

Girls attend their first retreat. Retreats are 4-6 days long and take place at rustic overnight camps. Each retreat includes a wide variety of leadership activities, cultural activities, self-reflection and goal setting activities, and supportive peer group development activities. They are also introduced to their Girls At Bat Challenge Booklet that helps them begin to better understand all of the ways they can engage in the program all year long. All girls are divided into groups of 8-10 and are assigned 4 group leaders. Group leaders are Jays Care and Plan International Canada staff as well as long-term female volunteers who are committed to supporting youth throughout the year. Mental health support workers and Elders also attend these events. Once girls complete their first retreat, they become known as Youth Champions in the program.



STEP 5

Youth Champions return to their communities and complete a series of challenges found in their Girls At Bat Challenge Booklet. These challenges include a wide range of activities that require youth to consider their personal strengths and life goals and to be creative. The booklet also includes a series of challenges that require the youth to work together to run fun games, activities and events, creating inclusive spaces and increasing the amount of programming available for children and youth in their communities. By completing challenges in this book, Youth Champions earn points. These points earn them spots at Retreats.



STEP 6

Youth Champions connect with Mentors. Local and National Mentors are women who live both in the community and out of the community who offer ongoing support and motivation to Youth Champions. Youth often refer to them as a fun aunty. National Mentors visit youth in their community once a year to help them with program goals. Jays Care staff also visit communities each year to help the Youth Champions run programming for their peers and work on their personal goal setting. The JBGAB program focuses heavily on introducing mentors into the lives of youth. Research shows that babies who received affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and have relational, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills. Research also shows that a consistent relationship with a caring adult is associated with better grades, healthier behaviours, more positive peer interactions, and increased ability to cope with stress later in life.

As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains vital for healthy physical and emotional development. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen's interests and friends and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary. A caring adult is one of the most influential protective factors a young person can have in their life.

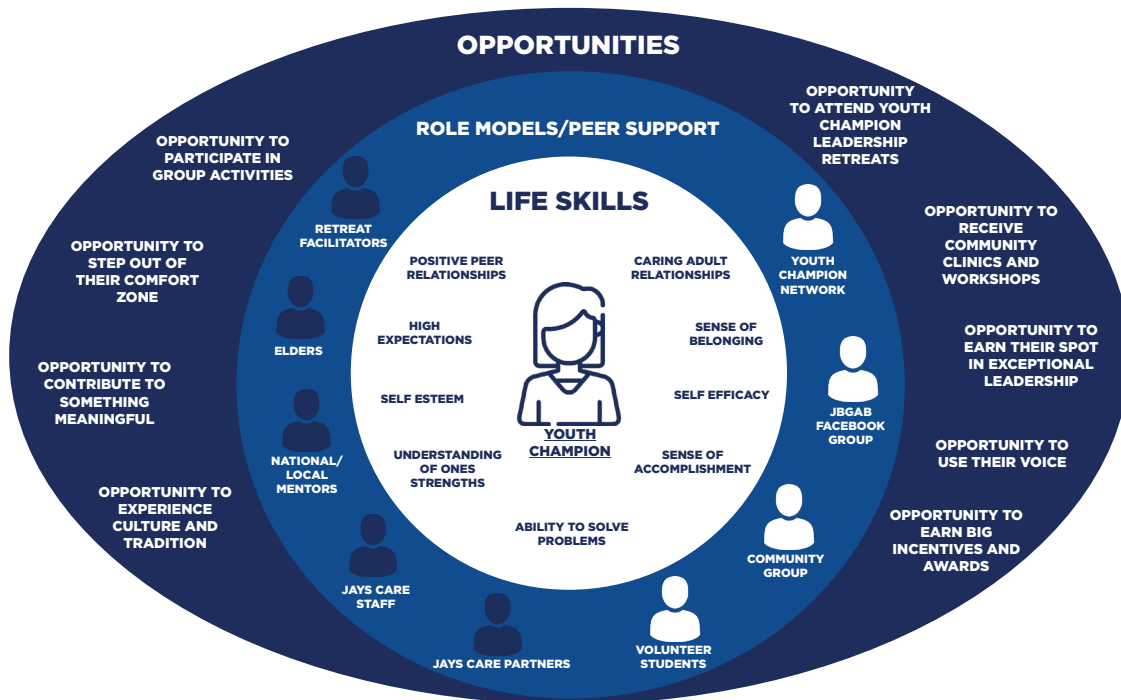
In the James Bay Girls At Bat program, mentors offer support to a handful of youth. They are a listening ear when youth need someone to talk to; a brainstorming partner when youth have a tough decision to make; or a caring friend who youth can count on for advice. JBGAB Mentors are like the fun aunty you see two to three times a year or that memorable camp counsellor you had as a kid. A JBGAB mentor always shows up when they say they will and will work together with a full team of adults to help youth champions dream big and strive for their goals.



