

For immediate release

April 23, 2020

New online service to give local youth a safe spot to chat about mental health

Mental health is vitally important during the COVID-19 pandemic with widespread feelings of anxiety, fear and isolation. Youth may need to talk more about how they're feeling and coping with the pandemic and local child and youth mental health providers are making it easier for youth to reach out. Starting on Friday, April 24, youth in Muskoka and across the Parry Sound and Nipissing districts will have access to **SafeSpot.ca**, a new online webchat service.

The service is the result of a collaboration between Muskoka's child and youth mental health provider, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions (SMFC) and Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca (Hands) who provides child and youth mental health services in the regions of Nipissing and Parry Sound. The timing couldn't be better for meeting the mental health needs of youth in communities across Muskoka, Nipissing and Parry Sound.

"In addition to the other forms of virtual supports that we are able to provide to youth at this time," says Jocelyn Wing, Manager of Child/Youth Mental Health Services, with SMFC, "we are thrilled to have a new platform that they can access independently from their homes."

The webchat service was developed based on a research project conducted by Hands. With funding from the Ontario Centre of Excellence, Hands researchers explored how the use of technology could play a critical role in reducing barriers to accessing mental health services, specifically for those living in rural or remote areas. They worked directly with youth in focus groups to better understand their needs and listened to their ideas of what would work best.

"The service was designed by youth, for youth," said Michelle Dermenjian, Director of Child and Youth Services at Hands. "Through the focus groups, we learned that a web chat could help reduce the stigma that youth often saw as a barrier to their decision to seek help. SafeSpot.ca also provides the anonymity youth seek, minimizes wait times and provides a way to receive more immediate attention for their mental health concerns."

SafeSpot.ca provides the opportunity for youth to chat online three days each week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 11:30 a.m. – 1 p.m. and from 3 – 5 p.m. The service is staffed by an expert team trained to listen and answer questions about mental health. They don't provide counselling but can help youth figure out if that is something that they want or need. They can support youth in understanding issues they may be facing and what to do next including connecting them to services with SMFC or Hands, depending on their location.

-30-

Contact: Melanie McLearn, Director, Communications & Community Relations
Email: melanie.mclearon@familyconnexions.ca
Cell: 705-955-7899

Contact: Bob Pipe, Communications Coordinator, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca

Email: bpipe@handstfhn.ca

Cell: 705-471-6205

About Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions (SMFC):

SMFC is the local Child and Youth Mental Health provider in the District of Muskoka and the Children's Aid Society in Muskoka and the County of Simcoe. The independent non-profit agency provides culturally appropriate, efficient and effective services in the areas of child protection and children's mental health. SMFC works collaboratively to enhance the safety and wellbeing of children, youth and families. Services are provided out of locations throughout regions of Simcoe County and the District of Muskoka – the head office of Barrie, Ontario and offices in Bracebridge, Collingwood, Huntsville, Midland, and Orillia.

About Hands - TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca:

Hands - TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca is dedicated to helping children, youth, adults with a developmental disability and families, receive the best possible care and help they need when they need it most. Hands' team is comprised of Child and Family Therapists, Youth Counsellors, Behaviour Therapists, Social Workers, Psychologists and many other health care professionals who are committed to providing care in our communities. Hands - TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca and its Core Service Providers and the Community Mental Health Planning Table partners are continuing to support Child and Youth Mental Health Services in the Muskoka, Nipissing and Parry Sound service area.