## Module 8: Peer support systems

**Objective/s:**

• Promote peer-to-peer support programs that empower students to address bullying.
• Train teachers to supervise and facilitate these programs.

**Summary of content:**

• Establishing peer mentoring and buddy systems.
• Training students as peer mediators and anti-bullying ambassadors.
• Empowering bystanders: building students' confidence to intervene safely.
• How to foster a sense of community and shared responsibility in the classroom.
• Assessing and improving peer support program effectiveness.

### Lesson 1. Establishing peer mentoring and buddy systems

#### What is peer mentoring?

Peer mentoring involves structured initiatives where older or more experienced students take on the role of mentors, building supportive relationships and becoming positive role models for younger or less experienced peers in need of guidance and advice. This support system is especially effective in reducing bullying, as mentors guide mentees toward responsible decision-making and respect for others, reinforcing a school culture rooted in empathy, inclusion, and mutual support. (Houlston et al, 2009).

A growing body of research is showing that the role of peer mentoring can greatly extend beyond academic outcomes and into positive psychological growth. Also, Cowie (2014) informed that peer support has also been of value, when it comes to bullying intervention; the adoption of peer support within schools can create opportunities for children and young people to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it.

#### What does a peer mentor do?

- Peer mentors aim to inspire hope, helping students realize they can overcome challenges and thrive
- Mentors walk alongside others as they navigate the challenges of recovery from bullying, offering guidance and understanding.
- Peer mentors work to dispel myths and misconceptions about the impact of being targeted or involved in bullying and promote a culture of acceptance and resilience.
- Peer mentoring encourages self-empowerment by sharing strategies and resources that promote coping and healing.
- Mentors support others in identifying personal goals, hopes, and aspirations and help create a path toward achieving these objectives in a positive and supportive school environment.

- This mentoring relationship helps build a foundation of trust and connection, essential for fostering a safer, more inclusive atmosphere for all students (Terrion et al, 2007).

**What is a buddy system?**

Similar to peer mentoring, this is a simple association system where two students are partners to support each other. It focuses on helping newly arrived students who need emotional support and to adapt to the new environment.

It focuses on providing friendly and informal support. The main goal is for students not to feel isolated and to have a trusted colleague to turn to. Usually short- or medium-term, and more relaxed and less structured than peer mentoring (O'Donnell et al, 1979).

**What does a buddy do?**

- A buddy helps new students integrate into the school environment. By supporting newcomers in adapting to their new surroundings, buddies reduce feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, which lowers the risk of these students becoming targets of bullying.
- A buddy can offer comfort and friendship to students who might be targets of bullying, helping them feel valued and less isolated.
- Buddies are often trained to recognize signs of bullying and know how to report it to teachers or staff members. This helps ensure that incidents are addressed promptly and appropriately.
- Buddies can walk with their partner to and from classes or spend time with them during recess or lunch to deter potential bullies from targeting someone who appears alone (McCaleb et al, 2023)

**Benefits of peer mentoring and buddy system**

- Increased self-esteem and confidence
- Increased sense of control and ability to bring about changes in their life
- Increased sense of hope and inspiration
- Increased empathy and acceptance
- Increased social support and functioning
- An easy school life
- Relational improvements
- Sense of belonging (Cowie et al, 2005; Hurst, 2001)

In a study conducted to assess whether peer support and buddy system has an effect, mentees reported that it significantly influenced their sense of belonging and personal development.
*„Being able to talk to somebody who's been through all of that, and who's hap- willing to say how nervous he was […] that helped a lot because I didn't feel I was different and as worried."*
*„Just sort of the little tips and stuff that my mentor would give me. Like, because it's the smallest things that help like, that help me like get on with the biggest, th- the biggest problems that I have."* (Stapley et al, 2022).

**How to establish a peer mentoring and buddy system?**

**Set clear objectives**
Establish that the goal is to reduce incidents of bullying, promote a supportive school environment, and empower students to address conflicts constructively. Clarify that the program should lead to increased empathy, conflict resolution skills, and a positive school culture.

