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Setting-up and delivering peer support for mental health and wellbeing in schools, colleges and youth organisations

Lessons learned from a pilot programme evaluation

February 2020

Laurie Day, Diarmid Campbell-Jack and Erica Bertolotto.

What works for peer support?

Having a dedicated (physical) space for peer support

Head teacher and senior leadership team buy-in

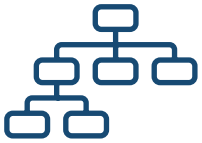
A supportive wider professional network

Empowering young people to lead and manage the local programme

Setting and managing clear expectations for the peer mentor role

Acknowledging and rewarding the time contributed by mentors

Engaging mentees through discussion, debate and interaction



Ensuring that the activities are flexible and match YP's interests.

Introduction

About this report

This summary report is for schools, colleges and youth organisations who are considering setting-up peer support or improving an existing programme. It is based on the learning from an independent evaluation of the Peer Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing Pilots, which was carried out by Ecorys on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) from 2018-19[1].

The authors would like to thank the staff, children and young people, and parents and carers who took part, as well as the policy and research teams from the DfE and colleagues from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, without whom the research would not have been possible.

Also available:

Full Research Report

Research Brief

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Who took part in the programme and evaluation?

764

Children and young people assessed using psychometric measures of resilience and emotional wellbeing at pre and post intervention

15

Number of schools, colleges, youth and community organisations taking part as case studies for the evaluation

169

Number of staff, children and young people, parents and carers taking part in the qualitative research

About the pilot programme

The DfE launched the Peer Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing Pilots in early 2018, to identify how schools, colleges and youth organisations can set up and deliver peer support to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The programme gave flexibility for organisations to deliver models of their own design, while including eight elements that were highlighted as important in an evidence review[2].

These included:

a. A selection process for mentors
b. Training for mentors
c. Adult supervision of the service
d. Senior Leadership Team (SLT) engagement
e. Whole school promotion of the service
f. Monitoring and evaluation of service
g. Programme sustainability
h. Clear signposting and pathways to further specialist support where necessary

The DfE appointed the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) as their delivery partner to oversee the programme, following a competitive tendering process. This role included the recruitment, management and delivery of training and support. In total, 100 successful pilot organisations were selected from six English regions: **East Sussex, Ipswich, Derby, Oldham, West Midlands** and **Bradford.**

