Peer Support
School Team Quick Reference Tool

What is peer support?

Students **can** and **do** help their friends, classmates, and others around them in a variety of ways every day. This type of informal, naturally occurring peer helping is something we hope all students can be part of. However, peer support is something slightly different—and it's important to ensure a shared understanding as the term can refer to a wide variety of practices, programs, and activities (e.g., peer counselling, peer mediation, peer champions, peer education, peer tutoring, and peer advocacy, among others). While there is no single definition of peer support, key elements differentiate it from everyday helping and friendship, including **planning, structure, and training**. Other important elements that distinguish peer support include **supervision**, **monitoring**, and **the recruiting of peer workers with specific peer characteristics**.

Is peer support evidence-informed?

The information needed to determine that youth peer support in a mental health context is an evidence-informed practice isn't currently available. There are just so many different versions of it, they haven't all been evaluated yet. This does not necessarily mean peer support has no value. However, it does mean it needs to be approached in a careful and thoughtful way.

What are the potential benefits and cautions?

Although little is known about which program elements lead to positive outcomes, youth peer support can be thought of as a promising practice that may offer some potential benefits:

- for those receiving support (e.g., improving participation in and engagement and satisfaction with mental health services, improving outcomes in some areas of functioning, increasing happiness and wellbeing, providing opportunities to gain knowledge and skills)

- for those providing support (e.g., improvements in skills, self-confidence, and relationships)

- for the wider school community/whole-school environment

It is important to be mindful that peer support also involves **cautions** and **potential harms**, including:

- issues related to the positioning of the role (e.g., being assigned inappropriate duties, youth tokenism)

- risks to those receiving support (e.g., peer supporters with inadequate training and support inadvertently experiencing issues with boundaries, breaching confidentiality, providing unhelpful advice, or not following up disclosures)

- risks to those providing support (e.g., stress related to drawing on personal experiences, difficulty knowing how to disclose personal information strategically, an increase in their own mental illness symptoms, a sense of burden and responsibility, vicarious trauma)

If peer support initiatives are to be considered, careful steps need to be taken to prioritize the wellness of the students involved.

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What type of peer support should schools engage in?

Peer support is not an alternative to professional support, and it is not appropriate for complex mental health needs. In particular, the evidence clearly indicates **peer-based suicide prevention presents significant risks to the students involved and should not be part of our school practice.**

In contrast to the challenges and potential harms presented by peer support for complex mental health needs, there are some great places to build opportunities:

- mental health promotion
- upstream approaches to prevention (e.g., enhancing protective factors, promoting life skills)
- modelling healthy coping attitudes and practices
- building awareness of resources and supports
- encouraging help-seeking
- stigma reduction

If your school is considering a peer support initiative, here are some questions to consider:

- Are you excited and passionate about student leadership?
- Do you have a good understanding of mental health promotion at school and ways students can help?
- How will you prioritize the wellness of the students involved?
- Do you have the support and commitment needed from school administration?
- Are you able to offer the time to provide training and on-going coaching for the role?
- Do you have knowledge, or access to knowledge, to deliver appropriate training for students (e.g., knowing limits of expertise and when to refer, confidentiality, how to safely and strategically disclose personal information, awareness of mental health services and pathways to care, inclusivity and cultural sensitivity)?
- How will you ensure effective supervision of peer supporters and on-going allyship and monitoring that provides support when needed?
- How will you ensure peer supporters do not feel overburdened or overwhelmed by the responsibility of helping others who may be struggling with mental health problems?

When planning peer support initiatives, consider the opportunities they present to:

- create a sense of culture and shared belonging
- include students from diverse community groups who can relate to and support young people's personal identities and who have a firsthand understanding of issues
- create an environment where students feel welcome, safe, and respected

For additional information to assist school mental health leadership teams in considering peer support initiatives, see School Mental Health Decision Support Tool: Peer Support Initiatives.

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