

# Peer Support

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Peer support initiatives help senior students and staff to address issues affecting all students in a positive and productive manner. A training and supervision program enables senior students to develop their capacity to act as peer supporters.

## What is peer support?

Peer support strategies are based on the premise that young people, especially adolescents, seek out other young people for support and advice when they are experiencing some concern or worry, especially when they are cyberbullied.

Peer supporters are not professional counsellors or therapists; they are young people who offer supervised support to other young people. They need to be trained to provide a non-judgemental, active approach to listening which encourages others to express and explore their feelings or concerns.

## How can peer supporters help?

Peer supporters may be involved in:

- Helping younger students with learning
- Helping younger or new students make the transition to a new school
- Assisting with bringing concerns of students to a teacher's attention
- Assisting students by listening in a non-judgemental way

Peer supporters have the potential to be successful as many students feel more comfortable talking to an older peer about being bullied (especially cyberbullying) than a teacher. They also promote pro-social behaviours which positively influence the social environment of the school and reduce bullying.

Peer supporters do however, need to have:

- Suitable training
- Strong links to the school's pastoral care programs
- whole-staff support and action

## Identifying peer supporters

The selection of peer supporters is the most important step in the establishment of such a program. Research suggests that students be selected by students (vetted by teachers) from varying year groups, so the general population of students has a range of supporters who they may feel comfortable talking with.

Some schools have used existing school leaders to be peer supporters. These students may not be the most appropriate choice as they are typically high achievers and may be perceived by students as 'good students' who may not represent the cross-section of students at the school.

## Training of peer supporters

Students should be trained—ideally by a counsellor or other qualified person—and have the opportunity to practise:

- Active listening skills
- Problem solving approaches
- Empathy building
- Acceptance of others
- Showing respect for those who talk to them
- Processes at the school for accessing help or progressing complaints or problems (such as what to do if a student is extremely upset or in need of help)
- Listening in a non-judgemental way and providing students with the correct processes or staff to assist them
- The need for confidentiality
- Record keeping

## How does the program work?

Students who have been selected and trained as peer supporters should be identified to the whole-school community. These students must be known by their peers if they are to be accessed for support.

There are many ways in which the role of peer supporters can be used.

- Being informally present every day in the schoolyard in an unofficial capacity, unless approached by another student; while other peer supporters can be available at a 'drop-in' room where students can speak with them in private. This 'drop-in' room may be seen by students as a possible way to discuss challenges without being noticed by their school peers.

- Being responsible for showing new students around the campus during break times, and generally looking out for them by making sure they have other students to play or sit with. This process provides new students with familiar and safe students they can go to if they feel alone or isolated during break times, and can reduce the likelihood of being bullied.
- Having a regular spot at assemblies to discuss peer supporters' roles and the rights and responsibilities of each member of the school community.
- Assign a duty teacher the task of providing assistance to the peer supporters.

### Keeping it successful

While peer support programs have been used successfully in schools, there are common issues that can threaten the integrity or existence of the program including:

- peer supporters clearly understanding the boundaries of their role. Staff are responsible for ensuring these boundaries are observed, particularly if peer supporters begin providing advice beyond the scope of their brief and training
- training of peer supporters to be thorough and ongoing. Training needs to be provided by staff with advanced skills in the fields of communication, behaviour management and counselling, with regular follow-up or booster trainings linked to specific needs
- whole-staff support for the peer supporters must be consistent, highly visible and ongoing

### Further reading:

Hurst, T. An Evaluation of an anti-bullying Peer Support Programme in a (British) Secondary School, Pastoral Care, June, 2001, p. 10-14.

Naylor, P. and Cowie, H. The effectiveness of peer support systems in challenging school bullying: the perspectives and experiences of teachers and pupils, Journal of Adolescence, vol 22, 1999, p. 467-479.

