



Reg'd charity no. 1003758

Setting up a peer support scheme

Ideas for teachers and other professionals setting up and supporting a peer support scheme

Introduction

This booklet has been written in response to the many requests we have received at ChildLine from schools who want to set up a peer support scheme. We have seen that schools can do a great deal of useful preparation before involving an external organisation such as ChildLine. Our aim is therefore to help you address the issues you will need to think about before setting up a scheme and to find the answers best suited to your school.

The most successful peer support schemes are those that are supported by other strategies to deal with pupils' emotional wellbeing. These strategies may link with PSHE, Citizenship or Healthy Schools for example. If pupils

are going to use the scheme, there needs to be a culture within the school of talking about issues. This document only covers peer support schemes but if a scheme is to be successful, it needs to be part of a whole-school approach where everyone has an investment in creating better relationships in the school.

There are different types of peer support, for example involving mediation skills, peer education or peer listening. However, the examples used here are based on our work in secondary schools, in setting up peer listening schemes. The information can still be transferred to other settings and for primary age children.

What is peer support?



Peer support can mean different things to different people. For example, ChildLine defines peer support as:

- building on a natural willingness of people to help one another
- taking place between those of a similar age, role or background
- working within a formal setting, such as school, youth group or workplace, to enhance the common purpose of the group
- a structure to develop and use interpersonal skills within safe boundaries
- enabling those who participate to gain valuable life skills

Peer support...

...begins with the natural willingness of most young people to act in a co-operative, friendly way towards one another. Peer support systems build on this intrinsic quality and create structures which facilitate the young person's potential for responsibility, sensitivity and empathic caring.

Cowie and Sharp, 1996

Peer support is not about counselling or telling people what to do, but rather listening and – if necessary – sign-posting to relevant organisations.

It will be important to discuss some of these ideas with the pupils so you can come up with your own definition for your school.

Here are some thoughts from students involved in peer support schemes:

'I know not to give advice but to keep the problem focused on the child, so they can sort it out. You are just a guide to show you care and to help them get through it.'

'I can only try to help as a friend. I cannot become a counsellor and should ask for help.'

'Peer support is helping and supporting people when they need it so they can help themselves.'

Preparation

Before setting up your peer support scheme, you may find it helpful to consider the following questions:

■ Why do you need a peer support scheme?

What are the needs of the school and how do you know this? You could send out questionnaires to pupils and the staff to find out if they think a scheme is necessary.

■ What support structures already exist in the school and how would a peer support scheme complement this work?

You may have a school counsellor or a youth worker who could help set up and run the scheme. This may also help identify if pupils are used to seeking help within the school or if they will find peer support an unfamiliar concept.

■ Are pupils used to being consulted about issues in school?

You will need to be honest about the school culture, since this is an initiative that the pupils will be running, with adult support. Will they meet resistance? How can this be challenged?

■ What are the aims of the scheme?

Identifying clear aims will help to focus the work you are doing. For example, you may be:

- trying to break down barriers between year groups
- encouraging people to talk about bullying.

Pupils and staff can take the aims as a basis for how the scheme is used and promoted.

Don't forget to make sure that your aims are SMART:

S-Specific
M-Measurable
A-Achievable
R-Realistic
T-Timed

■ What style of peer support?

There are different ways of developing a peer support scheme.

What would best fit your aims? For example, you could have a buddying service, a more formal listening service or even a mediation service. Some schools have invented playground pals, specifically designed to encourage pupils to play together at breaks. This will determine how many peer supporters you'll need and what resources are needed.

■ What resources are available?

What are the financial implications for your school? These will vary depending on the type of scheme, but may include training, decorating a room, administration and so on. What about the human resources? Which staff and pupils are going to be involved and how much time can they spare? Are they able to help with the practical aspects of running the scheme or will they offer support as and when it is needed?

■ Is there a target group?

Consider who the service is targeted at and who the peer supporters will be. For example, you could offer a peer support scheme for the transition period from Year 6 to 7, with Year 10s as supporters. Some schools may want the sixth formers to act as peer supporters but you will need to be aware of the relationship the sixth formers have with the rest of the school and how that may affect the scheme.

■ What time span are you working to?