Five core principles of peer support

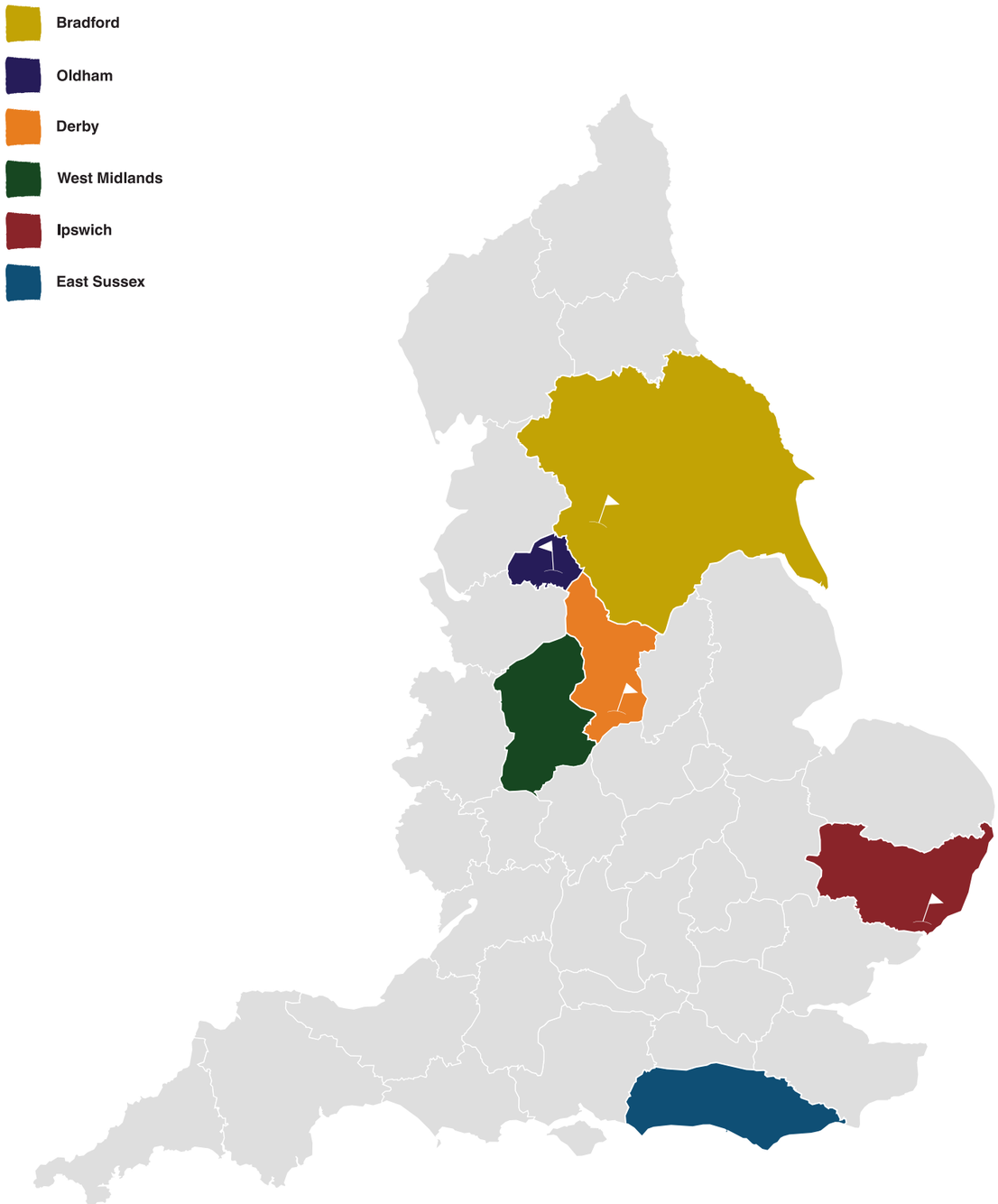
Each organisation received evidence-informed training and resources to help them to develop a peer mentoring programme tailored to their individual setting. These were based on five core principles:

1. WORK WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE AT; BE CREATIVE IN HOW YOU ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE
2. INVOLVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE; THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT MENTOR AND MENTEE RECRUITMENT
3. FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS; BUILD TRUST TO CREATE SPACE FOR CHANGE
4. ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE'S OWNERSHIP; COLLABORATE, CO-DESIGN, AND CO-PRODUCE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE
5. BE SAFE AND BOUNDARIED; ENSURE MENTORS ARE ADEQUATELY TRAINED AND SUPERVISED

The pilot organisations were responsible for recruiting and training their peer mentors, recruiting and matching mentors with mentees, and providing evidence for the evaluation. Delivery took place between April 2018 and March 2019.

The supporting training materials for pilot organisations are available online here: **Training materials.**

Location of the pilot schools and youth organisations (England)



Why offer peer support for mental health and wellbeing?

Potential benefits of offering peer support in schools, colleges and youth organisations

Most pilot organisations had a wide range of other emotional wellbeing and mental health support in place and were advocates for this area of work, but most also saw peer support as adding something new or different.

The main aims for involvement in the pilot were to equip staff and young people with the skills and confidence to deliver high quality peer support, and to meet unmet need. Some organisations also saw potential benefits with regard to tackling stigma, and easing pressure on pastoral staff in responding to moderate mental health difficulties.

What are the benefits?

