University of Northern Iowa

UNI ScholarWorks

Graduate Research Papers

Student Work

2005

Components of effective peer helper programs

Aaron M. Cretin
University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

Cretin, Aaron M., "Components of effective peer helper programs" (2005). *Graduate Research Papers*. 380.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/380

Components of effective peer helper programs

Abstract

Peer helper programs have increasingly been implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools, and must be developmentally appropriate for each grade level. Peers can serve as tutors, mentors, mediators, and support systems, and schools utilize peer helper programs in order to assist other students in these areas. Effective peer helper programs share common characteristics.

The purpose of this paper is to examine characteristics of effective peer helper programs. These programs incorporate peer helper roles, training considerations, developmental considerations, characteristics of peer helpers, screening and selection procedures, program service and delivery, supervision and evaluation needs, and school/community needs.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PEER HELPER PROGRAMS

———————

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

———————

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

———————

by

Aaron Cretin

December 2005

This Research Paper by: Aaron M. Cretin

Entitled: COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PEER HELPER PROGRAMS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Education.

8-30-05
_____   _____
Date Approved   Advisor/Director of Research Paper

8|31|05   John K. Smith
_____   _____
Date Received   Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
                                     Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

Peer helper programs have increasingly been implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools, and must be developmentally appropriate for each grade level. Peers can serve as tutors, mentors, mediators, and support systems, and schools utilize peer helper programs in order to assist other students in these areas. Effective peer helper programs share common characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to examine characteristics of effective peer helper programs. These programs incorporate peer helper roles, training considerations, developmental considerations, characteristics of peer helpers, screening and selection procedures, program service and delivery, supervision and evaluation needs, and school/community needs.

Educators throughout history have looked for innovative and original ways to help their students in areas such as attendance, tutoring, mediation, problem solving and interpersonal relationships. Brown and Trusty (2005) noted that students routinely helped same-age peers and younger students in the one-room schoolhouses of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Schools have returned to this approach in terms of students helping students through peer helper programs. Peer helper programs have been successfully implemented in high schools and colleges since the early 1960s. These programs have gained increased popularity and acceptance in the elementary and middle school grades since the mid-1980s (Tobias & Myrick, 1999).

Peer programs are needed today more than ever. Young people are faced with complex economic, family, academic, and social challenges. They need extra help during the transition from elementary to middle to high school. Peer helper programs help students communicate more effectively, make healthy decisions, peacefully resolve conflicts, and develop a sense of personal worth. Students also develop connections to friends, the school, and the community (Forouzesh, Grant, & Donnelly, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to describe components of effective elementary, middle, and high school peer helper programs. There are a variety of programs in all grade levels, and special considerations for younger grades will be discussed.

Supervision and training needs are important components of programs and will be addressed. Since research consistently documents successes of peer helping programs, benefits of peer helper programs will also be included.

<div align="center">Types of Peer Helping Programs</div>

There are several different types of peer helper programs. Specific characteristics of each will be described in this section.

Academic Tutoring

Peer and cross age academic tutoring is a service that trains peer helpers to provide tutoring to other students. Students can be the same age, or older students can teach younger students. Topics include traditional academic subjects in addition to personal development, decision making, and communication (Forouzesh et al., 2001).

Personal Support

This type of program is more suitable for older students. Adolescent peer helpers are trained to assist with processing developmental concerns. They act as active listeners to assist other students who are experiencing developmental concerns or personal difficulties. Topics can include communication, decision making, problem solving, violence prevention, and conflict resolution (Forouzesh et al., 2001).

Peer Mentoring

. Adolescent peer helpers act as big brothers or sisters in order to mentor same-age or younger children. Peer mentoring offers students a chance to feel less isolated and more connected to the school. Peer mentoring also assists students in learning to deal with personal challenges (Forouzesh et al., 2001).

Peer Prevention

Peer prevention utilizes students teaching students in order to provide information in a cost-effective manner to peers or younger students. The education can be provided in classrooms, school assemblies, conference workshops, or teen theaters. Peer prevention is often used to assist staff members with topics such as self-esteem or health issues including tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use (Forouzesh et al., 2001).

