

Raising Awareness and Promoting Positive Mental Health and Well-being Among Young People: The Role of Peer Support

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Background and aims

Schools have a major role to play in promoting young people's mental health and emotional well-being. Young people often choose to confide in their friends rather than adults and many schools have introduced peer support programmes which build on natural support systems. There has been little evaluation of such programmes and a limited amount of research on young people's perspectives of this type of support.

The aims of the research project were:

- To explore young people's views and experiences of peer support and whether they think it would be a good approach to take in terms of raising awareness and promoting positive mental health and well-being
- To find out how peer support might be developed so that it becomes a more effective means of raising awareness and promoting positive mental health for children and young people.

The study focused on what makes young people stressed and worried and what coping strategies they use. It was designed to explore informal peer support networks as well as perceptions of more formal peer support programmes. It also explored gender differences in terms of coping strategies and views of peer support.

Methods

Three secondary schools in three local authorities in Scotland took part in the research. Peer support systems operated in all three schools. Barnardo's worked with two of the schools. A range of methods were used to collect the data: focus groups with 55 first-year pupils; focus groups with 23 peer supporters; interviews with four teachers and three Barnardo's project workers; a written questionnaire to S1 pupils.

Main findings

Well being

Young people in S1 reported that friends, football and family make them happy. Exams, school work, falling out with their friends, someone dying and the future cause young people to be stressed or worried.

Girls and boys often worry about different things: girls worry most about falling out with their friends; boys worry most about exams.

Young people's coping strategies

Young people are most likely to cope with stress by talking to, and seeking help from, their family and friends.

Coping strategies vary according to gender: girls are most likely to talk to their friends; boys are most likely to talk to their parents, or play football, watch TV or play Playstation games.

Young people's views of peer support

Young people want a range of supports to be available in schools including peer support approaches. Boys are particularly likely to favour support from videos, DVDs and websites. Young people favour the informal support of friends and family above formal peer support systems. Young people are not always aware of peer support systems and are unlikely to approach peer supporters because they do not know them well enough and are not always sure how to access them. There was no relationship between young people's perceptions of peer support and how well developed were the peer support systems operating in their schools. Young people reported that they prefer accessing informal systems of support. Friends have had similar experiences and can be trusted not to pass on information. Young people want to help and support their

friends, but do not always know how to do this. They feel they need more information in order to provide useful advice.

Peer supporters' views

Peer supporters were broadly supportive of peer support approaches. They reported that the experience of providing peer support gives them increased confidence and skills. Those who receive training and ongoing support value this highly. However, their role is not always clearly understood and they often feel they could do a lot more to help younger pupils. They stressed that they should be able to meet young people as early as possible, e.g. when they are still in primary school.

Adults' views

Teachers and Barnardo's project workers were very positive about the contribution peer support can make as a supplement to the many supports already provided by adults in schools. They reported that some young people receive significant amounts of support from peer supporters but do not always remember this and do not always value this support very highly.

Developing peer support systems

The young people, peer supporters and adults who participated in the study suggested ways in which peer support systems could be developed or improved. Their suggestions are listed below along with further suggestions made by ourselves after considering the findings from the research.

- Young people should be provided with more information so they can effectively support their friends; all young people could benefit from the kind of training peer supporters receive

- Peer support approaches could be used more in transition programmes between primary and secondary school
- Young people need designated times when they can see their peer supporter
- Young people should be paired with someone they know and/or with someone of the same sex
- There should not be a large age gap between peer supporters and young people who are being supported
- More boys should be encouraged to become peer supporters
- Peer supporters could be more involved in providing peer education e.g. in relation to coping with exam stress
- Peer support programmes should be voluntary and all pupils should be able to apply to be peer supporters not just selected pupils
- Training and ongoing support should be provided to peer supporters and young people should be involved in providing this
- School nurses should be involved in peer support schemes
- Support should be available beyond S1
- All teachers and other staff should be aware of peer support systems
- Peer supporters and adults need to be clear about their roles
- Peer support systems should be evaluated.

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