Tapping the Power of Peer Helping

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Adolescent youth are an under-utilized human resource during a period of development when peer influence is powerful. Peer helping programs, in which youth are trained in interpersonal skills to equip them to reach out to others, are systematically tapping this resource in reclaiming at-risk youth. Research supports the validity of these programs in terms of personal benefits both to the helper and the recipients, as well as significant intervention strategies.

A high school boy moved to the microphone to speak at an assembly following the suicide of a classmate. The group assembled had been asked what really was going on at his school. In response, this boy said that they all needed to confront the real problems underneath drugs, alcohol, and suicide:

It is despair, loneliness, and hopelessness. We need someone to talk to; we need to be taught how to talk. We need people who really care about us, support us...we need to be loved. Suicide crisis prevention is okay to learn about in a crisis, but we need to be taught to be ourselves, be open, honest, real. Teach us to hope. Bring some kind of meaning and purpose to our lives.

This cry for help, this powerful message to society as a whole, could be echoed by hundreds of youth across America who are falling through the cracks of society, despite the billions of dollars that have been spent on interventions addressing at-risk youth. How many of these interventions confront despair, loneliness, and hopelessness? How many are bringing some kind of meaning and purpose to the lives of youth? Peter Benson, president of Search Institute in Minneapolis, asserts that a new paradigm is needed that promotes positive developmental assets through the mobilization of all citizens in a community who share a vision and the responsibility for creating healthy communities where all kids can get what they need to thrive. He further states, “Peer Helping matters, because it is a tool, process, resource and catalyst for helping develop such healthy communities” (Benson, 1995, p. 12).

Benson gives evidence of why this approach to reclaiming youth is needed. We live in an age-segregated society, which virtually has severed the ties between the Novices (youth) and the wise Sages (adults), eliminating the traditional support systems for youth. This rupture cuts off the normal osmosis process of how youth formulate their values and behaviors and how they acquire strength, wisdom, and vision to forge their future lives and commitments. Based on his research, less than half of American youth experience parents and adults as social resources, including having frequent, in-depth conversations or access to them for advice and guidance. Only 30% of those Search Institute had surveyed felt that their schools had a positive atmosphere where anyone cared about them as individual persons. “No one is home; no one in the neighborhood is noticing or caring what youth are doing. Significantly, the church or synagogue continues to play an important role because it now is the only intergenerational community left available to youth” (1995, p. 13).

These data point out that, increasingly through the span of adolescence, peers are becoming more important in the development and socialization of one another. From peers, youth learn attitudes, values,
and skills that will influence them the rest of their lives. Therefore, how one interacts with the peer group, whether as a victim, aggressor, or helper, significantly affects one's self-esteem. Plenty of evidence exists to illustrate the negative effects of peer influence. But now we are beginning to see the evidence of the power of peer influence to build lives, rather than destroy them. Based on Benson's research, of all the developmental assets, the most powerful is positive peer influence, deemed even more important than the family (Benson, 1999, p. 134).

What Is Peer Helping?
The term "peer helping" is an umbrella name that is used to cover a wide variety of services, in many different settings with diverse populations. The basic core of these programs which makes them unique is that help is provided formally and informally by "lay" people who primarily are youth. Youth are recruited, trained, and supervised to systematically reach out to their peers who are lonely, isolated, or lack the social skills to cope with the peer group culture. The training teaches youth how to ask open-ended questions that help to build relationships, how to deal respectfully with people in authority, how to welcome strangers and rejected peers into groups, as well as listening and peer mediation skills. They also are trained to help another with a decision, without giving advice, and to learn how to seek professional help when a life may be in danger.

More and more professionals have come to realize the need to supplement the scarcity of helping resources and are turning to peer helping as an answer to this need. They are learning that peer programs are providing services they cannot provide; that often the help that is provided by peers meets a need or resolves a problem so that the person does not require professional help; and that often peers are aware that a problem exists long before it is brought to the attention of counselors or psychologists. Therefore, the peer helper can assist in bringing in professional help before the problem becomes more severe.

