

Module 8. Peer Support Systems

This module explores how to establish effective peer support systems to combat bullying in schools. Through structured programs like peer mentoring, buddy systems, peer mediation, and anti-bullying ambassador initiatives, students can be empowered to create safer, more inclusive learning environments.



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Understanding 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 shows that peer mentoring extends beyond academic outcomes into positive psychological growth. Cowie (2014) found that peer support has been valuable for bullying intervention; the adoption of peer support within schools creates opportunities for children and young people to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it.

Inspire Hope

Peer mentors aim to inspire hope, helping students realize they can overcome challenges and thrive in their school environment.

Provide Guidance

Mentors walk alongside others as they navigate the challenges of recovery from bullying, offering guidance and understanding throughout the process.

Dispel Misconceptions

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.

Encourage Self-Empowerment

Peer mentoring encourages self-empowerment by sharing strategies and resources that promote coping and healing after bullying incidents.

Support Goal Setting

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). In a study assessing peer support effectiveness, mentees reported that it significantly influenced their sense of belonging and personal development, with one mentee noting: "Being able to talk to somebody who's been through all of that, and who's willing to say how nervous he was [...] that helped a lot because I didn't feel I was different and as worried" (Stapley et al, 2022).

The Buddy System: A Simple but Effective Approach

Similar to peer mentoring, the buddy system 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 assistance adapting to a new environment. The buddy system provides friendly and informal support with the main goal of ensuring students don't feel isolated and have a trusted colleague to turn to. It's usually short- or medium-term, and more relaxed and less structured than peer mentoring (O'Donnell et al, 1979).

What Does a Buddy Do?

- Helps new students integrate into the school environment, reducing feelings of insecurity and vulnerability that might make them targets for bullying
- Offers comfort and friendship to students who might be targets of bullying, helping them feel valued and less isolated
- Recognizes signs of bullying and knows how to report it to teachers or staff members
- Walks with their partner to and from classes or spends time with them during recess or lunch to deter potential bullies from targeting someone who appears alone (McCaleb et al, 2023)

The buddy system creates an immediate connection for vulnerable students, particularly those who are new to a school or who might otherwise be isolated. By pairing students together, the system creates natural protection against bullying while fostering friendship and integration. As one student in Stapley's 2022 study noted: "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, the biggest problems that I have."



Benefits of Buddy Systems

- Increased self-esteem and confidence
- Greater sense of belonging
- Improved social support and functioning
- Relational improvements
- Easier school life transition

Establishing Effective Peer Mentoring and Buddy Systems

Creating successful peer support programs requires careful planning, clear guidelines, and ongoing supervision. The following steps provide a framework for establishing effective peer mentoring and buddy systems in schools:

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 throughout the matching process.

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.

Establish Clear Guidelines

Create a handbook 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.

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 and Refine

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).

It's essential to set up a protection system for mentors and buddies to empower them to protect others without fear of retaliation. Consider providing rewards for students in the program to increase motivation to be part of the mentors' community in the school.

Peer Mediation: Resolving Conflicts Constructively

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 (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. During training, student mediators are taught to understand others' perspectives, communicate effectively, and apply problem-solving techniques (Messing, 1993). Peer mediation enhances 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 & Johnson, 1997).



Understanding Conflicts

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



Learning Negotiation Skills

Students learn to express what they want, describe how they feel, explain reasons, take the other's perspective, propose solutions, and agree on actions.



Developing Mediation Skills

Students learn to end hostilities, secure commitment to mediation, guide negotiation, and formalize agreements between disputants.



Implementing the Program

Students rotate as official mediators, wearing identifying markers and being available to mediate conflicts throughout the school.

Anti-Bullying Ambassadors: Student Champions for Change

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.



Empathy

The ability to understand and share the feelings of others, which allows them to recognize signs of bullying and support those affected.



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

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.

Teaching students to become anti-bullying ambassadors involves a series of steps:

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).
2. **Develop empathy:** Engage students in activities like "walk a mile in their shoes," where they role-play being the victim of bullying. Read books or stories about characters who face bullying, followed by discussions about feelings and impact.
3. **Build communication skills:** Set up scenarios where bullying occurs, and practice how to respond. Role-play situations where a student is being bullied and another student steps in to support.
4. **Foster confidence and courage:** Create scenarios where students must practice intervening in a controlled environment. Activities like giving short presentations can build their confidence in taking a stand against bullying.

Empowering Bystanders: Building Confidence to Intervene Safely

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 marginalization, or becoming the subject of additional bullying themselves (Ahmed, 2008). This hesitation to intervene significantly limits the effectiveness of anti-bullying measures.

Key Factors That Increase Bystander Intervention

- **School connectedness:** 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.
- **Shame management:** Students who recognize their personal responsibility and feel guilty for not intervening are more inclined to take action when they see bullying (Ahmed, 2008).
- **Moral courage:** Bystanders with high moral beliefs, such as empathy and justice, are more inclined to interfere in bullying situations (Dal Cason et al., 2020).



Bystanders who engage in shame displacement, such as blaming others or ignoring the problem, are less likely to act (Ahmed, 2008). Similarly, those 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.

Personal Construct Psychology Activity: Detailed Implementation

This comprehensive activity helps students understand how their personal constructs influence their behavior as bystanders in bullying situations.

By examining and challenging these constructs, students can develop more effective intervention strategies.



Sample Introduction to Personal Construct Psychology

"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."



