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How to implement a 'Peer Support' program in a P-6 School"

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The Peer Support Program

All of the Year Six students at Scotch are entrusted with a leadership role. This gives them the shared responsibility of leading the other students. In addition to leading by personal example, these students facilitate Peer Support groups - small groups of six to eight children from across the three grade levels. In this way positive relationships are built amongst students and between teachers and students. These groups meet three to four times a term to complete a variety of activities designed to develop values and skills, which enable the leaders to use their talents to benefit others.

Rationale

The purpose of the Peer Support program is to foster the physical and emotional well being of all school community members through the development of skills, attitudes and understandings needed for safe and healthy life decisions and positive contribution.

The benefits of such a program for the students include:

- a more active role in their welfare
- acceptance of responsibility for and ownership of their own behaviour and learning
- an opportunity to succeed in a group and develop a support network
- an opportunity to integrate their learning into their lives

The benefits of such a program for the school include:

The building of positive relationships amongst students and between teachers, students and others personal and social development better school/community relationship leadership

The benefits of such a program for the school community include:

the building of a culture, which prevents violence or harassment based on race, gender, or ability

the fostering of diversity

promoting acceptance and cooperation across the school community

the provision of a core of trained and skilled leaders who can contribute to school community initiatives.

Outcomes of Peer Support

The boys should:

develop a sense of self

develop strategies needed to live a safe, and healthy lifestyle based on positive personal practices

in their groups and across the school, develop improved understandings and acceptance of others

develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to enhance their quality of life

empowerment to apply these skills within the school and the wider community

develop the skills necessary for effective communication, decision-making, problem solving, assertiveness, and conflict resolution

PEER SUPPORT FOUNDATION

The Peer Support Foundation first began in Melbourne in 1971. Since that time it has spread to several other states of Australia. The Peer Support Foundation has been working in schools to help students feel good about them. This means thinking more positively about themselves and the choices that they can make. This means that students are helped to talk about their ideas and their feelings, they learn to believe in themselves and they develop greater confidence in their ability to make good decisions and the strength to say “no” to harmful pressure from others.

I started teaching at Scotch College in 2005 and implemented the first Peer Support program at the school. Previously I had run the program at Trinity Grammar School in Kew, Melbourne for two years. My initial Peer Support training was a two-day workshop run by the Peer Support Foundation. Over these days I undertook training in how to teach our Year 6 boys the skills necessary to lead a group of younger boys and how to run all the associated games, lessons and activities that are involved within the program.

Part of my contract with Scotch College was to introduce and oversee the Peer Support program in the Junior School (Year Two to Year 5). With the support and commitment of the Junior School Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster, we decided that the program would run during normal ‘House’ meeting times. Due to the ‘normal’ House program, Peer Support would only be able to have four sessions per term in a four-term year.

We decided that all Year 6 boys would be trained as Peer Support leaders (78 in total). This would give all these boys a 'leadership' role within the school and enable us to include all the Year 2 to Year 5 boys in the program (260 in total). The training sessions were of one-day duration for each of the three Year 6 grades. I had previously sent the school counsellor/religious education teacher and one Year 6 teacher to attend Peer Support training. The counsellor/R.E. teacher was able to attend all three training sessions with the boys and was a very valuable colleague to have as a trainer. The 'normal' training sessions are held over two days but we could only accommodate one day off school for each Year 6 grade. The sessions covered the following topics;

- *Introduction and Welcome, games and name cards
- *What is Peer Support?
- *Group Harmony/rules
- *Listening and Communicating
- *Feelings
- *Giving clear instructions
- *Group management techniques
- *Cooperation-working together
- *Put down Vs Build ups
- *Relationships-Good friends and leaders
- *How Peer Support will operate in the school

The training sessions were very active and positive with many games and 'energisers' to keep the boys on task. All boys were asked to start or conclude an activity, giving clear instructions about where to move and what equipment to use throughout the day to give them some experience at leading a group. The boys seem to enjoy the day, which consisted mostly of 'brainstorming' ideas in small groups and coming together to discuss their findings.

All the boys were given a Peer Support training manual to take home and discuss with their parents (all parents were given a letter outlining the program and training previously). Boys were presented with their Peer Support leaders badge at assembly.

With the help of the Heads of House, we divided each House into groups of 8 to 10 Years 2, 3, 4 and Year 5 students. Each group had two Year 6 leaders. We tried to combine an outgoing, confident leader with a quieter Year 6 boy in order to facilitate a successful training partnership.

We started towards the end of Term One. Each of the four Houses was allocated an indoor area (the school hall, gym, drama rooms and three Year 6 classrooms (which have bifold doors). Term One is normally the hottest term of the year so air-conditioning was very beneficial. Each House has several staff members allocated to oversee the House and all activities.

The sessions were 25 minutes in duration and were held in the first period of the day (8.25-8.50a.m.) on Day 6 of a rotating six-day timetable. This meant that Peer Support could happen on any day of the week. We asked the Year 6 leaders to meet in the school hall by 8.15a.m. for a briefing and to hand out worksheets the boys would be using. Each leader was given a photocopied sheet(s) outlining the session a few days before each session. It was given as homework to read and then they would

'touch base' with their Year 6 partner and devise how they were going to 'teach' each session. Unfortunately we did not have time for a 'debrief' after each lesson but the Year 6 teachers would try and discuss the days' session at some point in that day. All boys in Years 2 to 5 would also take home a 'Home Talk' page that their parents could discuss with them about that days session.