**Identify the mentors**
Choose mentors/buddies who are empathetic, responsible, and respected by their peers. Ensure a mix of mentors from different backgrounds to relate to a broader range of mentees.

**Match mentors and mentees**
Pair mentors/buddies and mentees based on shared interests, age groups, or needs to build trust. Maintain the privacy of students' information and concerns.

**Provide training and resources**
Train mentors/buddies to recognize different forms of bullying (physical, verbal, and cyberbullying). Teach active listening, empathy, and constructive feedback. Equip mentors with tools for mediation and de-escalation. Also, set up a protection system for mentors and buddies, to empower them to protect others without fear of retaliation. Provide some rewards for students in the program, to increase motivation to be a part of the mentors' community in the school.

**Establish clear guidelines**
Create a handbook or brochure that outlines what mentors/buddies are expected to do, including listening without judgment and guiding mentees to helpful resources. Emphasize boundaries to prevent mentors/buddies from becoming over-involved in complex situations. Ensure mentors/buddies know how to report issues to school counselors and teachers.

**Facilitate regular check-ins**
Plan regular one-on-one or group sessions for mentors/buddies and mentees. Create forums for mentors to share experiences and seek advice. Have a counselor or teacher oversee sessions to offer additional support.

**Evaluate**
Use surveys and informal check-ins to gather feedback from mentors/buddies and mentees. Measure changes in reported bullying incidents and student wellbeing. Refine the program based on feedback and results (Cornelius et al, 2016).

**What qualities should a peer mentor and a buddy have?**
- Empathy
- Patience
- Good communication skills
- Supportive

- Responsibility

**Reflection questions:**

- What do you think about the idea of implementing a peer mentoring program or a buddy system in your school?
- Do you believe that implementing these programs could make a difference in your school?

## Lesson 2. Training students as peer mediators and anti-bullying ambassadors

Conflicts are a regular part of school life, from disagreements over lunch seating or recess games to decisions about work and play. Yet, students often receive little guidance on resolving conflicts constructively. Telling them not to fight, without offering alternatives, rarely prevents disputes. Beyond physical fights, many other school conflicts also need resolution (Johnson et al, 1992).

Peer mediation is a structured process where a neutral and impartial third party, the mediator, helps two or more individuals in conflict work together to negotiate a constructive and peaceful resolution to their disagreement (Bickmore, 2002). Support is provided by trained peers who guide the resolution of conflicts in a neutral setting (Morarty și McDonals, 1991). During training, student mediators are taught to understand others' perspectives, communicate effectively, and apply problem-solving techniques (Messing, 1993). Peer mediation is said to enhance self-empowerment by allowing students to make decisions about issues and conflicts that impact their lives, fostering self-regulation, self-esteem, and independent decision-making (Johnson și Johnson, 1997).

Students are trained to become **peer meditators** through several steps:

**1. Understanding conflicts and their potential benefits**

Students learn to distinguish between what constitutes a conflict and what does not. They also explore how conflicts, when managed constructively, can lead to positive outcomes.

**2. Learning integrative negotiation skills**

Students are taught to resolve conflicts of interest by following these steps:

- **Expressing what they want:** Clearly state their needs using effective communication skills and frame the conflict as a specific and manageable mutual problem. For example, "I want to use the book now."
- **Describing how they feel:** Accurately identify and articulate their emotions. For example, "I'm frustrated."
- **Explaining the reasons for their wants and feelings:** Share the rationale behind their needs and emotions in a constructive way. For instance, "You've been using the book for an hour. If I don't get it soon, my report won't be finished on time. It's frustrating to wait so long."

- **Taking the other person's perspective:** Summarise their understanding of the other person's wants, feelings, and reasons. For example, "My understanding is that you…"
- **Proposing three possible solutions:** Suggest creative options that benefit both parties. For example, "Plan A is…, Plan B is…, Plan C is…"
- **Agreeing on the best course of action:** Finalise the agreement with mutual consent, such as a handshake or verbal commitment. For example, "Let's go with Plan B!"

The agreement should maximise joint benefits, enhance cooperation, and provide clear steps for future actions, including provisions for reviewing and revising the agreement if necessary.