STEP 7

Youth Champions have access to exciting program incentives. Youth who demonstrate leadership in the program can be nominated to win big opportunities such as:

- Throwing the first pitch before a Blue Jays game
- A spot at the Exceptional Leadership Retreat
- Jays Care's Unstoppable Kid Awards
- A trip to watch the Blue Jays play
- Post secondary school scholarships
- Community workshops



Mentors, thanks for motivating me and keeping me going when I didn't feel like doing it or I didn't see no worth in me. You helped me come such a long way! Because of all the help, I have conquered from within. Lots of love.
- Youth Champion

What is the Impact of the Program?

This model of supporting youth to strengthen essential life skills, connect them with role models and a consistently positive peer group, as well as present them with a wide range of new opportunities helps to enhance the vital protective factors youth need to thrive. Protective factors help keep vulnerable children from risk and harm and help children become more resilient. Below is a list of some of the most influential protective factors that this program directly targets:

- Caring adult relationships
- Opportunities to participate in group activities
- Understanding of one's strengths and assets
- Positive peer relationships
- Ability to solve problems
- Self efficacy
- Sense of belonging to a group or community
- Opportunity to contribute to something meaningful
- High expectations

How Do You Know it is Working?

Since September 2016, 150 girls have been actively engaged in the program. We have hosted 6 week-long retreats, one exceptional leadership retreat, and completed 50 community visits to further support youth at home. Throughout this time, we have collected feedback from mentors, chaperones, and youth through surveys and interviews and what we have learnt is that this program is working. Here is just some of what the youth are telling us:

100%
of Youth Champions
at the last retreat
reported that they
believe the program
has had a positive
impact on their lives



**“It made me
realize that I have
this whole other
family that’s there
for me.”**

- Youth Champion



87%

**of Youth Champions
reported that the
program has helped
them develop skills to
better care for
themselves and others.**

**“I have never seen youth
in this community react
like that to outsiders....
You guys must be doing
something right.”**

**- Nishnawbie Aski Police
Services, Attawapiskat**



92%

**of Youth Champions
said that the retreats
make them feel like they
have more peers and
adults they can rely on.**



Are Youth Becoming Leaders Through this Program?

Yes. Absolutely. Each day, youth from the program surprise themselves by setting their own expectations higher and higher and achieving them. Below are some great examples of ways Youth Champions are stepping up and showing up:

Over 150 Youth Champions are actively involved on The JBGAB Facebook page, posting challenges they completed in their challenge booklet and supporting each other through positive comments and memes.

Three Youth Champions from Attawapiskat were selected to join the Crisis Response Youth Team (an initiative captained by Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to create more effective crisis response protocols at the government level).

Two Youth Champions who have aged out of the program have applied to be Mentors-In-Training. They both attended two retreats in this capacity taking on significant responsibilities mentoring and leading the youth.

33% of Youth Champions have been actively involved in the program since inception - attending all 6 retreats and working hard to earn points all year long.

Three Mentors were honoured on the Rogers Centre field during the pre game celebration for National Indigenous Peoples day because of their dedication to youth in the program.

Two Youth Champions, through incredible dedication to their growth and healing, earned the opportunity to throw a first pitch at a home game.

Five Youth Champions were selected for Ted Rogers Scholarship (for post secondary school) because of their tremendous efforts as leaders in the program.

Three Youth Champions applied and were approved to complete their volunteer hours for their Early Childhood Education credit by volunteering as child-care providers at James Bay Girls At Bat retreats. They attended two retreats and cared for 4 children under the age of 5 all day long.



The James Bay Girls At Bat program reaches the unreachable youth.

- Front-line Worker, Wapekeka First Nation

