CoramBAAF response to the DfE call for evidence
Peer support for children and young people's mental health
24 March 2016

What we mean by peer support

Peer support can encompass a variety of models and levels of formality from helping a friend discuss emerging issues, through buddying and befriending schemes, to formal 1:1 and group support sessions within supportive environments. It is equally about promoting good mental wellbeing for all and supporting those with problems.
We define 'peers' to mean friends or contemporaries, including an older young person, or near-peer.

Peer support is not a replacement for specialist support from a mental health professional but it should help to signpost those who need it to the appropriate services and might help to complement it going forwards.

Proposal and rationale

We want to create an environment - in schools, colleges, community groups and online – which promotes good mental wellbeing, and where young people have the skills, confidence and knowledge to give and ask for help from one another.

We want this to happen within a 'safe' structured system, which, if young people want it, recognises and accredits the support they are providing. We also want to make sure, that if young people are accessing online support, they know what to look for.

Many schools already provide peer support schemes on a wide range of topics including friendships, transition and bullying. Some already run peer support programmes for mental health. Many other organisations outside of school settings, including online approaches, have also developed schemes for peer support.

We have launched this call for evidence to find out more about your knowledge and experience of peer support for children and young people's mental health. We want to understand what best practice looks like, how it might include training and accreditation and how and where peer support fits within wider mental health support and treatment offers. We value your views and opinions, which are vital for the development of this programme.

We know that young people understand better than anyone the pressures their peers face. We want to crucially hear from children and young people and will be seeking their views through a separate young people's call for evidence, as well as other engagement activities. 6

The Survey

In this survey we are asking you about your experiences of peer support programmes. This might be experience in running them, commissioning them or taking part in them. We will report on what you have told us about your experiences.

We have established an Advisory Group comprised of a range of practitioners, academics and experts with the aim of identifying ways to increase and improve the quality of peer support for mental wellbeing made available to children and young people by schools. They will work with us to consider the results of this call for evidence and other activities and make recommendations about the key features of good peer support programmes and what we can do to encourage more excellent practice.
This survey should take you no more than 20-30 minutes to complete.

Questions

Peer support – your views and experiences

These questions are about your experiences of peer support across all types of issues (e.g. transition, bullying, friendship, mental wellbeing) and across all settings - schools; colleges, and community settings (we will cover online support in a later question).

The questions ask what best practice looks like for good peer support programmes in your experience. If possible, please describe how they operate and your views on what their impact has been. Where you have any formally collected evidence (e.g. data, evaluations, research) to support your views we would like to hear about that as well.

This response is being submitted on behalf of the CoramBAAF Health Group, which is also a special interest group of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH). The Health Group was formed to support health professionals working with children in the care system, through training, the provision of practice guidance and lobbying to promote the health of these children. With over 500 members UK-wide, an elected Health Group Advisory Committee with representation from community paediatricians working as medical advisers for looked after children and adoption panels, specialist nurses for looked after children, psychologists and psychiatrists, the Health Group has considerable expertise and a wide sphere of influence.

Our area of concern is the particularly vulnerable group comprised of looked after and adopted children and young people.

We have replied only to questions relevant to our experience.

1. What are your experiences of what best practice in peer support across all types of issues looks like?

2. How can this best practice be translated into supporting children and young people's mental wellbeing?

3. How could good peer support approaches in community settings be used to support programmes within schools and colleges?

4. What are your experiences of peer support for mental wellbeing or mental illness (e.g. loneliness, depression, eating disorders etc.)?

5. What in your experience do schools, colleges and community settings need to set up and facilitate peer support (e.g. advice on which models to use, training for young people, an external facilitator etc.)?
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Support, training and accreditation

These questions are about your experiences and views of what support and training that peer supporters need to have to be knowledgeable, confident and effective.
We also want to know if you have any experience of the types of recognition or accreditation that might encourage and reward both the peer supporters and their organisations, and inspire them to take part.