**3. Learning mediation skills**

Students are trained to mediate conflicts between classmates by:

- **Ending hostilities and calming disputants:** Mediators ensure that both parties are calm and willing to engage in the process, sometimes initiating mediation themselves if needed.
- **Securing commitment to the mediation process:** Mediators confirm both parties are ready to negotiate in good faith, explaining the voluntary nature of mediation and setting ground rules, such as:
    1. Agree to solve the problem.
    2. No name-calling.
    3. Do not interrupt.
    4. Be honest.
    5. Abide by any agreed solution.
    6. Maintain confidentiality.
- **Guiding negotiation:** Mediators assist disputants in following the integrative negotiation process step by step.
- **Formalising the agreement:** Mediators document the resolution using a mediation report, which both parties sign. Mediators also follow up to ensure the agreement is upheld.

**4. Implementing the program**

Once students complete their training, the Peacemaker Programme is introduced:

- Each day, two students are selected to act as official mediators.
- They wear identifying T-shirts, patrol areas like the playground and lunchroom, and are available to mediate classroom and school conflicts.
- The role of mediator rotates among all students to ensure equal participation.
- If peer mediation is unsuccessful, the conflict escalates progressively to the teacher, and, if necessary, the headteacher for resolution.

**5. Ongoing training and skill development**

Students continue to receive training throughout the school year to refine and enhance their negotiation and mediation skills, ensuring they remain effective peacemakers in their school community (Johnson și Johnson, 2001).

**Anti-bullying ambasadors**

An anti-bullying ambassador is a student who watches out for bullying, offers support to those being bullied, and serves as a listening ear for anyone who wants to talk about their concerns, providing a safe space outside of adults.

**Qualities of an anti-bullying ambassador include:**

- **Empathy:** The ability to understand and share the feelings of others, which allows them to recognize signs of bullying and support those affected.
- **Effective communication:** Being able to actively listen, offer emotional support, and communicate clearly without judgment.
- **Patience**: Demonstrating patience in providing support to bullying victims and giving them time to express their feelings and concerns.
- **Responsibility**: Being aware of their role and committed to creating a safe and positive school environment for all students.
- **Leadership qualities**: Inspiring others, motivating, and encouraging peers to contribute to bullying prevention efforts.
- **Courage**: Having the courage to intervene when bullying is observed and to speak out against negative behaviors.
- **Compassion**: Showing compassion towards bullying victims and being willing to offer help and encouragement (Hawker et al, 2000)

To teach students how to become anti-bullying ambassadors involves a series of steps that focus on building empathy, communication skills, confidence, and a sense of responsibility:

**1. Introduce the concept**

Start with a class discussion about bullying, what it is, and why it's harmful. Use video clips, stories, or role-playing scenarios to illustrate different types of bullying (verbal, physical, relational). For example, show a video depicting a scenario of a student being bullied in school, followed by a group discussion on feelings, actions, and possible interventions.

**2. Develop empathy**

Engage students in activities like "walk a mile in their shoes," where they role-play being the victim of bullying. Another activity could involve reading a book or story about a character who faces bullying, followed by a group discussion about the character's feelings and the impact on their well-being (Bezerra et al, 2023).

**3. Communication skills**

Set up scenarios where bullying occurs, and practice how to respond. For instance, role-play a situation where a student is being bullied in the playground and another student steps in to

support. Discuss and debrief each role-play to analyze effective communication techniques and the impact of their actions.

**4. Build confidence and courage**
Create scenarios where students must practice intervening, such as a 'mock bullying situation' in a controlled environment. Activities like giving short presentations or leading a small group discussion can build their confidence in taking a stand against bullying.

**5. Empowerment and Responsibility**
Have students work on a project that addresses bullying, such as creating an anti-bullying poster campaign, organizing a school-wide awareness day, or leading a workshop for younger students about kindness and inclusion. These activities empower students by giving them a tangible role in bullying prevention (Ayala et al, 2012).

How can you encourage students to take responsibility for their actions in conflicts?
What are some simple ways to encourage students to support each other and speak out against bullying?