- **Building strong and healthy peer relationships**
- **Developing empathy, listening and communication skills**
- **Empowering children and young people to take ownership of their mental health and wellbeing**
- **Building capacity for preventative mental health and wellbeing, alongside professional support**
- **Supporting whole school approaches to tackling stigma relating to mental health**

A growing evidence base...

In the UK, research has shown that peer tutoring can help raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, as part of a whole school approach[3]. Evidence from America shows that supportive peer relationships in the last year of primary school have a strong influence on school adjustment at ages 11-14[4].

There is also an increasingly strong case for peer-led approaches to support children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health[5]. A recent academic review concluded that peer mentoring is associated with mentor outcomes such as increased self-reflection, self-awareness, and improved interpersonal and communication skills[6].

The review identified five common characteristics of effective mentoring programmes:

- **A** RECRUITING MENTEES WITH INTERMEDIATE LEVELS OF DIFFICULTIES
- **B** PROVIDING ONGOING TRAINING AND SUPPORT TO MENTORS
- **C** MATCHING MENTORS AND MENTEES ON PERSONALITY STYLES
- **D** FOSTERING AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR–MENTEE RELATIONSHIP
- **E** ROUTINE OUTCOME MONITORING TO ENSURE CONTINUAL EVALUATION

Recruitment and matching of peer mentors and mentees

Setting-up a programme, and raising awareness

Pilot organisations took steps to engage with staff, young people and parents and carers, using multiple channels to ensure a broad base of support. These included special assemblies; social media and newsletters; staff briefings, and letters and meetings with parents and carers. Some recruited working groups of young people to take the lead.

The wider organisational climate and attitudes towards mental health influenced take-up for peer support within any given setting. Some organisations set up their pilot as part of a 'whole school' approach to challenge negative attitudes towards mental health, alongside campaigns and awareness days.

Mentor and mentee recruitment commonly included:

- **an open application process** for mentors, followed by an interview to test their motivation, maturity and expectations.
- **looking beyond the usual suspects,** to provide mentoring opportunities to young people with challenging behaviours, or with past experiences of friendship or family difficulties.
- **asking all staff to identify potential mentees,** combined with opportunities for self-referrals once trust is established, e.g. via informal drop-ins, or confidential "worry box".

Case Study

Young people taking ownership of the pilot

One primary school had experienced a disappointing initial take-up for their peer mentoring pilot, after first raising awareness through assemblies and setting in place a feelings box for children to register their interest in speaking with a mentor.

Staff convened the group of Year 6 mentors and held a brainstorming session to agree what could be done. The mentors pooled their ideas, and came up with a plan to re-brand the pilot as the "Talk it Out Team". They chose to use some of the pilot funding to design a set of roller banners to display around the school, and to design sweatshirts for the mentors to wear. They also helped to convert a small storage/copy room into a peer mentoring room, selecting the furniture and repainting the meeting area.

This activity attracted attention from other children within the school. The pilot lead reflected that it was the children's ideas, energy and enthusiasm that really got the pilot support off the ground.

Matching mentors and mentees

During the pilot, mentors and mentees were most commonly matched based on shared interests, age and gender. Mentors were usually older than mentees by at least one year, to provide maturity and experience, while schools avoided year groups with heavy academic commitments such as Y6 and Y11.

Matching was often perceived to be most successful when led by young people and combined with informal group activities to build rapport. Matches brokered by staff could also be effective, however, where personalities and shared experiences were established in advance.

A number of pilots also involved Year 7 or Year 8 students supporting Year 6s from feeder primaries transitioning to Key Stage 3. Where this was the case, it proved important to coordinate timetables well in advance between the different schools, and ensuring continuity in the relationships established prior to transition stage, so that mentor and mentee pairings continued after the start of the new term.

There was considerable overlap in what young people looked for in a peer mentor. Confidentiality and privacy was a main theme. The 11+ group placed a greater emphasis on listening skills and being non-judgemental, while trustworthiness and being sensible were emphasised by the under 11s.