Conflict Resolution

Peer helpers help individuals in conflict to resolve their disputes peacefully. Students learn to control their anger and feel less isolated as a result of conflict resolution. They learn to use active listening skills and to discuss problems in a constructive manner. As students learn conflict resolution skills, they can resolve future problems on their own leading to a safer school climate (Forouzesh et al., 2001).

Specialized mediation training often occurs in effective peer helper programs. Students are trained in a step-by-step mediation process. Students introduce themselves as mediators, and then provide the rules of conduct for each participant including no interrupting, no name calling, and being truthful about the situation. It is important for participants to agree to try and solve the problem, and the peer helper assists each student in defining the problem. Each participant in the mediation process discusses his or her feelings associated with the problem. A mutually satisfying solution for all disputants is the goal of mediation, and the peer helper works with the participants to accomplish this goal through mediation. It is important for helpers and participants to follow the mediation process that they are trained in, and post-training tests are often given to re-enforce knowledge gained (Humphries, 1999). Theberge & Karan (2004) emphasized that conflict resolution and mediation skills need to begin in the elementary grades for peer helper programs to be most effective, and follow-up needs to be consistently utilized.

Benefits of Peer Helper Programs

Peer helper programs can be offered to elementary, middle, and high school students and benefit all age levels. Tobias and Myrick (1999) noted that utilization of a peer helper program results in an improvement in student's behavior, attitude, and attendance. Students who worked with a peer helper had

decreased discipline referrals, improved attitude towards school, improved attendance, and improved grades (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2003). Baldwin and Street (2001) noted peer helpers' self-esteem improved as a result of the program.

Even younger children benefit from peer helping programs. Bickmore (2002) conducted a study of programs in twenty-eight urban elementary schools in Cleveland, Ohio. On average, students showed an increased understanding of non-violent conflict resolution and an increase in their utilization of non-violent resolution techniques. Students' capacity for achievement was also increased as a result of the implementation of this program.

Adolescents also benefit from implementation of peer helper programs. The American School Counselor Association emphasized the importance of adolescents having opportunities to help other adolescents, and identified peer helping as a needed resource (Hayes, 2001). Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, & Hawkins (2004) noted that peer-to-peer mentoring programs are most successful at strengthening social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies and help build self-efficacy among students as well as help students develop clear standards for behavior in their schools and communities. Carielli (2002) noted students who participated in a peer-helping program were impacted positively in their identity formation, moral choices, and career aspirations.

Students who were mentored showed increased self-esteem, increased positive

connections to school, peers, and family, and were less likely to be depressed or

involved in bullying behavior (King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002).

Peer Helper Training Programs

Flohr (2002) emphasized that program leaders need to select an appropriate

number of students in order to provide adequate training and supervision to their

peer helpers in training. All training programs should address the goals of that

organization's peer helper program and provide training that reflects those goals.

Program administrators need to have an understanding of the population that is

going to be served and train the helpers so that the population can most effectively

be served based on the age and needs of that population. Training programs also

need to utilize appropriate training strategies based on applicants' strengths and

needs. Programs should follow the appropriate guidelines and ethics to ensure

proper training (Flohr, 2002).

There are additional considerations that must be taken into account when

determining how best to train peer helpers. It is important to determine if training

should occur in a classroom or a small group setting. The exact number of

training sessions prior to beginning a program should also be considered. It is

important to decide the schedule and length of each session as well as the content

of each session (Scarborough, 1997).

Training Content

.   Training needs to include demonstration of the proper skills and techniques by experienced individuals, and should provide a chance for potential helpers to develop the necessary skills. Trainers need to provide consistent feedback and training to those individuals as they develop their skills (Flohr, 2002). Brown and Trusty (2005) noted that training needs to focus on attending, active listening, empathy, assertiveness, multicultural issues, mediation, problem solving, referral procedures, accepting supervision, and legal/ethical issues. They also noted that intensive summer training is often used and highly effective.

Effective peer helpers need to be trained on the basic principles of verbal and nonverbal communication and must learn active listening and attending skills. They need to learn to empathize with other individuals and to know how to paraphrase and summarize key points. They must learn to facilitate effectively through questioning and clarifying statements, and learn to communicate in diverse situations. Effective peer helpers need to be able to communicate with individuals from other schools, other countries, different socioeconomic statuses, and different genders (Flohr, 2002).

