

TEACHING PEER HELPING SKILLS

Bayonne's Peer Helping Program provides a way to tap student energies and make the school a more caring institution.

EDWARD R. KEALY,
DERMOD McDERMOTT, AND
JAMES WASSER

Most educators intuitively recognize the links between peer group experiences, academic performance, and student attitudes and behaviors. Yet, as Schofield and Sagar (1979) point out, "teachers are so busy meeting the demands . . . to produce immediate gains in academic performance that they hardly have time to consider the ways in which the children's social experiences may promote or inhibit their academic development."

The Peer Helping Curriculum, developed with the help of a Title IV-C grant in the Bayonne, New Jersey, Public Schools, makes those links explicit in the curriculum and provides a way for teachers to facilitate students' self-help activities as a regular school function.

The development of effective peer relations among students is crucial for children in the 8- to 12-year-old range, particularly among those with learning disabilities (Hargrave and Hargrave, 1979). In fact, peer relationships and the way schools shape them are the strongest predictors of student vandalism, especially among middle-class students (Richards, 1979). Programs that foster peer group relations can improve task-

oriented classroom behaviors among students, a key to basic skill mastery (Gow, 1977), as well as play a productive part in resolving such problems as desegregation (Liss and Robinson, 1978) and urban school disruptions (Ulrich and Batchelder, 1979).

The goal of the Peer Helping Curriculum is to develop in students a high degree of self-respect, respect for each other, and respect for their school environment. The curriculum model does not dictate what students must do to reduce alienation and anti-social behavior. Rather it gives students the skills and staff support necessary to address school problems in their own way. However, students are expected to take action to change behavior during the program.

The model introduces students to a process to develop their own activities by asking them (1) to identify the symptom of alienation they wish to address; (2) to assess the degree to which the symptom exists within themselves; (3) to reduce the symptom within themselves; and (4) to reduce the symptom within fellow students and the school environment.

The curriculum consists of 20 skills grouped into five clusters:

—*Attending*: listening, paraphrasing, reading nonverbal messages

—*Clarifying*: by questions, hunches, emphasis, sharing similar experiences

—*Facilitating*: group task completion, team building, showing concern for group members

—*Confronting*: criticizing without judging

—*Activating*: defining the problem, defining the objective, and organizing the action plan and alternatives.

The topics in Figure 1 include the specific skills and a general schedule of training.

Students learn these skills in peer helping groups or classes. Educational staff learn how to teach these skills and how to implement a peer helping program during 50 hours of training and follow-up conferences. The teacher training curriculum includes all the student skills as well as strategies to initiate and supervise a peer helping program.

A variety of teaching techniques are used in the skill training and include explanation, demonstration, practice, and group discussion. Figure 2 is a typical lesson plan incorporating all the teaching techniques in a 45-minute period. The skills are developed in a micro-counseling fashion (Ivey, 1972) that teaches one simple skill, such as paraphrasing feelings, and incrementally adds more advanced skills. Gradually students are able to master the more advanced skills of confrontation, facilitation, and action planning.

Implementing Peer Helping

A peer helping program can be implemented in one academic year. First, the principal recruits teachers according to

Edward R. Kealy is ESAA Project Director and Staff Developer, Bayonne Public Schools, Bayonne, New Jersey; Dermot McDermott is Educational Consultant, Full Circle Associates, New York City; and James Wasser is Peer Programs Director, Bayonne Public Schools, Bayonne, New Jersey.

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criteria that emphasize rapport with students and motivation to learn new skills. After the first ten hours of inservice training, teachers can ask students to nominate potential peer helpers for participation in student training and then select volunteers from the nominees, or entire classes or grade levels may be selected for the program. Teachers can begin the skill sessions and discussion sessions with students while continuing their own training.

The next major step is a 48-hour workshop, preferably held away from the school. Here students and staff interact in a more relaxed fashion and con-

centrate on skill training, particularly the advanced cluster of action planning skills. Once the action plans are drawn up, they can be carried out at school during a Peer Activity Day in the spring.

Peer School Improvement Projects

Students trained in peer helping are able to carry out a wide variety of school improvement projects. In fact, 75 percent of the students in Bayonne's most recent program increased their involvement in school activities. Examples of such student projects are:

- *Diversity is Beautiful Day*—a pro-

ject displaying different racial/ethnic heritages, roots of individuals' families, and the unique contributions of different cultures

- *Better Understanding of Your Family*—a series of exercises by which students can study their family dynamics and make them work better

- *Respect Your Neighbor's Property*—activities to increase student awareness of property rights and effective security measures, such as a poster campaign and awards to classes in which nothing was stolen

- *Beauty and the Building*—a clean-up project of a school building, its bathrooms, and school yard

- *Peer Tutoring*—a cross-grade tutoring program in which positive role models help raise academic levels of lower grade students.

Tapping Student Energy

The Peer Helping Curriculum is one way to tap into student self-help energy, to build student self-respect, and to create a sharing and caring school environment. But it can only work if educators expand their educational horizons beyond the "basics" and see students as participants in the educational process, not just as objects of instructional techniques and subjects of disciplinary rules. In an age of declining resources, educators cannot afford to overlook the one resource they will always have—students. ■

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Figure 1. Bayonne Peer Helping Curriculum.

Session	Topics and Skills
1.	Growing in Respect: The Purpose for Learning Peer Helping Skills
2.	Attending Skills in General: Being an Effective Listener
3.	Attending with Encouraging Phrases
4.	Attending Nonverbally by Reading Body Languages
5.	Attending by Paraphrasing Feelings
6.	Attending by Paraphrasing Nonverbals
7.	Attending by Paraphrasing Whole Messages Using Skills 3-6
8.	Group Facilitation Skill: Working as a Team to Get the Job Done
9.	Clarifying Skills: Summarizing and Emphasizing a Peer's Statement
10.	Clarifying by Using the Educated Guess to Clarify a Peer's Statement
11.	Clarifying by Recognizing the Feelings in Statements of a Peer
12.	Group Facilitation Skill: Showing Concern for Individuals in the Peer Group
13.	Clarifying by Peers Praising a Peer's Behavior
14.	Clarifying by Sharing Similar Reactions
15.	Integrating Attending and Clarifying Skills
16.	Integrating Group Facilitation and Attending Skills
17.	Confronting Skills: Describing Inconsistent Behavior
18.	Confronting by Describing Personal Reaction
19.	Confronting Without Hurting a Peer
20.	Activating Skills: Defining the Objective and Making an Action Plan

Figure 2.
Lesson Plan for
a Peer Helping Skill Session.

Time Budget in a 45-minute session	Activity
5 min.	Warm up exercise and review of previous skill
10 min.	Explanation of new skill and demonstration. Students take notes in Peer Logbook
10 min.	Practice of skill by students in groups of three (talker, listener, observer)
5 min.	Group discussion of skill: what was easy and difficult, helpful or unhelpful
12 min.	Peer group discusses an issue of concern to students using skills
3 min.	Group critiques their skill acquisition. Students complete their log with note on what they learned

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