Most important qualities of a peer mentor

Delivering peer support

Choosing a delivery model

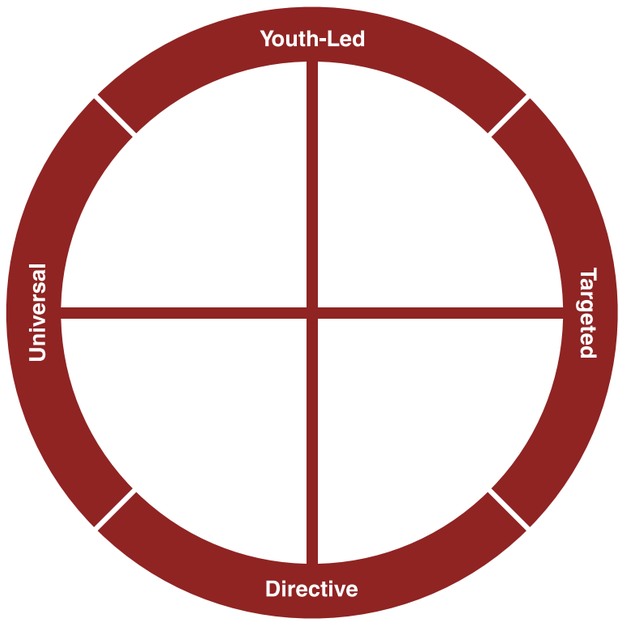
Peer support was delivered in a variety of formats during the pilot programme, from group sessions with whole classes or year groups, to drop-ins, and ongoing one-to-ones. Overall, the models were defined as much by their ethos as by their structure. This centred on whether peer support was run by staff as an intervention for young people, or whether it was run and delivered by young people on their terms. It involved decisions about the extent to which peer support was targeted or made open to all.

The models that emerged during the pilots varied along these lines, as follows:

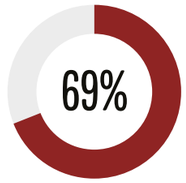
- At one end of the scale, peer mentors were trained to support their peers with specific difficulties (e.g. anxiety, or self-harm recovery). This approach proved best suited to local programmes that aimed to position peer support as a more formal 'intervention'.
- At the other end, pilots created secure spaces for young people to meet and interact open-endedly, with one-to-one matches taking place over a period of time. This approach proved best suited to local programmes where the aims were more around creating a supportive school environment and building trust.

In practice, the most suitable model often emerged following a period of testing and experimentation. When setting up peer support, a development phase is recommended.

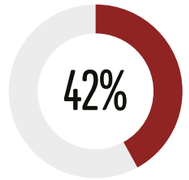
Dimensions of peer support for mental health and wellbeing



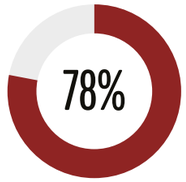
Key characteristics of the pilot delivery models



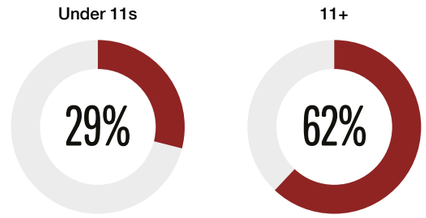
Proportion of peer mentees reporting weekly contact with their peer mentor



Proportion of pilot organisations combining combined one-to-one support with group-based delivery



Proportion of young people of secondary school age (11+) reporting that peer support took place during the school day



Proportion of organisations offering group-based peer support

"When starting out the programme within the school we had a clear idea of what we wanted it to look like. However, this idea is now not the programme we run within the school. The programme has evolved on its own through the lead of the children that have been taking part and their needs. Make the programme fully child-centred by letting them lead the way."