You will need to think realistically about how long the scheme will take to develop. The groundwork that you put in first will help the scheme survive but will take time. It is useful to take into consideration things like exams, exam pressure and other pupil commitments, as these will impact on the length of time it will take to get the scheme up and running.



■ How will you recruit and select?

There is a lot to think about regarding recruitment and selection.

Peer supporters should be representative of the school population. It can sometimes help a scheme if the supporters have some 'street cred' as there can be stigma attached to becoming a peer supporter. The recruitment process will need to address this. You do, however, need to be careful of creating an elite group of people running the scheme who are not representative of the young people you are hoping will use the service.

What process will you use for recruiting? Application forms? Interviews? Volunteers? There are benefits and drawbacks for each method but it is important to think about whether the method you

choose will encourage representative group of pupils to apply.

How will you deal with someone who is not appropriate (and who will decide who is not appropriate)? It might be helpful to place some emphasis on self-selection, as not everyone is suited and some may change their mind after the training.

What are the roles for the pupils who want to get involved with the scheme? Remember that pupils can get involved in different ways. They don't all have to be supporters, as some can take part in different ways, such as gaining publicity for the scheme within your school and outside, for example with parents.

■ What role will adults play?

Adult support is essential for a scheme that exists in a school to

succeed. There also needs to be support for the adults involved. This may include extra training or guidance on child protection issues and running support groups for the peer supporters. The adults will need to be realistic about what the role will entail.

It is also important to ensure that parents are aware of the scheme. Parents of new pupils may be reassured by the existence of a scheme. In order to raise awareness among parents, some schools have asked parents of peer supporters to sign agreements for their child to be involved in the scheme.

Extra resources for staff can be found on page 7.

■ How will the peer supporters be supported?

This is one of the most crucial but often overlooked aspects of a successful peer support scheme.

Peer supporters must have the opportunity to meet and talk about the running of the scheme, and also about how their work as a peer supporter is going. It is vital that there is an adult who can supervise these sessions to ensure that they are supported in their work.

It is also important for supporters to know who they can get support from before the scheme starts and when this support is available to them.

Extra notes on support for peer supporters can be found on page 9.

■ How will you ensure that peer supporters keep certain things confidential and that they also know when to break confidentiality?

It is important that pupils within the school can trust the peer supporters but it is just as important for everyone to know when confidentiality needs to be broken.

It is essential to have a confidentiality policy for the peer supporters to

work to, and for students to know when things should be passed on and to whom. One way to help with confidentiality is to limit the scheme to school-focused issues, and to make this clear in any publicity about the scheme.

Extra notes on confidentiality can be found on page 8.

■ Will you be keeping records?

It may be a good idea to keep a record of how the service is being used, for example how many students use it, from which years and what they want to talk about. This can help with future development of the scheme. You need to be clear about why you are keeping records to ensure that you are collating relevant information. Where will these records be kept and who will have access to them? They need to be kept confidential.

■ What is the role of a peer supporter and what are the boundaries of this role?

Before starting a peer support scheme, peer supporters must be clear about their roles. For example, they need to know that they are there to listen and not to counsel and also when they are expected to be peer supporters and when not. Sometimes peer supporters feel that they should be able to offer support to others whenever it is asked of them. It is important that they know that they fulfil the role at specific times. This could be marked out by wearing badges to show when they are on duty.

It is also important for peer supporters to be aware of their own feelings and when they might need some time out.

Pupils and staff need clearly defined roles.

■ How will the scheme be run?

How will the peer supporters actually be able to fulfil their role? How often will the scheme run (and still allow time for the peer supporters to meet as a group)? Will they be working in

pairs? Will it be a drop-in service or will students have to make appointments, or would a combination of the two approaches help less assertive pupils to access support?

■ **How will you raise awareness of the scheme?**

There can sometimes be a problem for pupils using a peer support scheme because they may feel it has a stigma attached. Publicising the scheme in an appropriate way may help with this. You will need to let people know what it is about and who it is for. You may be able to raise awareness through assemblies, parents' evenings, visits to feeder schools and so on.

This will also be important for getting across the message about confidentiality and times when it may need to be broken.