Peer helpers need to be trained in confidentiality and liability issues. Generally, communication between helpers and clients is confidential and peer

helpers do not share participants' confidential information with other students, teachers, or administrators. However, there are exceptions to this role in effective programs. Peer helpers need to break confidentiality if there are threats made that would harm the personal safety of a peer helper, a participant in peer helping, or a staff member; and any child abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, or other harm to self or others. Students should seek assistance if there are situations or problems that are beyond the training that a peer helper has received. They need to know how to recognize these situations and have ready access to professional staff members who can assist them (Flohr, 2002). Dollarhide & Saginak (2003) noted that students must know their limits and know when to get a professional to help with concerns that are beyond the scope of the peer helper program.

Peer helpers need to have an opportunity to practice skills with other trainees prior to implementation. Trainees should be committed to the process and understand that training is on going. Trainees should maximize the opportunities for skill development and personal growth that this type of training allows for (Flohr, 2002).

Developmentally appropriate training and re-teaching needs to occur at each level year-after-year in order to account for all students. It is important to utilize junior-high and high school students in teaching elementary students these skills.

Peer helping needs to be accessible to all students, and separated from punishment. Students must understand that they can trust designated helpers and that their issues and concerns will remain confidential (Theberge & Karan, 2004).

Older peer helpers may receive specialized training in other areas such as basic concepts of human behavior or in individual and group dynamics. Peer helpers can receive training in group facilitation techniques as well as peer tutoring strategies, learning styles, teaching strategies, and crisis management. Conflict resolution, mediation, and anger management techniques may also be covered. Specific problem areas such as substance abuse, truancy, dropout prevention, depression, teen pregnancy, gangs, and family relationships may also be addressed based on the population being served (Flohr, 2002).

Developmental Considerations

Successful programs follow the same implementation techniques regardless of grade level. However, the developmental needs of students at each grade level need to be taken into consideration, and training and implementation may need to be adjusted based on these developmental needs. There are special considerations for working with preschool and early-elementary students that must be taken into consideration. Preschool programs must include all children being trained in peer helper techniques so they all can implement the strategies. Developmentally,

early childhood peer helper programs must provide immediate feedback that is

·informal and offered as a consistent teachable opportunity to all children with

follow-up by staff members. Since children of this age are still developing their

leadership styles, they need more direction and guidance from adults than older

children do (Gillespie & Chick, 2001).

Elementary students have additional needs in planning for peer helper

problems, including missing recess while on duty, not always being able to help

others, and having too many conflicts. In addition, peer helpers of this age will

continue to have conflicts with other students. Some students end up losing

friends because they feel as if their friend expects them to side with them in every

conflict. Some elementary children have felt as if they were being picked on,

teased, or made fun of by other students due to their status as peer helpers. Some

elementary students struggled because other students tried to get them to fight due

to their status as peer helpers. Students worry that having a negative reputation or

being seen as unpopular by other students affects their helping skills as some

students will not allow unpopular peer helpers to govern conflicts (Humprhies,

1999).

Due to these concerns, it is vitally important that elementary students receive

adequate and on-going training. It is important to teach peer helpers the process

of peer helping so students can remember and follow-through with the proper

steps when they are involved in opportunities to utilize their skills. It may be necessary to increase the amount of meeting times for elementary students in order for them to receive feedback and training so that they can consistently carry out their responsibilities. Elementary students may also need to write out the mediation process and have notes with them when they are on duty (Humprhies, 1999).

Middle and high school students are concerned with how other students see them. Peer pressure and peer relationships are pivotal developmental processes throughout child and adolescent development (Vernon, 2004). As students grow and mature, they are constantly defining themselves and their moral and social identities. They are experiencing more autonomy as they learn to accept themselves. Identity formation is an important process for adolescents, and they lessen their need to be seen the same as their peers (Pruitt, 1999). These normal developmental considerations can be addressed in a proactive manner by peer helper programs.

