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Youth urged to battle homophobic slurs; Rethinking Relationships Conference: More than 400 youth from across Ontario attended the event at the London Convention Centre

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Encouraging young people to ensure their relationships are healthy and based on equality got a big boost yesterday at a conference that included music, theatre, multimedia exhibits and workshops.

People such as Juno-nominated rapper Shad, Ben Barry, who runs the first modelling agency that represents models of all ages, sizes and backgrounds, and Jessica Yee, a self-described Indigenous feminist reproductive justice freedom fighter, all lent their support.

The Rethinking Relationships Conference held at the London Convention Centre included more than 400 youth from across the province, as well as teachers and youth leaders.

"The notion of 'rethinking relationships' implies we need to collectively and individually 'rethink' how we conceptualize and enact relationships in our everyday lives. This includes relationships among peers, dating relationships, and adult/youth mentoring relationships," said Helene Berman, Rethinking Relationships project director.

Berman is research chair at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, which presented the conference.

During a panel discussion on healthy relationships, Yee said there is often a gap in talking and relationships between the older generation and youth.

Yee, from the Mohawk nation, said it is common for elders to pass down information to youth about relationships, but not as common elsewhere in society.

"Telling stories and visiting with people are the best ways to talk about relationships."

She said youth often tune out after about 10 minutes of listening, unless it's on Facebook. She encourages youth to spend more time talking to people with experience and talking in their peer group.

But Yee, 23, also pointed out that young people "know best what's going on with our bodies and relationships."

She said youth often hear the message that adolescent relationships are dangerous.

Yee said it would be more helpful for young people to be able to talk to adults about sex and dating, rather than hearing a lecture and that youth need to be taken seriously on this subject.

Gaston Cotnoir, a healthy sexuality co-ordinator for Access AIDS Network, talked about the struggle for acceptance young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered still face.

He encouraged conference attendees to notice how they talk to each other.

In secondary schools, he said homophobic slurs are heard an average of 26 times a day.

"We have to be careful of the language we use with our friends. I want you not to just tolerate, I want you to make a difference," he told the young people.

Heather Milner, a Gr. 12 student at Clarke Road secondary school, agreed that she often hears slurs throughout the day.

"You hear words and it's ignorance. Stuff happens every day."

She said the conference gave people keys to address equality for all young people in the school system. "It's really informative."

Berman said the conference wasn't about sitting back and letting experts talk to kids.

"It's an opportunity to learn, in some cases, from the youth who will be leading the sessions about innovative approaches designed to prevent violence and promote healthy and equal relationships."

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