(Pilot lead, Primary School)

"She [Youth Worker] gave us space to do it ourselves. She gave us the office and this room and she like let us get on with it. She didn't like control us"

(Female, 15, Mentor)

Supervision, support and training

Peer mentor training and development

The evaluation explored the training and development offered to peer mentors. The materials developed by the delivery contractor generally provided a good foundation, and were adapted to meet the needs of each setting. However, young people identified that more role-play and practical exercises would have been useful to prepare for the scenarios they encountered, and strategies for engaging with younger age groups.

A few pilots opted for an extended training format. One secondary school delivered a two-day programme, involving Healthy Schools, and two organisations delivered the training off-site with an external provider. This helped to raise the profile of the role, and to show mentors that their development was being taken seriously.

Training provided for peer mentors

Supervision and safeguarding

"I felt a bit uncomfortable, because I know that's not right… I talked to [pilot lead] and it got sorted out. I know if there's any other problem I can talk to her."

(F, 14, Mentee)

The **safeguarding** aspects of peer support were central to the pilots, and safety and confidentiality were key factors affecting young people's willingness to take part. It is important to ensure that safeguarding is embedded within training for peer mentors, and that young people of all ages are aware of their reporting responsibilities.

"As part of the mentor's personal development, it is very important to critically reflect during supervision on the issues that the mentors have covered and explore how the issues were resolved and if there were any other possible resolutions."

(Pilot lead, Primary School)

Structured **supervision** is also fundamental aspect of any peer support programme, which requires careful consideration from the outset. Peer mentors at secondary stage in particular were mindful of the impact on their wellbeing, and professional oversight was important to ensure they were not taking on too much responsibility.

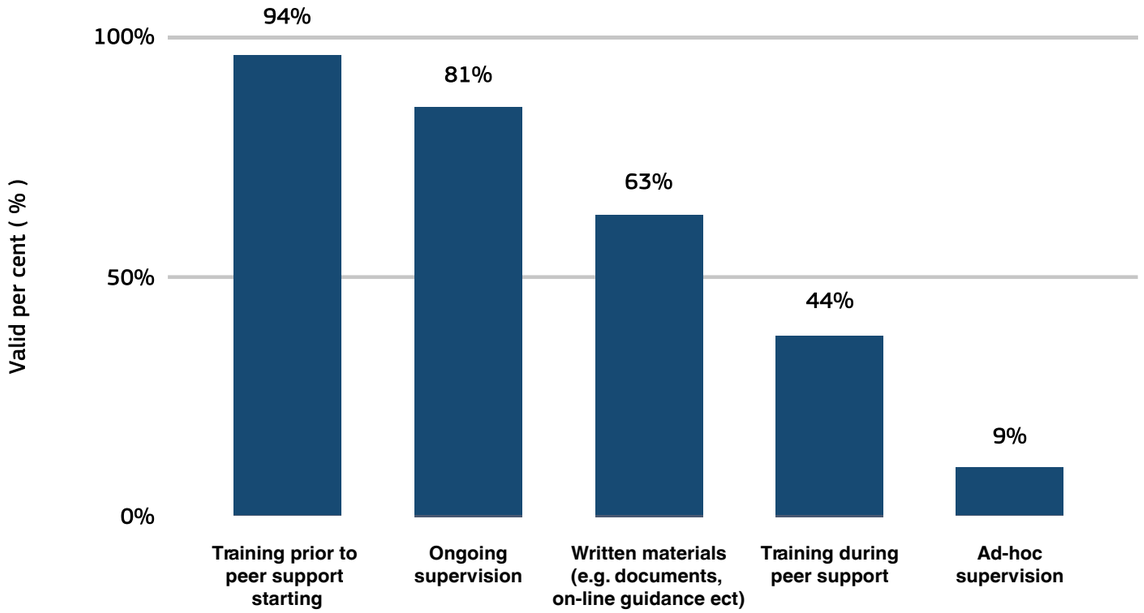
Case Study

Supervision and support - primary

One primary school adopted a wraparound model of supervision, which was used to plan, review and continuously improve delivery:

- Adult supervision was carried out systematically at the weekly sessions, with the pilot lead available to support the mentors and to provide advice and assistance.
- Before each session began, the mentors and Lead would meet to discuss the issues that might have arisen and how they could help.
- The Lead was available during the session, and chaired a circle time debrief afterwards.
- The mentors were also given time after each session to talk to raise any concerns or worries that had arisen, one-to-one.