## Lesson 3 - Empowering bystanders: Building confidence to intervene safely

This lesson explores how bystanders can act as a support system for victims of bullying in schools, highlighting the psychological, social, and school climate factors that enable effective interventions.

### 1. Bystanders and the role they play in bullying prevention

Bystanders are one of the most effective, yet underutilized resources in the fight against school bullying. Bystanders, or witnesses to bullying, have an important role in determining the outcome of bullying occurrences (Doane et al., 2019). According to research, when bystanders react, the occurrence and impact of bullying is greatly reduced (Mazzone, 2020). However, many spectators are hesitant to intervene, fearing reprisal from the abuser, social marginalisation, or becoming the subject of additional bullying themselves (Ahmed, 2008). This hesitation to intervene significantly limits the effectiveness of anti-bullying measures.

Ahmed's (2008) study reveals numerous elements that increase bystander intervention. **School connectedness**, or students' sense of belonging within the school environment, is one of the strongest indicators. Students who feel strongly connected to their school and peers are more inclined to intervene in bullying situations, because they see bullying as a threat to their community's shared ideals.

Furthermore, **shame management** is a key factor in bystander behaviour. Students who recognise their personal responsibility and feel guilty for not intervening are more inclined to take action when they see bullying (Ahmed, 2008). Bystanders who engage in shame displacement, such as blaming others or ignoring the problem, are less likely to act (Ahmed, 2008).

The psychological side of bystander behaviour can be better understood via the perspective of **moral courage.** Dal Cason et al. (2020) found that bystanders with high moral beliefs, such as empathy and justice, are more inclined to interfere in bullying situations. Bystanders who do not feel morally required to intervene, or who see no direct threat to their own social status, are less inclined to take action.

**Class activity you can try with your students:**

This project will inspire students to think on their personal constructs (i.e., how they view others, themselves, and the environment) and confront any limiting assumptions that may impede them from becoming effective bystanders. Understanding their own structures allows adolescents to develop more adaptable, effective responses to bullying. This activity helps students explore their personal constructs and *how these beliefs shape their willingness and ability to intervene as bystanders.*

**What you will need:**

- A timer
- Scenario cards (pre-written instances including bullying),
- A whiteboard/flipchart, and markers.
- Prompted reflection sheets using George Kelly's Repertory Grid, a tool for understanding personal constructs.

**Instructions:**

**1. Introduction to personal construct psychology**

Briefly explain George Kelly's theory of Personal Construct Psychology. Discuss how people interpret and respond to the world based on personal constructs—mental frameworks we use to categorize and make sense of our experiences. These constructs are fluid and can be challenged or modified.

In the context of bystander behavior, we examine how students' constructs about bullying (e.g., "bullying is someone else's problem," "if I intervene, I will be rejected") influence their actions or inactions.

**Example of explanation:**

*"Today, we're going to talk about something really interesting called Personal Construct Psychology, which was developed by a psychologist named George Kelly. His theory helps us understand how we, as individuals, make sense of the world and the situations we encounter. Essentially, we all have mental frameworks—what Kelly called personal constructs—that shape how we view ourselves, others, and the events happening around us. These constructs are like invisible lenses through which we interpret and respond to life.*

*Let's think about this in the context of bullying. Imagine you witness someone being bullied. How you interpret that situation—whether you think it's your responsibility to intervene, whether you believe the bully is 'mean' or just 'looking for attention,' or whether you think the victim needs your help—*

*depends on the personal constructs you've developed. These constructs are shaped by your past experiences, your environment, and even your emotions.*

*Here's the cool part: Personal constructs aren't fixed. They can change, grow, and evolve as we gain new experiences or challenge our existing beliefs. For example, if you think, 'If I intervene, people will think I'm weak,' that's a personal construct. But what if you change that construct to, 'If I intervene, I'll be helping someone in need and showing strength'? That shift can completely change how you respond in a bullying situation.*

*What we're going to do today is explore our personal constructs—how we see the roles of the bully, the victim, and the bystander—and understand how these beliefs influence our actions. Once we've identified these constructs, we'll think about how we can challenge any that might hold us back from intervening and replace them with ones that empower us to take positive action. This will help us not only as individuals but also as a group in creating a safer, more supportive school environment."*

**2. Activity - Part 1 – Repertory grid exploration**

Ask students to think about their personal constructs regarding bullying and bystander behavior. Give them a list of prompts to guide their thinking:

- How do you see yourself in situations where you witness bullying?
- How do you perceive the bully in such situations? What kind of person do you think a bully is?
- How do you view the victim? What beliefs or judgments come up when you see someone being bullied?
- What does intervention look like to you? What fears or concerns might you have when thinking about intervening?