■ **What are the training needs for the pupils?**

Have you identified training for the pupils that fits into the type of scheme they will be running? Who will do the training? Is there anyone already involved with the school

who may be able to get involved? It is important that whatever training the pupils receive, they recognise that most of their learning will happen when they are actually in the role. The training should not be seen as the end of the process, since you cannot train for every eventuality. It may be necessary to identify on-going or follow-up training.

■ **How will the scheme be monitored and evaluated?**

You will need to monitor the scheme to ensure that you can develop it successfully. Is it effective? You could put questionnaires out to pupils and staff. Regular meetings with the peer supporters will also help to keep a track of how the scheme is going. How will it develop in the future? There are many ways in which the peer supporters could work.

■ **How will you keep the students and staff motivated?**

It may be a while before the scheme takes off in your school. It is important to acknowledge this with the peer supporters and think about how to keep them motivated during the quieter times.



Where can you get help?

ChildLine's CHIPS (ChildLine in Partnership with Schools) can provide training in active listening and helping skills. The training that we deliver is primarily focused on enhancing trainees' listening and communication skills, to support them in being part of a peer listening scheme in their school or youth group.

There are many other organisations that can offer training and support which can be found on the peer support forum website at www.mentalhealth.org.uk/peer/forum.htm

A newsletter on peer support can be found at www.peersupport.co.uk



Suggested reading:

Peer Support in Action: from bystander to standing by, Helen Cowie and Patti Wallace, Sage, 2000 (ISBN 0-7619-6353-7)

The Effectiveness of Peer Support Systems in Challenging School Bullying: The perspectives and experiences of teachers and pupils, Paul Naylor and Helen Cowie, London: The Princes Trust, 1998

Resources

Playing with Fire. Creative conflict resolution for young adults, Fiona Macbeth and Nic Fine, New Society Publishers, 1995. (ISBN 0-86571-306-5)

The Peer Aid Book. Approaches to setting up and running young people's peer-education projects, Amanda Brodala with Jim Mulligan, CSV Education for Citizenship, 1999 (ISBN 0-907829-74-0)

Peer Mediation Training for Young People: a video training resource, Hilary

Stacey. Available from Lucky Duck Publishing, tel: 0117 973 2881

Peer Support – the video: a video from the Mental Health Foundation which illustrates the work of four peer support schemes. It is aimed at professionals and students who are interested in implementing peer support projects in their communities. Available from MHF tel: 020 7802 0300.

Keeping confidentiality

It is important that pupils are able to trust the peer supporters, otherwise they will not use the scheme. Schools and youth groups should be encouraged to think clearly about the interaction that is expected to take place between:

- young people using the service and supporters
- supporters and other supporters
- supporters and members of staff involved in the project.

How will information remain confidential? You may like to consider the following points.

- What level of privacy will you have? Those involved with the scheme will need to think about the environment in which the peer support will be taking place, so it's important to find a suitable venue.
- How will those involved let people know that their service is confidential?
- Peer supporters should see themselves as part of a network of support. They need to be informed that their role is different from that of a friend.
- How will confidentiality work with the group? Supporters will need to meet and talk about how their peer support work is going but this can still be done in confidence. When talking in a group support session they should be encouraged to discuss issues that they are faced with in their role, but without mentioning the names or identifying features of anyone involved. Instead, they should be supporting each other by reflecting on how the situation was handled.
- Peer supporters need to understand the importance of keeping exciting information confidential and that matters spoken about in a peer support session must not turn up as playground gossip.
- What will happen if someone leaves the scheme? It is important to talk about this with the peer supporters.
- If you want to keep records of peer support sessions you will need to ensure that they remain confidential. Think about why you are keeping records as this will determine the information you need.
- Peer supporters should never promise to keep confidentiality.

Breaking confidentiality

There may be times when confidentiality needs to be broken. You may like to consider the following points.

- Peer supporters, staff and other pupils should be clear about when confidentiality will need to be broken. This must be the case for child protection issues but it may arise with other issues as well. You will need to think about how you can get this message across to everyone. It may be helpful for schemes to have a confidentiality statement for those using the service to read or to publicise around the school.
- What would the procedure be if confidentiality needed to be broken? Who would the peer supporter go to in the first instance? Teachers, other adults and young people need to be aware about what information should be passed on and who to pass it on to.
- The young person using the scheme should be informed about what is happening and support offered to them.
- Peer supporters themselves must also be offered adequate support by an appropriate adult.
- A peer support scheme should work within the child protection procedures that already exist in your school as you are part of a wider network of support.

