

Peer Support

Student Quick Reference Tool

What is peer support?

Students can and do help their friends, classmates, and others around them in lots of ways every day. We hope all students can be part of this type of peer helping. But when we're talking about peer support, we are talking about something slightly different. The term can be used to describe many things, like peer counselling, peer mediation, peer champions, peer tutoring, and more, so we need a shared understanding of it. While there is no one definition of peer support, it involves people helping each other in a planned and structured way. Unlike everyday helping and friendship, peer support also involves training and supervision so people can help others in safe ways that work.

Should there be peer support programs at school?

There are some good reasons to consider peer support at school:

- Many students have mental health concerns.
- Many students don't know where to go for support.
- Even when students know the resources available, sometimes they can be hard to access.
- Youth often share their concerns with a friend before an adult.
- Even though students want to help their friends (and are doing so), they aren't always sure what to do.

Peer support programs at school seem like a great way to help students help each other. Still, there are some things to consider—like the fact that youth peer support for mental health hasn't been studied enough yet to know if it works. There are just so many different versions of it, the information needed to figure them all out hasn't been collected. That doesn't mean peer support has no value. However, it does mean it needs to be thought about carefully.

What are the pros and cons?

Although there is still a lot to learn about peer support, it seems promising. Studies have shown that it may be helpful, if it is done well. For example:

- Youth who receive peer support can experience increased satisfaction with mental health services, increased happiness and well-being, and the chance to learn knowledge and skills.
- Youth peer supporters also report good things, like building skills, self-confidence, and relationships.
- The whole school can feel more positive, too.

While all of that is great, we need to be careful because peer support also has **possible harms**, including:

- not being treated well in the role (e.g., a lack of respect in the role, being assigned inappropriate tasks/duties)



- risks to the youth receiving support (e.g., because things like boundaries, privacy, knowing how to help and what advice to give, and knowing what to do when you learn that someone is at risk of harm can be hard and students don't always have the training and support that they need)
- risks to peer supporters (e.g., a sense of burden and responsibility, feeling overwhelmed, learning upsetting information from others)

If schools are going to think about peer support initiatives, they need to be careful to take care of the wellness of the students involved.

What type of peer support is a good fit for schools?

Peer support (peer counselling) is not recommended for serious mental health concerns. In particular, the information we have says **peer-based suicide prevention activities may harm some young people**, so we shouldn't ask students to step in and support peers when concerns about suicide are present. If a student finds themselves in a situation where a friend or classmate expresses feelings that suggest they may be thinking about suicide, the best way to help is to quickly connect with a caring adult who can offer assistance.

Peer support for mental health can still be a great option if it focuses on activities like these:

- promoting good mental health and well-being
- helping students build life skills
- modelling healthy coping attitudes and strategies
- helping students know the resources and supports around them
- encouraging students to seek help if they need it
- decreasing mental health stigma

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

- How will the school include you in deciding which peer support initiative to focus on and in planning it?
- Will school staff provide you with consistent leadership, support, and supervision?
- Does your school have the time and resources to provide you with the training you need (e.g., knowing when to bring in more help, knowing when to keep things private and when to share them, knowing the mental health resources available and how to reach them)?
- How will your school help ensure the initiative is inclusive and fits for students at your school?
- How will your school care for the wellness of the students involved?

Peer support initiatives can be a healthy addition to your school if they are planned carefully, focus on safe areas, and students have the support they need to be involved.

You just learned about peer support. Now it's your school's turn! If you are talking about peer support with school staff, share this with them [School Mental Health Decision Support Tool: Peer Support Initiatives](#).