Next, students fill out a simplified version of Kelly's Repertory Grid:

- Write down three people or situations related to bullying: *the bully*, *the victim*, and *the bystander*.
- For each pair of roles (bully vs. victim, bully vs. bystander, victim vs. bystander), ask students to identify two contrasting constructs (e.g., for bully vs. victim: *threatening vs. vulnerable*).
- After completing the grid, ask students to reflect on how their personal constructs shape their understanding of these roles and behaviors.

**3. Activity- Part 2 – Role-playing intervention scenarios**

Divide the class into small groups (4-5 students per group). Give each group a scenario card depicting a bullying situation.

Using their personal constructs as a starting point, have students discuss how they might respond in the scenario. Ask them to focus on the constructs that might limit or enhance their ability to intervene (e.g., "If I intervene, I might be seen as weak" vs. "I can help the victim and show that it's important to stand up for others").

Each group should then perform a role-play of the intervention. The other students will observe, paying attention to how the intervening bystander uses their constructs to manage the situation (e.g., addressing the victim's feelings, confronting the bully calmly).

**4. Group reflection and challenging constructs**

After the role-plays, bring the class together for a discussion. On the whiteboard, draw two columns: *Limiting Constructs* vs. *Empowering Constructs*.

Ask students to share any limiting constructs they identified in themselves during the activity (e.g., "I'm afraid of retaliation," or "It's not my business") and write these on the whiteboard under *Limiting Constructs*.

Then, invite students to brainstorm alternative, more empowering constructs (e.g., "Intervening can help create a positive change," or "I can stand up without confronting the bully directly").

Discuss how shifting from limiting to empowering constructs can impact the likelihood of intervening in bullying situations.

**5. Activity - Part 3 – Reflection**

Give students a set of reflection prompts based on Kelly's concept of the "core role structure" (the patterns of behavior that are important to one's self-concept):

- How did your constructs about bullying (as a bystander, victim, or bully) affect your response during the role-play?
- In what ways can changing your constructs empower you to intervene when you witness bullying?
- Think about a time when you did or didn't intervene in a bullying situation. What constructs influenced your decision? What might have changed if you had a different construct in mind?
- Have students write brief reflections or share them in pairs.

## Lesson 4 - Fostering a sense of shared responsibility and community in the classroom

According to constructivism, shared responsibility and community-building occur organically as students learn to navigate and affect their social environment, rather than being imposed by teachers. Teachers can serve as facilitators, helping students co-create a strong classroom atmosphere. By portraying bullying as a group issue rather than an individual problem, kids begin to perceive themselves as active actors in building a supportive, respectful learning environment (Forsbergg, 2024). Below, we look at how a constructivist approach might build a feeling of shared responsibility and community in the classroom.

**Establishing norms collectively**

Norms and expectations are co-created with students rather than enforced by the teacher alone. A class discussion at the start of the year, in which students are invited to share their opinions on respect, inclusivity, and kindness, can serve as the foundation for developing a collective agreement on behaviour. Students use discourse to negotiate and refine beliefs about what behaviours are acceptable and what actions will not be tolerated (Shah, 2019).

Because students are active participants in the co-construing of classroom norms, they are able to internalise common ideals. It also promotes accountability, as students are more inclined to follow and keep the norms they helped set. In bullying situations, for example, students who helped to build community norms are more likely to feel obligated to intervene or seek aid. They recognise that protecting their peers is part of their shared responsibility (Milbrandt et al., 2004), which fosters a feeling of community and reduces the bystander effect.