Implementation of Effective Peer Helper Programs

Characteristics Needed

Peer helpers need to have a commitment to helping others and an ability to interact with a wide variety of people. They need to be willing to accept

standards of ethical conduct such as confidentiality. They also need to be willing

and able to work within the philosophy and goals of the program (Scrivner Blum,

1990). The peer helpers need to be reflective of a wide variety of students in

terms of race, gender, and socio-economic status so that all students feel as if peer

helpers adequately represent them. Schools can successfully implement peer

helper programs that account for these variables (Theberge & Karan, 2004).

Screening and Selection

All programs should carefully select and screen potential peer helpers. This

screening process needs to be well defined and should establish the appropriate

criteria necessary for selecting helpers who have certain characteristics, such as

being helpful and trustworthy, sharing concern for others, and being able to serve

as a positive role model (Flohr, 2002).

It is also important that peer helpers can listen actively and fairly to others.

Prior to implementing a program, screeners need to conduct surveys of the

population to determine if these characteristics exist in possible peer-helpers.

Any potential applicants should also have solid recommendations from teachers

and peers as being appropriate to help other peers (Flohr, 2002).

Brown and Trusty (2005) noted that screening of potential peer helpers is

vitally important. They recommended confidential letters of recommendation

from teachers in addition to interviews of potential peer helpers. Scrivner Blum
. (1990) recommended that potential peer helpers be referred by teachers or other
students, complete applications with confidential letters of recommendation, and
be interviewed by previous peer counselors and leaders of the peer helper
program. The interview should include demonstrations of the skills that are going
to be required of the potential peer helper, such as peer counseling, public
presentations, phone skills, and interacting with new people. However, it is
important to be aware of developmental needs and concerns as younger students
will not be providing all the same services as older students (Flohr, 2002).

Service Delivery

Peer helpers must understand their roles in delivery of service. Delivery of
services should be consistent with and reflective of program goals and should
enable peer helpers to apply the skills and knowledge they have learned during
their training. Delivery should enhance the personal growth and development of
both helpers and clients being served, and ongoing training and supervision
requirements should be accounted for in delivery of services. Peer helpers need to
have an opportunity to practice these skills with other trainees prior to
implementation. Trainees should be committed to the process and understand that
training is ongoing. Trainees should maximize the opportunities for skill
development and personal growth that this training allows for (Flohr, 2002).

Supervision

Supervision of peer helpers is a key component of an effective peer helping program and must occur on a regular basis once services have begun. Dollarhide and Saginak (2003) stated that it is crucial that peer helpers are adequately supervised and monitored as even a well trained facilitator is not qualified to conduct a counseling group alone. Brown and Trusty (2005) recommended that supervision occur on a weekly basis and within a group setting that has all peer helpers present. They also stated that supervision should be both formal and informal in nature.

Leaders should observe and supervise activities and services provided by peer helpers. Supervision should help peer helpers grow personally and become more effective in service delivery, as well as encouraging them to share information with one another. As they share information, they should learn from each other and support each other as needed. Supervision should protect participants from taking on too many responsibilities. Peer helpers also need to be aware of their roles and to handle appropriate assignments (Flohr, 2002).

Program Evaluation

After a program has been established, it is important to have safeguards in place to maintain the program. Leaders of a peer-helping program should ensure that steps are being taken to improve on the program and expand or provide

additional services as needed. Evaluation should be in the initial program's

design, and should measure the effects of the program on peer counselors, on the

population being served, and on the school climate (Scrivner Blum, 1990).

   According to Flohr (2002), evaluation should include four key components.

The first component is process evaluation, which identifies whether the peer-

helping program is consistent with programmatic standards, and whether it is

meeting its stated goals and objectives. The second component is impact

evaluation, which determines the impact that has occurred on the designated

population that was targeted for peer helping, and can be qualitative and/or

quantitative. The third type of evaluation is outcomes, which determine the long-

term effects of any program that is implemented in both the school and

community. The fourth type of evaluation is cost benefit analysis, which

determines the effectiveness of the program in terms of dollars spent versus

dollars saved due to reductions in other responsive/reactive services.

   Data for evaluation can come from the frequency of referrals to peer helpers

and from the frequency and nature of the peer helper contacts with other students.