All the worksheets, activity pages and 'Home Talk' sheets are part of the Peer Support Foundation's training manual that all teachers receive on completion of their training. Peer Support teachers photocopy relevant sections/social skill lessons each week and distribute these to the Year 6 classrooms. Activity and 'Home Talk' sheets were placed in each House's Peer Support box. These large plastic boxes contained the each leader couple's Peer Support bag (which was a small music book satchel) that contained pens, textas, balloons, dice, small and large white paper, scissors and sticky tape. The House Vice-Captain, who was in charge of Peer Support, took the boxes to each session. They were then handed out to each pair of Year 6 leaders.

At the start of each session the Head of House would welcome all the boys, explain any upcoming House events/competitions/news then send off the boys into their groups. Each group would form a circle sitting on the floor, welcome everyone and then start the first activity, which was usually a warm up game. This was followed by a 'social skills' lesson taken directly from the worksheets. If there were any time left over boys would play another game. At the end of the session, boys would say goodbye, take their 'Home Talk' sheets, pack up their equipment into their Peer Support bags and place them in the Peer Support box. The Vice-Captain would take the box back to the Year 6 rooms. All boys would then go back to class for period one. The 'Home Talk' sheet would also go in the weekly school newsletter so parents would be informed of the sessions and the social skill being taught.

EVALUATION

The timing of the sessions was very 'tight' and all the boys needed to be on time to make sure that all activities were concluded successfully. Obviously there were some boys in the junior grades that were difficult to 'teach' by the Year 6 leaders. There were also Year 6 leaders who were struggling to gain control of their groups. House staff were on hand to oversee the groups and 'naughty boys' were taken out of the groups by their leader and spoken to by a staff member. Some Year 2 boys found it difficult to understand the worksheets and write their ideas on paper. After the first four sessions, the groups began to feel more confident and the boys learnt to trust each other and participate more readily in all the activities.

The decision to use all Year 6 boys as leaders had some drawbacks. Clearly some boys had little or no interest in planning each session or actively participating. That is why it was important to partner them up with a reliable student who could basically take the group by themselves. Many younger boys felt that Peer Support was taking away their 'normal' House time which may have consisted of fun games on the oval. As time progressed, the Year 6 leaders became more confident implementing the program and their group management strategies improved. It was very pleasing to see the more quiet leaders give instructions and control their groups with growing authority. The younger boys got more used to sitting, chatting and listening. They

enjoyed the warm-up activities and became more adept at working in pairs and in small groups.

Since the program was begun, the staff has noted that there has been an improvement in the relationship between the boys in the school grounds. There has been a decrease in the amount of bullying-type behaviours at recess and lunchtimes. Older boys have been more proactive in helping younger boys solve 'disputes' in the playground. Boys have been more likely to talk to other boys about their problems that have occurred both in and outside of school. Most Year 6 leaders have become more confident in managing a small group of younger students. Our school community is steadily building more meaningful relationships between boys of all ages.

MAKING THE PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM SUCCESSFUL **(Things to consider)**

1. Develop a questionnaire for students to ascertain the extent and types of bullying at your school. It must be a whole-school approach.
2. What is a Peer Support program? What are its aims and objectives?
3. Where do I find Peer Support programs for my school? Can I make up my own program that suits my school and its students?
4. Presenting your ideas to the Head of School, staff and parents.
5. Timetabling issues-how much time do you need to run the program? Where does it fit into the curriculum?
6. How much money do I need to budget for?
7. How many staff need to be professionally developed in Peer Support and who will be in charge? Will they need extra remuneration?
8. How do you select the leaders? What type of training do they need?
9. What Year levels will be involved? Does it cater for different cultures/religions?
10. How many sessions will they have each term/year? Will it be a whole year program or just a semester?
11. Where will the sessions be held, inside or outside? How much space do you need?
12. What equipment the leaders and the students will need?
13. Other resources needed-bags for materials, paper, pens, scissors, tape etc.
14. Purchasing Peer Support badges.
15. Rewards and recognition for leaders
16. Information for parents-letter home
17. Evaluation of the program/feedback from staff and students
18. Responding to feedback, 'streamlining' the program.
19. Incorporating a social skills/personal development program?
20. Updating the program each year.

REFERENCES AND PEER SUPPORT INFORMATION

<http://stride.org.au/>

(Peer Support organisation, Melbourne, Australia)

This is what my Peer Support program is based on. This is the organisation that trained me to teach P.S. Contact them for training manuals, worksheets etc.

<http://www.peersupport.edu.au/aboutUs.asp>

(Peer Support Foundation, New South Wales, Australia)

N.S.W. has there own P.S. organisation with very similar training models and information. Contact them for training manuals, worksheets etc.

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforteachers/classroomresources/every-school_wda55394.html

(National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, (N.S.P.C.C.) in the United Kingdom.)

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforteachers/classroomresources/EverySchoolPDF_wdf55391.pdf

This is a free downloadable PDF from the N.S.P.C.C. regarding P.S. schemes in schools

<http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/CITE/bullying.htm>

Bullying resources page from Canada. 37 websites for P-6 schools

<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/>

Dr Ken Rigby's website contains information on research into bullying and anti-bullying programs in schools plus questionnaires providing information about the nature and prevalence of bullying in schools. (a great way to get started if you need to find out the extent of bullying in your school from the students).

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying/pack/02.pdf>

Excellent 66 page PDF (Dept. of Families, Children and Schools U.K.) that covers whole school approaches to bullying, pupils experiences, strategies to combat bullying, working with parents, case studies, materials, references and websites.