**Peer support system for empowerment**

Teachers can take advantage of this by building peer support networks that encourage kids to stand up to bullying together. Rather than relying solely on teachers to implement anti-bullying measures, encourage students to consider themselves as active partners in creating a safe atmosphere.

**Reflection and empathy-building**

Students can learn about the emotional and social consequences of bullying through structured discussions, role-playing games, and guided reflections, as presented in the SEL-based module.

**Scaffolding student empowerment: gradual steps toward responsibility**

Scaffolding is a common technique in constructivist teaching (Melero et al., 2012), in which the teacher assists students until they can apply concepts or skills independently. Teachers can scaffold empowerment in the context of promoting community and responsibility by first guiding kids through little activities that build confidence in confronting bullying. These activities may include speaking up when they notice disrespectful behaviour, checking in on isolated classmates, or participating in group discussions about fairness and kindness (Pepler, 2006).

As students perform these skills and receive positive feedback, they gain confidence in dealing with problems on their own. Teachers can progressively step back, allowing students to take greater responsibility for managing and maintaining their classroom environment. This scaffolded method helps kids acquire a sense of agency and autonomy, realising that they are active participants in their social environment rather than passive observers (Rahman et al., 2018).

## Lesson 5- Assessing and improving peer support program effectiveness

Peer support is crucial in the educational as it offers valuable emotional and social support to students. Students feel encouraged to share their issues and receive support from peers in ways that may not be possible through other means. This type of support can help students cope with academic and personal challenges, develop problem-solving skills, and learn to care for others.

The continuous evolution of peer support programs is just as important as their initial implementation. Continuous improvement of these programs can involve periodic evaluation of their impact on students, adapting methods and strategies to meet the current needs of students, and enhancing the training and support provided to mentors (Mead et al, 2006; Cowie et al, 2000).

**Strategies to enhance peer support programs for bullying prevention**

1. **Regularly evaluate program impact**: Gather feedback to assess the program's effectiveness in reducing bullying. This helps identify areas for improvement.
2. **Adapt strategies**: Modify peer support activities to address bullying, including training mentors to recognize and handle bullying situations.
3. **Continuous professional development**: Stay informed on best practices for bullying prevention to guide students and mentors effectively (Watson et al, 2016)

**Classroom activity example - Exploring peer support through the "River of Experience"**

One constructivist technique that allows the exploration of personal experiences with the aim of instigating reflection on the influence of past events and people on current experience is the "River of Experience" (Pope & Denicolo, 2001). This activity will help pupils to reflect on personal experiences of peer support, fostering awareness of how past events and relationships influence perceptions and behaviours within a peer support context.

**What you will need:**

- Blank sheets of paper
- Coloured pens, pencils, or markers

**Instructions**

**Introduction:**

Explain the purpose of the activity, drawing on Pope and Denicolo's (2001) description of *The River of Experience*. Highlight that the river represents each participant's life flow, with its shape and features symbolising life dynamics, key events, and influential people. Emphasise that the goal is to explore how past events and relationships, particularly involving support, **have influenced their personal and professional choices.**

**Drawing the river:**

- Ask students to draw a river on their paper, representing their experiences in school, with a focus on moments of peer support.

- Encourage them to depict the river's flow dynamically:
  - Meanders for gradual changes or periods of reflection.
  - Whirlpools for challenging or confusing times.
  - Narrow sections for stress or isolation.
  - Broader sections for periods of connection and support.
- Students should use symbols, phrases, or short statements to annotate key events, shifts in dynamics, and the people who played significant roles.

**Reflection and sharing**

- In small groups, students share a part of their river that reflects a significant moment related to giving or receiving support.
- Encourage group members to ask reflective questions rooted in Personal Construct Psychology, such as:
  - "What does this part of the river tell you about your experiences with support?"
  - "How might your current approach to helping others relate to these events?"
  - "What would the opposite of this experience look like for you?"
  - "What do these rivers reveal about the dynamics of peer support in our community?"
  - "How can we build on these insights to improve our peer support program?"

Summarise the key reflections and encourage students to consider how their individual experiences could contribute to a stronger, more empathetic peer support system. Suggest that the insights gained could inform practical improvements or initiatives within the school's peer support program.

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