Support for the peer supporters

'All schools need to ensure that the peer supporters are provided with frequent and regular opportunities for being debriefed about their supporting experiences. In other words, there needs to be recognition that the peer supporters themselves need continual support from the teachers if they are to be successful in their own supporting role.'

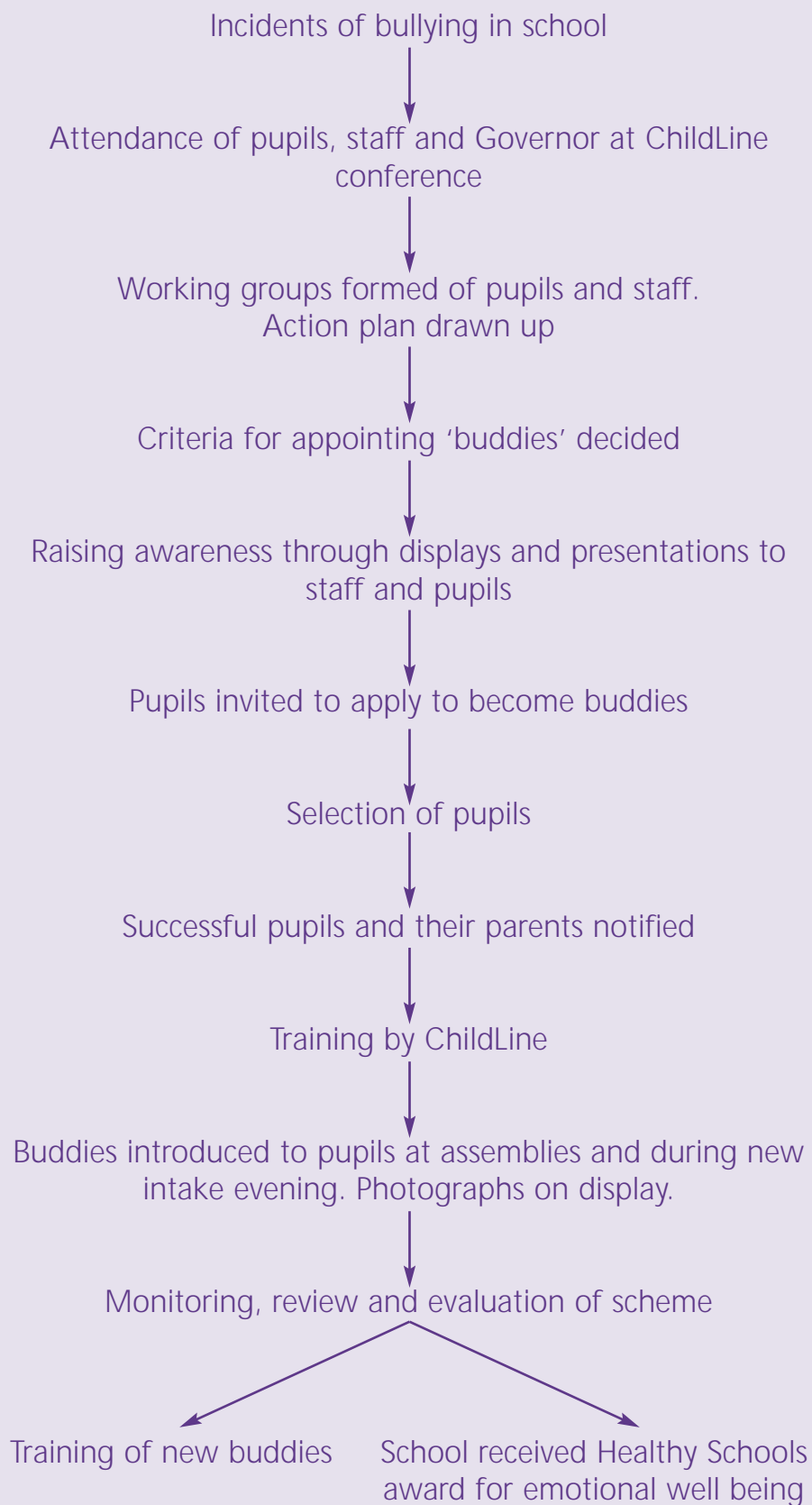
Naylor and Cowie, 1998

- Group support for the peer supporters is important as it will give them a chance to check through the work they have been doing, develop their skills and learn from others.
- Support sessions can give peer supporters the opportunity to ask for advice from other peer supporters if they are finding a particular situation challenging.
- A peer support scheme will be developing all the time and support sessions can help identify any further training needs and look more generally at what isn't working within the scheme and may need to be changed.
- These sessions should not just be used to talk about things that are going wrong. It is helpful to talk about things that are going well and learn from these experiences too.
- Peer supporters can get support from each other but it is important that they are also supported by staff.
- You will need to work out how peer supporters will get this support, how often and with whom.
- Having these support sessions will help the peer supporters to keep confidentiality, as it will reduce the desire to offload information to someone else not involved with the scheme.
- Think about what will happen if a young person fails to attend support sessions.
- A peer supporter needs to recognise that they have a right to get support too.



Golborne High School, Cheshire

Process for setting up a peer support group



Glenthorne High School, Surrey

The peer support scheme at Glenthorne is now in its second year. The students faced a few teething problems in the first year but they quickly rose to the challenge and the scheme has gone from strength to strength with an extra 24 students wanting to get involved.

Charis Saunders was one of the original peer supporters; 'Peer support at Glenthorne is well underway: results have been positive. Our launch – an activities afternoon with Year 7 students – provided invaluable links. Peer mentors also now help out with extra-curricular clubs, paired reading and prefect duties. By working alongside the

younger students, we were able to break down barriers and students now feel more at ease approaching us.

'One-to-one mentoring had been uncomfortable for some students as they do not have the courage to come and speak to us. The lunch-time drop-in sessions where students play games has helped overcome this. In this relaxed environment, students can talk to peer mentors or youth workers (who attend sessions) whilst playing games. There is a quiet room to discuss problems, letting students make decisions. Staff and youth workers are on hand with support for us if we need it.'

Lismore Comprehensive, Lurgan, Northern Ireland