Types of support and supervision implemented for mentors



QA8 (Pilot Leads: Follow-Up) Which of the following types of support and supervision did you implement for peer mentors?

Base (total sample): 32

Enablers for successful peer support programmes

The evaluation highlighted a number of enablers for setting up and running peer support programmes, which were common to schools, colleges and youth organisations taking part in the pilots.

Having a dedicated (physical) space for peer support

While peer support was playground-based in some primaries, most pilot organisations had secured regular access to a confidential space such as a classroom, common room, or youth centre premises (for CYPCOs).

This was considered important to provide a 'home' for the peer support, and to allow privacy for the participants.

Head teacher and senior leadership team buy-in

The engagement of senior managers made a real difference to the pace and scale at which the pilots were rolled out.

Where senior managers held reservations, it was sometimes necessary to sell the potential benefits, and to reassure about the measures to manage the 'risk' associated with peers discussing mental health issues.

A supportive wider professional network

In schools, the pilot lead often liaised with heads from the participating year groups and with pastoral teams to identify and recruit participants.

Having this wider network created regular opportunities to raise awareness. It also tapped expertise for mental health, SEN, and behavioural support when this was needed.

Empowering young people to lead and manage the local programme

Where young people's participation was meaningful, this benefited all stages of the pilots – from challenging preconceptions of what the mentor / mentee roles should look like, to devising suitable training materials, to listening to young people's feedback and making adjustments where activities were missing the mark.

Enablers for successful peer support programmes

Setting and managing clear expectations for the peer mentor role

Mentor recruitment and retention was assisted by setting realistic expectations from the outset about the responsibilities of the role. This was often reinforced with a light touch ‘interview’ process of some kind.

In turn, the opportunity to take extra responsibility, share experiences and to receive training and support offered suitable incentives to participate.

Acknowledging and rewarding the time contributed by mentors

Pilot organisations often created badges or insignia to raise the profile of the mentors, and used presentations, assemblies, awards and certificates to show mentors that they were valued.

This visible celebration of the role was an important way to encourage other young people to step forward, as well as tackling the stigma surrounding the pilot.

Engaging mentees through discussion, debate and interaction

Activities often worked well where there was no fixed expectation of matching as an outcome, and where the group activity had value in its own right. This allowed time and space for mentors and mentees to explore shared interests.

Once matches had formed, mentors and mentees valued regular contact to allow relationships to develop.

Ensuring that the activities are flexible and match YP’s interests.

Feedback from pilots indicated that young people were more engaged where they had the opportunity to decide what activities would be undertaken in group mentoring sessions, and to allow flexibility to vary the format to keep it engaging. This regularly included the use of creative arts and sporting activities.

Outcomes from peer support

Most helpful/best things about being supported (mentees)

Positive reinforcement

Reassurance provided about their strengths, and their self-worth, whether in general: **“tells me I am special, and smart”**, or in relation to something they found difficult: **“helped me to keep confident with friendship groups”**.

Help with specific difficulties

Satisfaction that the mentor had helped them to make changes to their situation, where this was needed: **“how to overcome bullying”**, and **“helped me to get through hard times”** with a terminally ill family member.

Having someone to turn to

The knowledge that the mentor was always there for them, and the confidence boost that this provided **“I had someone to rely on, so I felt happy”**, and **“If I needed to talk to someone, they were there for me”**.