Benefits of Peer Helping
There are three basic components of a healthy self-esteem: 1) a sense of one's unique attributes: the awareness of what is special about me that makes me different from others and valued; 2) secure membership in a group or groups that one values; and 3) a feeling of participating in meaningful roles that make a lasting contribution to others or society as a whole. All of these components are difficult to experience in our present society, yet all are potentially available through peer helping.

Sense of Unique Attributes: As youth become peer helpers, they not only learn how to cope with their own developmental tasks, but also begin to recognize their own unique qualities, skills, talents, and experiences that can be useful in helping others. One girl who was a junior in high school, who had been a heavy drinker and drug user, enrolled in the peer helping class at her continuation high school. As she began working with other students who were starting on the same path she had taken, she began to realize she had skills to empathize with hurting peers and to help her peers think through the decisions they were making that were potentially harmful. She began to see the positive influence she was having and came to reassess her own value and worth, which eventually led her to enter college and a career in a helping field.

Membership in a Valued Group: There is a loneliness in our society today that is more pervasive than we have ever known before. More people are feeling isolated from one another and, as families are more fragmented and involved in individual concerns, friendship skills are not being systematically taught or modeled. As a result, many youth lack the skills to become a significant member in a group, or to acquire the support of lasting friendships. This can be a serious deficit because failure to develop social and relationship skills is a powerful predictor of later substance abuse, delinquency, and other interpersonal problems (Kellam, Sheppard, Brown, & Fleming, 1982). The Peer Helping training and the practice of the skills learned equip youth with what they need to know to be socially competent for success in life for marriage, parenting, and employment.

Meaningful Roles: The key element of self-esteem, as Diane Hedin (1987) states, is the experience of being needed, valued, and respected by another person, which produces a new view of self as a worthwhile human being. Many youth have few avenues to experience this kind of self-worth because they are not given responsible tasks to perform or are told that they are inadequate, too young, or incompetent. However, when peer helpers are given useful and
relevant tasks, these feelings change. Assisting others to work through a problem, supporting them through a difficult period, or even teaching peers the skills they themselves have learned, peer helpers know they have given something to another that cannot be taken from them. They know they have performed a useful role and that their life has meaning. When these opportunities are given to at-risk youth who become peer helpers, these youth are salvaged from going through life feeling useless, unvalued, and certainly not respected. A boy entering continuation school from prison became a peer helper to a seventh grade boy who was the scapegoat of the school. As he worked with this boy, teaching him some of the social skills he himself had been learning, and watching the boy begin to blossom, his attitude about himself changed. His own grades improved; he graduated and went on to college. When you know you have helped even one person, you know your life has worth.

**Intervention Strategies:** Bonnie Benard (1990), a vocal advocate of peer programs—calling them the “lode stone to prevention”—has summarized much of the research supporting peer resource strategies in her monograph, *The Case for Peers*. She states that youth service programs can play a major role in reducing the alienation many youth feel from their families, schools, and communities, a disconnectedness that often manifests in the social problems of alcohol/drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school (p. 1).

In pointing out the importance of social support provided by peer programs, Benard cites the work of Cassel, who claimed that “people can become physically, mentally, or socially debilitated if they do not receive or perceive signs from significant others that make them feel safe and valued” (p. 3). For youth, peers are the significant others that can destroy that feeling of safety or worth if social support is withheld. On the other hand, peers also are the most powerful to provide that support.

Benson (1990) also provides research evidence of Peer Helping as an intervention strategy through his analysis of the developmental assets. In addition to identifying the developmental assets that youth need, he looked at the deficits or liabilities which can interfere with healthy development, such as hedonistic values, over-exposure to television, drinking, stress, social isolation, and negative peer pressure. Each of the deficits is associated with at-risk behavior. Those students reporting the deficit also report a significantly higher number of at-risk indicators, such as frequent alcohol use, cigarette use, attempted suicide, school absenteeism, sexual activity, and eating disorders, than those not reporting the deficit. His research also found that the more assets a student reported, the fewer deficits were indicated.