Data can also come from student, teacher, counselor, or administrator experiences

with and perceptions of the programs. Evaluations can be qualitative or

quantitative (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Effective peer helping programs provide for long range planning for implementation of their programs so that their programs can be sustainable into future years. Effective programs account for staffing decisions, encourage peer ownership, help peer helpers take personal accountability for their programs, and have a secure and consistent funding base (Flohr, 2002).

School Community Needs

Schools implementing peer helper programs need to create a school climate with a strong sense of community among students, faculty, and parents. It is important that all populations feel mutually respected. Without this sense of community, peer helper programs are difficult, at best (Theberge & Karan, 2004).

For peer helper programs to be successful, all members of a school community must be committed to the concept and believe in the program. Staff members need to take an active role in modeling the behaviors they want to see students implement whenever conflicts do arise among adults. Administrators must provide leadership and support that emphasizes that school peer helper programs are important components of the school. Forouzesh et al., (2001) noted that students who received training in communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, violence prevention, and problem solving were able to form healthy and positive connections with other students and improve the overall school climate.

Conclusion

Peer helper programs strengthen schools and bring responsive services to more students. They also increase the delivery of the guidance curriculum and provide system support. Peer programs should be publicized, promoted, and encourage school-wide ownership. Written guidelines need to be in place, and programs that are comprehensive and provide a wide variety of services are most effective. Peer helpers should reflect the diversity of the student population and should not just include certain targeted students based on intelligence or social standing. Potential peer helpers should be carefully screened, selected, and trained, and ongoing training is a necessity. Peer helpers should be supervised weekly and supervision should be both formal and informal in nature. Program evaluation and planning for the future are also necessities (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

References

Baldwin, M., and Steet, S. (2001). The effects of a peer helper program on

    middle school transition: A narrative description. *The Peer Facilitator*

    Quarterly, 18, 1-5.

Bickmore, K. (2002). Peer mediation training and program implementation in

    elementary schools: research results. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly,* 20,

    137-160.

Brown, D. & Trusty, J. (2005). *Designing and leading comprehensive school*

    counseling programs: promoting student competence and meeting student

    needs. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.

Carielli, C. (2001). Peer helping and its relationship to adolescent task

    development. *The Peer Facilitator Quarterly,* 17, 108-117.

Catalano, R., Berglund, M., Ryan, J., & Hawkins, J. (2004). Positive youth

    development in the united states: research findings on evaluations of

    positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of*

    Political and Social Science, 591, 98-124.

Dollarhide, C., & Saginak, K. (2003). *School counseling in the secondary school:*

    a comprehensive process and program. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Flohr, S. (2002). Introduction to the revised programmatic standards and ethics.

    The Peer Facilitator Quarterly, 18, 35-40.

Forouzesh, M., Grant, K., & Donnelly, M. (2001). *California association of peer programs: comprehensive evaluation of peer programs,* Pasadena, CA: California Association of Peer Programs.

Gillespie, C., & Chik, A. (2001). Fussbusters: using peers to mediate conflict resolution in a head start classroom. *Childhood Education,* 77, 192-195.

Hayes, L. (2001). Lending a helping hand. *Counseling Today,* 43, 8.

Humphries, T. (1999). Improving peer mediation programs: student experiences and suggestions. *Professional School Counseling,* 3, 13-19.

King, K., Vidourek, R., Davis, B., & McClellan, W. (2002). Increasing self-esteem and school connectedness through a multidimensional mentoring program. *Journal of School Health,* 72, 294-299.

Pruitt, D. (1999). *Your adolescent: emotional, behavioral and cognitive development from early adolescence through the teen years.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Scarborough, J. (1997). The SOS club: A practical peer helper program. *Professional School Counseling,* 1, 25-28.

Scrivner Blum, D. (1990). *Group counseling for secondary schools.* Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Theberge, S., & Karan, O. (2004). Six factors inhibiting the use of peer mediation in a junior high school. *Professional School Counseling,* 7, 283-290.

Tobias, A., & Myrick, R. (1999). A peer facilitator-led intervention with middle

    school problem-behavior students. *Professional School Counseling, 3,*

    27-33.

Vernon, A. (2004). *Counseling children and adolescents.* Denver, CO: Love

    Publishing Company.