Listening, without judgement

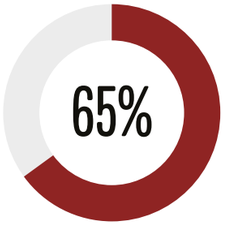
Feeling able to speak openly to the mentor and taken seriously: **“she listens to anything I say, and I can tell her stuff”**, and reacting well: **“she understood me and kept calm… she didn’t explode with rage”**.

Advice, or a second opinion

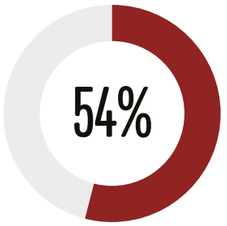
There were a number of specific mentions of the mentor **“talking advice”**, **“they gave me good advice”**, and **“advice, and tools given”**, among other responses.

Outcomes from the pilots

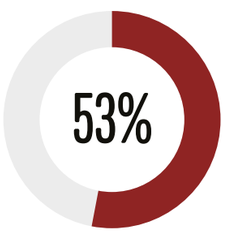
Young people participating as mentors or mentees self-reported a wide range of outcomes relating to their personal development, as well as their knowledge and awareness of mental health issues affecting their peers.



Proportion of over 11’s reporting that the pilot ‘helped a lot’ with listening and understanding other people’s thoughts and feelings.



Proportion of over 11s reporting that the pilot ‘helped a lot’ with their communication skills.



Proportion of over 11s reporting that the pilot ‘helped a lot’ with their understanding of mental health issues affecting children and young people.

Case studies

Case Study

Peer support for year 6 to 7 transition

The pilot organisation (an urban secondary school) had identified rising numbers of young people in the year 7 intake with anxiety in recent years. This had resulted in unnecessary disruption during the first term, with learning time being lost. The school identified an opportunity to use the pilot to intervene earlier in year 6 to support transitions, with a focus on wellbeing.

Overview of the model

The school aimed to provide mentor training to year 7 students, who would return to their previous primary school as mentors for year 6 students. There were three stages:

- The mentors undertook a visit in the summer term, to talk about how they felt about secondary school, what the transition had been like, their aspirations, and to answer questions. This was followed by a 'Transition Day' for the year 6 students to undertake orientation, during which they spent time with the mentors.

- The school ran a summer school programme during the first week of the holidays, which was attended by the peer mentors and involved arts, craft and sports to help further build relationships prior to the start of the academic year.

- Finally, one-to-one mentoring went ahead in the autumn. The matching process was undertaken with the aim of supporting the 15-20 students who stood to benefit the most from peer support

Lessons learned

Overall, the model was felt to have met expectations. The staff and mentors agreed that they had a better idea of the support needs of young people in the new intake, having engaged with them pre-transition and taken time to build rapport. The summer school activities had worked particularly well - partly because they were activity-based and broke the ice, but also because they allowed the young people to meet on neutral territory and helped to address a lack of suitable meeting space within the schools.

The pilot also highlighted some key practical considerations. It was found that visit dates that work best for the primary school may not align with the timetable for the mentors in secondary, so the schools agreed to plan earlier for the following year.

Case Study

Group-based support within a community setting

The pilot organisation is a voluntary youth club, which is attended by around 20 girls and 30/40 boys aged 11-18 years in an inner city area with a large South Asian community. The pilot lead described how the centre aims to support young people's personal development and wellbeing, as well as providing access to arts and cultural activities. The decision was taken to run the pilot with the girls in the first instance – there been some tensions within the group, and peer support was seen as an opportunity to bring the girls together as well as strengthening their support system.

Setting-up peer support

The youth workers wanted young people to lead the sessions. They had initially envisaged mentor/mentee pairings, and had allocated two rooms on the premises for the meetings. Having held an initial planning session, however, the girls opted for drop-in sessions with a more informal feel, along with more spontaneous conversations outside of scheduled drop-ins. Staff running the sessions described feeling able to take a step back, confident that the key messages around safeguarding and confidentiality had been taken on board, and to let the young people run the pilot.