Year 14 mentors were trained by ChildLine as part of its outreach programme and were involved in the induction of Year 8 pupils between September and November 2001. The main aim of this initiative was to provide additional support for form tutors and help ease the transition from primary to secondary school.

Peer support for Year 8 pupils was in operation for a number of years. However, evaluation had determined the need for additional training for peer mentors.

Consultation took place with students, parents and year heads. The project was explained to Year 13 students during assembly and further details of intended commitment discussed in form classes.

Volunteers were requested and year heads were consulted to ensure the suitability of each applicant.

The training provided young people with an increased sense of responsibility and value; it improved interpersonal, communication and listening skills. Issues such as confidentiality and boundaries were particularly important.

Mentors worked (in pairs) with tutors during form class each morning. Monitoring and regular meetings with mentors ensured that some aspects of training were revisited as required.

A similar scheme will operate for the next school year. This year's project has been commented on as a significant development in the induction of incoming Year 8 students. An internal evaluation indicated that Year 8 students, peer mentors and form tutors all benefited a good deal from the project.

Francis Bacon School, St Albans, Hertfordshire

It was Narinder, the school counsellor, at Francis Bacon who had the initial idea for a peer support scheme.

'I approached the two deputy heads at the school to see what they thought of the idea of introducing a peer support scheme. We discussed the issue at length and decided that if we were going to do this then we would need to make sure the whole school was made aware of what we were doing. I initially gave a presentation to the school governors and explained that the

counselling service had become an integral part of the school and that peer support would complement the work that I was doing. We then sent out a questionnaire to staff to find out their views and we organised a workshop to give all the staff an opportunity to discuss their concerns and to learn more about the issues. We also sent home a letter to all the parents, highlighting

the benefits, so that everyone was aware of what we were doing.

'We had school assemblies and gave out application forms to interested students from Years 10, 11 and 12. The interview process was lengthy but helped the pupils to think through whether this was what they really wanted to do. They had to do some group work –

role-plays and group discussion – as well as individual interviews. After this came the training day.

'We are now getting ready for the launch. As well as working out how the scheme will run, the pupils have designed a logo, put together a publicity plan including year assemblies and planned a launch event.'



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