

This briefing describes peer support; clarifies principles of good practice; identifies the benefits of peer support for children, young people and the wider society; and identifies the contribution it makes to national and local education, health and social priorities. It is for all those interested in peer support including policy makers, parliamentarians, senior management teams and youth officers.

Peer support: An overview

What is peer support?

Peer support is an umbrella term for a wide range of activities. The activities form a continuum: at one end are consultation activities where children and young people 'quality assure' adult-led activities, at the other end are activities in which children and young people share power with adults, including participating in solving problems. 'Peer support builds on the resources that friends spontaneously offer one another, and it can happen anywhere, in any organisation, in any age-group. Peer support systems have been created for young children, adolescents, young adults and senior citizens' (Cowie and Wallace 2000).

Peer support includes a variety of approaches such as peer listening, peer mediation and peer education. It also includes a range of activities that aim to benefit peers, for example through consultation, advocacy and representation at youth fora, school councils, neighbourhood and residents associations, and adult training.

Peer support:

- builds on a natural willingness of people – it is a voluntary activity
- takes place between those of a similar age, role or background
- provides positive benefits in schools, youth groups, workplaces and other settings
- enables those who participate to gain life skills and supports their emotional development.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out children and young people's right to participate in issues and decisions that affect them. Peer support is one method of enabling children and young people to participate.

Context for peer support

Peer support has grown in popularity and influence over recent years. It is becoming commonplace within schools. However, it is less well developed in further education colleges, the youth service, public care and secure settings. The Peer Support Forum believes this is a significant area of development.

Peer support contributes to government strategies and initiatives. It contributes to the five national outcomes for children set out in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), particularly the goals of 'making a positive contribution' and 'enjoying and achieving'. The government's increasing commitment to involving children and young people in decisions that affect them is demonstrated in key documents, such as *Learning to Listen: Core principles for listening to children and young people* (CYPU 2001) and *Working Together: Giving children and young people a say* (DfES 2004), and in national programmes, such as the National Healthy School Standard and Healthy Care, which have participation at their core (NHSS 2004 and NCB 2004).

There is a commitment nationally, regionally and locally to reducing social

and health inequalities and promoting inclusion. Increasingly, evidence suggests that vulnerable children and young people benefit most from participation, hence in this context the opportunity to be a peer supporter may play a significant strategy for promoting inclusion for some children and young people (Madge and others 2004).

Many early peer support interventions were developed to address bullying, and there is a growing body of evidence that suggests peer support can reduce the amount of bullying. Peer support can help those who are bullied through listening, mentoring and friendship. An institution's climate can improve as a result of peer support interventions (Cowie and others 2002; Cowie and Wallace 2000; Naylor and Cowie 1999; Smith, Ananiadou and Cowie 2003).

'[Peer support] allowed me to help somebody as well as develop skills of my own. I would describe my experience as being one of mutual learning and a mainly pleasant experience'
Peer mentor

Benefits of peer support

Peer support encourages both those being helped and the helpers to develop personal and social skills, such as communication skills; improving self-esteem; learning to negotiate with one another and adults over areas of conflict; and learning to ask for help and support. It gives children and young people the opportunity to experience different roles and responsibilities, and to learn leadership skills and team working (Cowie and others 2002).

Evidence from practice and research shows that peer support creates a calm environment in which children can learn, play, develop and grow, and where bullying is significantly reduced (Naylor and Cowie 1999; Cowie and others 2002).

Peer support contributes to school improvements. For example, where children and young people are supported to read by their peers, standards in literacy will improve.

Peer support can be used to promote inclusion, for example through promoting friendships between children and young people with and without disabilities.

Through peer education children and young people can address public health issues in school and in the community, such as mental health, alcohol and other drugs awareness, and sex and relationships.

Peer support has measurable outcomes. Those who receive support and the supporters often have improved behaviour, attendance and academic performance.

Staff benefit from having 'helpers' and a better atmosphere in school or college often results from improved relationships between staff and students (Cowie and others 2004).

Peer support can raise adults', children's and young people's awareness of issues that affect emotional health, such as bullying, exam pressure, racism, and peer and family relationships (Cowie and others 2004).

Good practice in peer support

The Peer Support Forum has developed principles of good practice for peer support activities. The principles are:

- Children and young people's participation is central and they must have the opportunity and support to drive peer support.
- Peer support is part of a whole school approach, which promotes a positive and supportive ethos.
- Peer support involves the active commitment of more than one staff member.
- Children and young people are offered opportunities to develop the skills to support each other more effectively.
- The self-esteem and emotional development of children and young people is nurtured.
- Confidentiality and child protection issues are covered in training, and all involved are clear about boundaries and referral procedures.
- Clear objectives, boundaries and ground rules are established with the children and young people involved in peer support.
- The selection criteria for peer supporters should be clear, publicised, fair and achievable.
- Equal opportunities must apply to all children and young people wishing to become involved, and support must be available to make access possible.
- All parents and carers should be kept informed of the project, their child's role in it and the skills their child is developing.
- Projects should be continuously monitored and evaluated to ensure that objectives are being met and principles adhered to.
- Children and young people receive appropriate initial and ongoing training, support and supervision. It is essential that children and young

people know when a matter has gone beyond their sphere of expertise, and that they know they can ask for help and support from an adult.

- Those training children and young people must be suitably qualified and security checked.
- There is liaison with local and national agencies who support peer initiatives.

Approaches to peer support

The following approaches to peer support have been identified by Helen Cowie, a founder member of the Peer Support Forum (Cowie and Wallace 2000).