Development of the model

Over the course of the programme, staff, parents and young people commented on the improvements to the cohesion and relationships among girls within the group. The young people identified how they felt there was an understanding that anyone within the group could look to each other for advice, and to discuss issues about relationships which they would not feel comfortable discussing with adults.

There was also an acknowledgement that the peer support gave the girls a positive outlet to have conversations about mental health – a topic carrying stigma within the local community.

"One thing that you will find with mental health, a lot of people will be in denial in our culture. They won't be believe it still… The new generation coming up is more open to things. So I think [peer support] is a really good way of doing it."

(Parent)

Case studies

Case Study

Working with whole year groups

The pilot organisation is a secondary school in an urban area, with a ten-form intake. The school was already running a year 7 transition project, to prepare incoming students for secondary school life, and to reduce levels of fear and anxiety. One of the themes identified was that students wanted to see: “a friendly face, first thing in the morning” at the start of the school day.

Overview of the model

The school trained 10 sixth formers as peer mentors, one of whom was attached to each of the year 7 form groups. The peer mentor attended the form group for 20 minutes per day, as part of a wellbeing session. A semi-informal approach was adopted, with the peer mentor chatting with students, allowing them to start discussing their feelings. This included some targeted work to engage with students with known emotional difficulties.

The form teacher was also present. The model was possible because of the daily time allocated to PSHE, as part of tutor time. Based on observations and reporting through supervision, staff running the pilot indicated that students had become increasingly willing to “open up” during their contact time about any fears or concerns. There were also a number of referrals made to the pastoral team for light touch ‘interventions’ afterwards, including enrolments on a befriending programme.

Future plans

The school aimed to continue the model as a rolling programme, so that the mentors follow the students through from Y7 to Y8, at which point other wellbeing support is available at Key Stage 4. If this proves successful, each intake will see a new cohort of peer mentees, and a new cohort of peer mentors will be identified and trained in Y11, who will follow their assigned mentees over two years before the cycle starts again. The model would ensure that all Y7 and Y8 pupils have access to peer mentoring.

Case Study

Playground buddies – using non-verbal communication to facilitate peer mentoring

The pilot organisation (a primary special school) aimed to develop a structured model for peer support, building on more spontaneous befriending and support between children in the playground. The PSHE coordinator took the lead, supported by lunchtime organisers and Teaching Assistants, with oversight by the Head-teacher.

Overview of the model

The model developed by the school was based on a buddying system, with mentors nominated by class teachers and made available to their peers during break time and lunchtime periods, following initial training about what makes for a good ‘buddy’.

A buddy bench was installed in the playground, along with communication boards (‘buddy boards’). These enabled the children to use pictures or symbols to show how they were feeling, and to indicate whether they would like help from a mentor. Staff overseeing the pilot felt that the boards had “…given the children a voice… a way to express themselves when they’re outside”. Mentees were also nominated by teachers using classroom observation. Staff overseeing the pilot subsequently discussed and agreed upon a suitable match, which was usually based on shared interests.

At the time when the case study visit took place, the school was also planning to run Friday afternoon activities for mentors and mentees, to build on the more informal playground contact with arts and crafts, sports and other child-nominated activities.

Lessons learned

The training materials designed for mainstream settings required quite significant adaptation to meet the needs of children with learning difficulties. A ‘talk’ based model was replaced by one based more around non-verbal communication, which staff considered to have been necessary within their setting. The early signs were positive: staff commented on children communicating more effectively with support from the communication boards, and gaining in independence. These interactions had also helped staff to observe and understand the dynamic between children in the setting.

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This report is based on the learning from an independent evaluation of the Peer Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing Pilots, which was carried out by Ecorys on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) from 2018-19.

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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Lessons learned from a pilot programme evaluation

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