

The Professional School Counselor and Peer Helping (Adopted 1978; Revised 1984, revised 1993, 1999, 2002, 2008)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

ASCA believes that peer-helping programs are one means of helping students reach a higher level of maturity and accepting responsibility. Peer-helping programs are implemented to enhance the effectiveness of school counseling programs by increasing outreach and the expansion of available services.

The Rationale

Peer helping includes a variety of interpersonal helping behaviors assumed by nonprofessionals who seek to assist others through such activities as one-to-one helping relationships, group leadership, discussion leadership, tutoring and other activities of an interpersonal helping nature. A peer helper is a person who assists persons of approximately the same age who share related values, experiences and lifestyles. Students often communicate their problems to their peers rather than to parents, administrators or school counselors. Peers can be selected and trained by professional school counselors in the areas of communication and helping skills through a carefully planned peer helping program. Peer-helping programs seek to enhance the effectiveness of the school counseling program by increasing outreach and raising student awareness of services. Through proper selection, training and supervision, peer helping can be a positive influence within the school and community. Additionally, peer counselors increase their own personal growth and gain exposure to possible future occupations in the helping professions. Research on peer-helping programs generally indicates that such programs are moderately helpful when focused on assisting students with social, academic or personal problems (McGannon, Carey, & Dimmitt, 2005; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Additionally, peer facilitators also derive positive benefits from peer-helping programs (McGannon et al., 2005).

The Peer Helper's Role

Properly trained peer helpers provide a variety of useful and helpful services for schools:

- One-to-one assistance: Talking with students about personal or school problems, referring to community resources or providing information about the school's counseling program.
- Group settings: Serving as group leaders, group counseling assistants, teachers of helping skills to other students, communication skills trainers or peer helper trainers.
- Educational functions: Tutoring in academic areas, serving as readers for nonreaders or assisting special education consultants in working with learning and behaviorally disabled students.
- Hospitality: Welcoming and guiding new students and their parents around the school.
- Outreach: Helping increase the services of the school counseling programs, serving as listeners or as a resource for populations that may feel uncomfortable talking with the professional school counselor or reducing crisis situations by alerting professional school counselors to problems of a serious nature.

The Professional School Counselor's Role

The professional counselor accepts responsibility for determining the needs of the school population and for implementing a peer helping program designed to meet those needs. Professional school counselors devise a selection plan for peer helpers compatible with the population to be served; coordinate an appropriate training program; schedule adequate time to work with peer helpers on an ongoing basis for continued training, supervision, sharing and personal growth; construct a support system through positive, honest public relations; and continually monitor, evaluate and adjust the program and training to meet the assessed needs of the population it serves. The professional school counselor accepts responsibility for the design, completion and evaluation of the peer-helping program. Results should be reported to the population served and other school stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents, community).

Summary

Well-trained peer helpers can have a positive, supportive effect upon students that no one else can provide. Students can relate to and accept suggestions for alternative patterns of behavior from peers who are struggling with similar feelings and problems. Peer helpers increase the services of the school counseling program in an outreach function and are an invaluable part of a comprehensive school counseling program.