

Dungeons & Dragons may help at-risk kids level up social skills, say researchers

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A community program using Dungeons & Dragons to foster social

growth among at-risk youth has caught the attention of University of Alberta researchers, who plan to evaluate its apparent success.

The Level-Up Gaming League was created by local management consultant Bryan Sali, who noticed a lack of social skills among [homeless youth](#) while working about seven years ago for the Calgary John Howard Society and for Homeward Trust Edmonton.

He found many [youth](#) lacked the basic skills to manage conflict or even initiate a conversation.

"A lot of kids who cycle through the justice system develop a very different skill set by default, more around survival," said Sali. "I thought, there's got to be a way to give them these skills."

Role-playing game

Reflecting on his own development as a child, it struck him that he learned to bond with others through Dungeons & Dragons, the popular fantasy tabletop role-playing game.

"I was a fairly shy kid, and when I started playing that game, I started to build friends and become more extroverted—I learned all sorts of things," he said.

"I learned to love reading because of that game and everything that surrounds it, all the novels and supporting books, I just devoured them."

Dungeons & Dragons requires players to create their own characters and embark on imaginary adventures, earning experience points that allow them to "level up."

The game is supervised by a dungeon master, a sort of principal

storyteller who maintains overall narrative consistency. In the Level-Up Gaming League, volunteer dungeon masters and [social workers](#) work together with the young players, said Sali.

"You can only proceed through the game by working as a team," he said. "It creates this mythos, this world, where failure isn't really an option," since the game is more about process and progress than competition.

What is perhaps most powerful about the game, especially for vulnerable youth, is that it encourages players to take risks and experiment with different roles, said Devyn Rorem, a U of A master's student in educational psychology studying the program.

"Adolescence is a time when you're trying to figure out who you are," said Rorem. "Level-Up Gaming provides the opportunity to try on different identities—to play with things like gender and different personality traits—testing them out in a sandbox-safe environment before bringing them into the real world."

Forging stronger bonds

Sali created Level-Up Gaming in 2017, striking up a partnership with local high-school music teacher Mark Melenberg. The two started working with Edmonton's Youth Employment Services and saw impressive social growth among the agency's young clients almost from the start.

"Watching these kids is amazing," said Sali. "One of the bigger surprises we hadn't anticipated was that—for kids who were gaming with their support worker—their relationships got stronger. Outside of the game, instead of just talking about employment and what happened at school, they would talk about their adventures and characters. It gave them something else to talk about—a different kind of camaraderie."

Since Level-Up only runs every other week, some even struck up their own league on the side, said Sali: "Two kids started running their own games in the shelter."

Finding the secret to its success

Under the supervision of principal investigator Jacqueline Pei, who specializes in adolescent learning and development, Rorem had just begun interviewing social workers and the volunteer support staff who run the program when it was interrupted by COVID-19.

"At some point we may talk to the youth, but right now we're concerned that even talking to them will disrupt the [game](#) process and compromise its effect," said Pei.

"(Adolescents) are some of the most fantastic populations to work with, but they don't engage easily or have a lot of trust in research or any of these formalized structures."

Though there is still much to learn about the potential for board games to nurture social development, Rorem said she is intrigued by what she's seen so far.

"It's such an innovative, outside-the-box approach to supporting complex youth in our community and helping them find success," she said.

"It really gives them an opportunity to practice building these important social skills in a safe and supportive way."

Provided by University of Alberta

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