One of the results of the study showed that students who engage in pro-social projects and programs to help others on a weekly basis are less likely than non-helpers to report at-risk behaviors. As Benson reports in *The Troubled Journey*:

> In our efforts to raise healthy children, it is as important to promote pro-social behavior as it is to prevent antisocial or health-compromising behaviors. Several reasons are paramount. One is that providing help to others functions as a teacher. Through acts of compassion, social competencies develop, positive values form, and the seeds for meaning and purpose in life are planted. This is why many of the school-based peer programs are called “service learning.” (1990, p. 34)

Among Benson’s recommendations, based on findings of his study were:

1. Enhance social competencies, including friendship-making skills, caring skills, assertiveness and resistance skills.
2. Emphasize the development of positive values, particularly those that build a sense of personal responsibility for the welfare of others.
3. Emphasize service learning programs, seeking to provide all students with helping opportunities and personal reflection on the meaning of help.

The goals of peer helping encompass these recommendations, and to the extent that goals are met, these programs are proving to be the most cost-effective path to prevention and intervention.

**A Spiritual Model of Peer Helping**

The core of peer helping that can reclaim youth is “heart knowledge,” which is a definition of spirituality. What motivates an individual to see beyond one’s own troubles or needs to sacrifice in order to help another? The answer is a spiritual one, and one that needs to be addressed in all peer helping work. Most peer programs do a competent job of preparing
youth with the interpersonal skills needed to perform services. Many give service, when asked, out of concern for others, and experience a sense of self-worth as a result. Too often, however, compassion and the awareness of needs of others is not a spontaneous habit that is practiced in daily life. Why should we help others, unless we are asked to do so?

In every human being lies a spiritual yearning, the source of his/her highest dreams, thoughts, ideals, and desires. This mysterious urge frequently cannot be named, but it can be sparked into life by an example, discussion, experience, or important relationship. Young people are particularly responsive to this yearning because they are very idealistic. Youth naturally want to be kind and caring. When the heart is connected to skills, this desire is sparked into life, and those who experience it find new meaning to their lives.

Although spirituality or religion cannot be taught directly in public schools, many youth are finding this added dimension to their peer training through the Biblically-based Peer Ministry program. Each of the skill sessions are set in a context of some message from the Gospel, a parable, or a Bible story which brings alive and makes concrete what it means to love and have compassion for others. Through experiential exercises, discussions, and practice, youth begin to understand what is involved in loving and acting on compassion. The principles of Peer Ministry work are based on the story of the Good Samaritan (Varenhorst, 1995, p. 34). The foundation principle is that the least likely person is the one who may be the most capable of helping a wounded person. As Remen (1996) noted, “Expertise cures, but wounded people can best be healed by other wounded people. Only other wounded people can understand what is needed, for the healing of suffering is compassion, not expertise” (p. 217). At-risk youth are wounded, and when recruited and trained, they become powerful “ministers” and healers for those like themselves, while healing themselves as well.

William Barclay (1971) once wrote:

There is nothing more moving in life than to hear someone say, “I need you; I cannot do without you.” There is no more uplifting feeling, however, than to see someone...a child, pupil or friend...facing the tasks of life competently, adequately and gallantly, and to know that you had something to do with equipping him or her through the caring that makes them real. (p. 142)

This is the power of peer helping in reclaiming youth.

For further information on Peer Helping contact the National Peer Helpers Association, toll-free: 877/314-7337; e-mail: npha@peerhelping.org; Web site: www.peerhelping.org

For information about Peer Ministry Programs, contact Lyle Griner at Youth & Family Institute, 1401 E. 100th St., Bloomington, MN 55425; phone: 952/698-3836.


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