Peer listening

Peer listening is where children learn the skills of active listening. Peer listening can be anything from providing a safe opportunity for a child or young person to discuss something that is bothering them, to dealing with deeper concerns like bullying or bereavement. The child or young person who is being supported has their concerns taken seriously, and they are encouraged to explore their own solutions and decide for themselves what to do next.

Peer listening is often used to resolve bullying problems, helping individuals to find their own solutions. Young people often set up drop-in sessions where peers can get help and support.

Peer befriending and buddy systems

Befriending and buddy approaches build on the innate desire of children and young people to help and support each other. These activities may have a specific focus, such as transition where there are newly arrived refugees or where there is a bullying issue. A buddy's job is to help. This approach encourages

'Being a peer mentor gave me a lot of confidence to communicate with people around me. It also gave me the ability to stand up for myself'
Peer mentor

'It was good to have someone to talk to as a personal friend as well as a fellow student'
Peer mentee

friendship. It is used particularly in primary schools to increase children's sense of belonging and to reduce isolation and loneliness.

Befrienders learn to understand and respect diversity, as sometimes those they are befriending are different in some way. Some schools have introduced 'playground pals' – programmes where pupils encourage others to play together at breaks.

Circle of friends

In a circle of friends, children and young people volunteer to be part of a group that helps a specific child or young person, who may be experiencing a family illness or death or be disabled. The friends support and encourage the child. This approach has also been used to help children and young people who have behavioural problems. The role of staff is central. Staff must understand both the intentions and processes of the initiative, provide advice, monitor it on a day-to-day basis, and support the efforts of the circle. This approach has proved to be a particularly useful in primary schools.

Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring usually involves a supportive, one-to-one relationship between two peers for a defined period of time. A mentor may provide friendship and support for a peer during a troubled time, for example when they are returning to school after a long illness or after a bereavement in the family. It is also used to help with transition periods and the run up to GCSE exams.

Peer mediation

In peer mediation, children and young people encourage problem solving between young people who are in conflict. It is often used to stop bullying and is part of a 'no blame' approach. Peer mediation can lead to a reduction

in disputes, quarrels, exclusions and violence. In this approach children and young people are empowered with the skills of conflict resolution. They learn: that they cannot coerce each other; to recognise how quarrels and conflicts impact on others; and how conflict can be resolved.

Peer advocacy

Peer advocacy takes place when children and young people seek to identify and represent the views and interests of, or speak on behalf of, other children and young people. Peer advocacy may happen in school councils, youth fora, community consultations and residents association meetings. This approach is particularly useful for advocating for the needs, entitlements and rights of marginalised or vulnerable children and young people, such as those with learning disabilities (Harnett 2003).

Peer education

Peer education has been defined as:

- 'The sharing of information, attitudes or behaviours by people who are not professionally trained educators but whose goal is to educate' (Finn, 1981).
- 'Young people teaching other young people' (Clements and Buczkiewicz, 1993).

'The process of peer education has been increasingly recognised as sound and valid in its own right. Peer educators not only help others to learn, they learn themselves in the process' (Foot, Morgan and Shute 1990).

Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring is a process where one person works with another to help them learn. This approach is particularly useful in helping pupils improve their reading skills. When one student is only a bit more advanced than the other both the tutor and the tutee benefit. Peer tutors can also be older pupils helping younger ones. Peer assisted learning can be used for reading (sometimes called paired reading) but also for thinking, writing and spelling.

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November 2004**

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About the Peer Support Forum

The Peer Support Forum aims to:

- raise the profile of peer support and to consolidate, develop and disseminate good practice
- articulate a common voice in support of peer support
- remind policy makers and practitioners about the energy and willingness children and young people have to help each other
- engage in the process of developing safer, healthier environments in which everyone is able to participate confidently.

The Forum works within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). For the purposes of its work it is particularly concerned with Articles 12 and 17.

ChildLine and the Mental Health Foundation founded the Peer Support Forum in 1998. Its membership now includes 27 national and local statutory agencies and voluntary organisations. It is based at the National Children's Bureau.

For more information about the Peer Support Forum visit:
www.ncb.org.uk/psf

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Stepping Forward: Working together through peer support

Hartley-Brewer, Elizabeth

2002. 48 pp. ISBN 1 900990 81 4 Price £8.00 (NCB members £6.50) plus p&tp.

Peer support has developed rapidly over recent years. However, approaches, aims and methods have developed without clear terminology and consensus about best practice.

Stepping Forward clarifies the breadth and scope of peer support, and offers explanations of the different approaches. It provides a number of examples to demonstrate how peer support is being developed in different settings, and offers practical guidance for developing and implementing programmes. It brings into the spotlight the energy and commitment children and young people have to helping each other feel safe, be healthy and overcome academic and personal difficulties.

This book is a useful resource for teachers, community workers, peer supporters, learning mentors and policy makers who are interested in how of peer support can be used to promote the emotional health and well-being of children and young people.

'I used never like reading out in class but now I can read so fast I don't mind'
Peer mentee



It's More Than Just Listening! Children and young people talking about participation

This video offers the direct voices of children and young people to explore how participation can:

- help prevent bullying and create a better school atmosphere
- build peer support
- improve teacher-pupil relations
- build bridges between those with different needs and skills
- increase confidence and motivation.

23 minutes. Price £15.00 (NCB members £12.00) plus p&tp.

To order these publications contact NCB Book Sales, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE (tel: 020 7843 6029, email booksales@ncb.org.uk).

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