6. What support or training for peer supporters is needed to make the support effective?

Peer supporters should receive training so that they:
- are knowledgable about the subject area and relevant evidence base. For example, anyone supporting looked after and adopted children will need a comprehensive knowledge of their backgrounds of trauma and loss and the potential impact this may have on their mental and emotional health, self esteem, relationships, education and behaviour.
- Have a greater understanding of diversity issues and are more able to accept differences amongst people
- have a clear understanding of their role, are aware of their own limits and can establish and maintain appropriate boundaries in the relationship
- develop good communication skills, particularly listening
- are aware of their own issues and how they may affect the process
- understand the issues around confidentialilty and information sharing
- have a good awareness of other resources available and know how to signpost to them. For example, they should be aware of the pathways to accessing assistance from the school nurse.
- are aware of safeguarding issues and know when to seek assistance
- know when and how to seek assistance if they have any concerns

Peer supporters should be carefully selected and assessed as to their ability to develop and provide what is outlined above. At times individuals may be drawn to an issue which is of personal interest or challenge to them, and which may interfere with their ability to effectively and appropriately offer peer support, so there must be a recognition of this and means of managing difficulties. Skilled and relevant supervision and support for those offering peer support must be in place, and an evaluation process would be very helpful.

7. What recognition is effective in encouraging young people to take part in peer support activity (group or 1:1) and helping them to capitalise on it in the future?

8. What is effective in encouraging schools, colleges and community settings to offer peer support?

9. What information or support do children and young people need before they start receiving peer support, or while they are having peer support?

Recipients of peer support need to have:
- a clear understanding of what support is on offer and its parameters
- confidence that they are in good hands and that those supporting them have the knowledge, training and skills outlined in Q 6.

- confidence that their peer will keep their personal and sensitive information confidential
- a trusted adult support person readily available if difficulties arise

Online peer support

These questions are about the increasing number of peer support online and mobile apps that children and young people are accessing for help.

10. What do you think the important features are of effective online support models for mental wellbeing?

The same qualities outlined in Q6 should be in place when offering online support. There should be a system in place to assist with recognition of those individuals who may need professional intervention, for example such as flagging key words related to suicide. A system of quality assurance should also be in place.

11. How do you think online support could be used effectively by schools, colleges and community settings?

12. What information and/or reassurance would you need to feel confident recommending particular online peer support apps to young people?

To know that appropriate safeguards were in place around the features noted in Q 6 and 10. An evaluation would also assist.

Peer support and linking with specialist services

Peer support is not a replacement for support from adults or specialist support from mental health professionals, but it should be able to signpost those who need it to the appropriate services.

These questions are about how peer support models can fit with, or link to, wider mental health support systems. 8

13. What are your experiences, including any evidence that you can share, about how peer support fits within the wider continuum of mental health support?

Some members have experience of a successful programme used in schools called Seasons for Growth.

We also have knowledge of a group of adopted young people in the north of England who meet with other groups of adopted young people to provide support with adoption issues. They also developed leaflets for peers and these were well received. The group had ongoing adult support.

14. How can good peer support models ensure appropriate referrals and a swift response to professional help when needed to prevent escalation and crisis of a mental health issue? Please give examples if possible.

See Q 6 re self awareness, safeguarding issues, awareness of other resources available and how to signpost to them, plus access to a skilled supporting adult who will act as needed to obtain professional help. Those responsible for the peer support programme should proactively make arrangements for access to skilled professionals when needed.

Risks

We want to know more about what you think the possible risks might be in providing peer support for young people's mental health, both for those offering and those receiving the support.

15. What are your experiences, including any evidence that you can share, about the risks of providing peer support, either through face-to-face or online support?

Potential risks include:
- the peer supporter could get drawn into a problem area, particularly if this is an issue for them e.g. eating disorder
- the peer supporter may not recognise how serious a situation is, and if something goes badly wrong it could adversely affect their mental health
- sensitive personal information may be disclosed either accidentally or deliberately with adverse effects for all concerned.

About you
16. Are you responding as or on behalf of :

☐ A parent/carer

☐ A school/college

☐ A community setting

x☐ A voluntary organisation

☐ A mental health professional

☐ A provider of online support

☐ Other (please state)

Thank you very much for completing the survey. The results will be used to help us better understand what good peer support looks like.

Please let us know any further comments or thoughts that you would like to share with us by emailing us at: PeerSupport.CONSULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk 9

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