



Department  
for Education

# **Peer support and children's and young people's mental health**

**Call for evidence analysis - a shorter  
version**

**March 2017**

## What is this report about?

The Government has been looking at how it can help schools, colleges and youth organisations to support good mental health and emotional wellbeing. We want to make sure they have the knowledge, skills and approaches that mean they can both provide appropriate support themselves and work effectively with specialist services.

Young people told us<sup>1</sup> that when they need help or support for mental health or emotional issues then the two main places they would turn to are their friend or apps/websites. They said that they would like to see more peer support available as a way of supporting their mental wellbeing.

So we needed to understand how good peer support programmes work. We had a lot of questions such as:

- What training do they include?;
- How do they keep people safe?;
- How do they encourage young people to be involved?;
- What support is needed from the adults at school, college or group?; and
- What are the risks?

## What's the problem?

Around **1 in 10** children and young people aged between 5-16 years have a diagnosable mental health condition.

That's an average of **3** people **in every classroom**

Plus another **4 or 5** are likely to have less severe problems.

To find out more about this we collected evidence through:

- an online questionnaire (which over 1,800 of you answered);
- weekly Twitter polls;
- workshops with both adults and young people; and
- a review of studies that have looked at this topic before.

This report is about what we found out.

The Government will be investing an additional **£1.4 billion** in children and young people's mental health services before 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> [YoungMinds CYP and families engagement report](#) and [Youth Select Committee report](#)

## Peer support in schools, colleges and youth groups

### Peer support

Peer support can range from **helping a friend** discuss problems through **buddying** and **befriending** schemes to **formal 1:1** and **group support** sessions.

It includes promoting good mental wellbeing for all as supporting those with particular problems.

It is definitely **NOT** a replacement for specialist support from a mental health professional.

Peer support programmes in schools, colleges, youth groups and online have the potential to provide effective early support that can help to identify mental health and emotional wellbeing problems and can prevent them from escalating.

They can create an environment which promotes good mental wellbeing, and where young people have the skills, confidence and knowledge to give and ask for help from one another.

Some schools already provide peer support schemes on a wide range of topics including friendships, transition and bullying. Some already run peer support programmes for mental health. Many other youth groups outside of school settings (eg: scouts, guides, volunteer groups, sports groups etc.) have also developed schemes for peer support, including online approaches.

We want to encourage more settings and organisations to offer peer support for mental health and make sure that it happens in a safe, structured system.

When young people are accessing online support we want to make sure you have enough knowledge to know which ones offer effective, confidential support.

### Terms

**Peers** = friends or other young people, including an older young person or a near-peer.

**Mentor / peer supporter** = children and young people who listen to their peers issues and difficulties and provide appropriate support.

**Mentees** = children and young people with concerns, issues or problems who talk to their peers and receive support from them.

## What did we find out?

**Young people are interested in peer support for mental health & emotional wellbeing**

Young people told us they are interested both in receiving and providing peer support for mental health.

50% of the 1,800 respondents in the online questionnaire said they would be interested in being a mentor/peer supporter for mental health and emotional wellbeing. Girls were more likely to be positive about this than boys.

Most adults felt that good peer support schemes have the potential to provide benefits.

**There are key features all successful peer support programmes need.**

Young people said peer support programmes should be confidential, flexible and appropriate to the users circumstances. Peer supporters should be friendly, approachable and well trained.

Most adults thought that training, both for the young people and the supporting adults involved is vital, including understanding of safeguarding issues and boundaries. Having good working partnerships with specialist mental health services is also important.

Research showed that programmes need to be well run with strong leadership and a flexible approach. Successful projects depend on the involvement of well-trained, enthusiastic peer supporters with good communication and interpersonal skills.

## Involvement

There were approximately **1,800** responses from young people to our online questionnaire and **113** adult responses.

The 'flash' Twitter polls asked a short-lived 'question of the week' over 4 weeks and received **741** responses.

52 adults and **over 30 young people** attended our workshops. There were 5 young people's workshops that were organised with the kind support of:

- National Citizen's Service;
- National Children's Bureau;
- British Youth Council;
- Kids (charity for disabled children, young people and their families); and
- Riverside School (school for children 4-19 with learning difficulties).

We are very grateful to all the organisations that encouraged their young members to take part in the questionnaire, including the British Youth Council and the NSPCC.

## Online peer support

You told us that you think that it is very important that websites and apps should be **private** and that the information they hold should be protected. You want to be confident that what you share is **anonymous**.

They should be **clear, factual** and **non-stigmatising** and you want to feel confident about the quality of the website and the integrity of the people you discuss issues with.

Adults also want to be reassured that the information and advice websites or apps give is **accurate, reliable** and **appropriate**.

The research shows that a key benefit of on-line good programmes can be the anonymity. Some studies suggest that this might particularly appeal to boys, who typically are less likely than girls to seek face-to-face professional help.

**Peer support programmes need to be carefully planned and set-up.**

Young people should be included in the design and development of programmes, which should be flexible regarding where and when they take place.

There should be a range of peer support programmes available so that organisations are able to choose an approach that is suitable for them. There should be pilots to test what works well.

The language used needs to be considered sensitively and schools, colleges and youth organisations should plan how they will encourage children and young people to want to take part.

**Comprehensive, ongoing training and support is vital.**

Virtually all the young people and the adults who responded to the online questionnaire thought training important. It should be high quality and appropriate for those involved and include the issues of confidentiality, safeguarding, role boundaries and ways of getting more specialist support when needed.

Training should occur before the support is launched and should continue throughout the programme. It should be in addition to a 'whole organisation' approach to the importance of good mental health and wellbeing.

Research shows that successful projects have good quality structured training for both the adult co-ordinators and the young peer mentors.

### **Recognition and rewards may increase involvement**

Young people said the most important recognition would be the ability to be able to refer to their peer support skills on their CV, college or UCAS application. However younger children felt recognition from school was the most important reward that they could be given.

Three quarters of adults also felt that having some kind of recognition or reward for the skills developed being a peer supporter would encourage young people to take part. These skills include valuable life-skills such as listening, problem-solving, empathy and negotiation.

### **Good links with specialist mental health services are vital**

There was widespread agreement that it is vitally important that any peer support system is fully integrated into a wider system of support so that any problems can be escalated and that support from a trained professional is available when necessary.

While peer support can be a helpful early intervention, the research review found that ensuring there are good links between it and other support services is a critical factor in the success of programmes.

Committed adult support and supervision of the peer mentors is vital so that young people are confident they know where to go to get further help and support.

### **As with anything there are potential risks if done badly**

The adults asked about this felt that the greatest risks to creating a successful programme would be if there was inadequate training, support and supervision of those providing the peer support. They were also concerned about safeguarding, confidentiality and ensuring children and young people have the right knowledge or experience to support their peers.

The research review also found that with peer support programmes that have been set-up before, the school or organisation needs to make sure that the leadership need to agree that it is important for it to be successful. They need to ensure it is regarded as a good thing and that enough young people want to take part.