Fostering a Sense of Shared Responsibility and Community

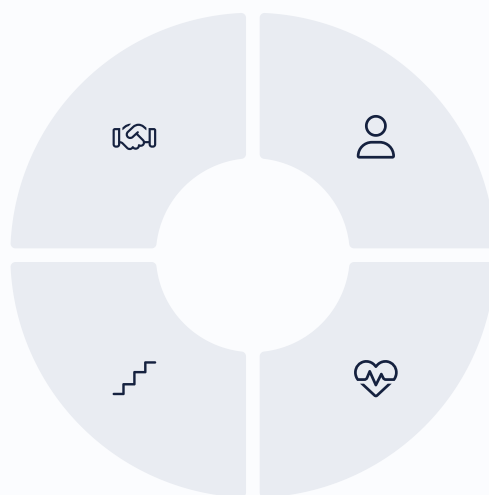
According to constructivism, shared responsibility and community-building occur organically as students learn to navigate and affect their social environment, rather than being imposed by teachers. Teachers can serve as facilitators, helping students co-create a strong classroom atmosphere. By portraying 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).

Establishing Collective Norms

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 behavior.

Scaffolded Empowerment

Teachers scaffold empowerment by first guiding kids through little activities that build confidence in confronting bullying, then gradually stepping back to allow students to take greater responsibility for maintaining their classroom environment.



Peer Support Networks

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

Reflection and Empathy

Students learn about the emotional and social consequences of bullying through structured discussions, role-playing games, and guided reflections, helping them develop deeper empathy for those affected by bullying.

Students use discourse to negotiate and refine beliefs about what behaviors 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 internalize common ideals. It also promotes accountability, as students are more inclined to follow and keep the norms they helped set.

In bullying situations, students who helped to build community norms are more likely to feel obligated to intervene or seek aid. They recognize that protecting their peers is part of their shared responsibility (Milbrandt et al., 2004), which fosters a sense of community and reduces the bystander effect.

Assessing and Improving Peer Support Program Effectiveness

Peer support is crucial in education 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).

1

Evaluate Impact

Regularly gather feedback from students, teachers, and parents to assess the program's effectiveness in reducing bullying incidents and improving school climate.

2

Adapt Strategies

Modify peer support activities to address evolving bullying patterns, including training mentors to recognize and handle new forms of bullying like cyberbullying.

3

Continuous Development

Stay informed on best practices for bullying prevention through professional development opportunities to effectively guide students and mentors.

Evaluation Methods for Peer Support Programs

Method	Description	Benefits
Surveys	Anonymous questionnaires for students, mentors, and teachers	Provides quantitative data on program effectiveness
Focus Groups	Small group discussions with program participants	Offers in-depth qualitative insights
Incident Tracking	Monitoring bullying reports before and after implementation	Provides concrete metrics on program impact
Observation	Structured observation of student interactions	Reveals real-time program effects
Mentor Feedback	Regular check-ins with peer mentors	Identifies implementation challenges

The "River of Experience" Activity: Exploring Peer Support

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 helps pupils to reflect on personal experiences of peer support, fostering awareness of how past events and relationships influence perceptions and behaviors within a peer support context.

Materials Needed:

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

Instructions:

1. **Introduction:** Explain that the river represents each participant's life flow, with its shape and features symbolizing life dynamics, key events, and influential people. The goal is to explore how past events and relationships, particularly involving support, have influenced their personal choices.
2. **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:

Students should use symbols, phrases, or short statements to annotate key events, shifts in dynamics, and the people who played significant roles.

- 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
1. **Reflection and sharing:** In small groups, students share a part of their river that reflects a significant moment related to giving or receiving support. Group members 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?"

Summarize 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.

The Role of Bystanders in Bullying Prevention

Bystanders play a crucial role in determining the outcome of bullying incidents. Research consistently shows that when bystanders actively intervene, both the occurrence and impact of bullying are significantly reduced (Mazzone, 2020). Despite this potential, many bystanders hesitate to take action due to fear of retaliation, social marginalization, or becoming targets themselves.

Psychological Factors Influencing Bystander Behavior

Ahmed's (2008) research reveals several key elements that increase the likelihood of bystander intervention:

- **School connectedness:** Students with a strong sense of belonging to their school community are more likely to intervene, as they perceive bullying as a threat to their shared values and environment.
- **Shame management:** Students who acknowledge personal responsibility and experience appropriate guilt for not intervening are more motivated to take action when witnessing bullying.
- **Moral courage:** Dal Cason et al. (2020) found that bystanders with strong moral convictions around empathy and justice are more likely to step in during bullying situations.

Conversely, bystanders who engage in shame displacement—blaming others or ignoring the problem—are less likely to intervene. Similarly, those who don't feel morally obligated to act or who perceive no direct threat to their own social status tend to remain passive observers.

Effective anti-bullying programs must address these psychological factors by fostering school connectedness, promoting healthy shame management, and cultivating moral courage among students. By understanding and addressing the complex dynamics of bystander behavior, schools can significantly enhance the effectiveness of their bullying prevention efforts.

Integrative Negotiation Skills for Peer Mediators

Effective peer mediation relies on students developing strong integrative negotiation skills. These skills enable them to help disputants find mutually beneficial solutions rather than competitive win-lose outcomes. The following structured approach teaches students how to facilitate constructive conflict resolution:

Expressing Wants

Students learn to clearly state their needs using effective communication skills and frame the conflict as a specific and manageable mutual problem.

Example: "I want to use the book now."

Describing Feelings

Students practice accurately identifying and articulating their emotions in a non-accusatory way.

Example: "I'm frustrated."

Explaining Reasons

Students share the rationale behind their needs and emotions in a constructive way that helps others understand their perspective.

Example: "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 Perspective

Students summarize their understanding of the other person's wants, feelings, and reasons to demonstrate active listening and empathy.

Example: "My understanding is that you need the book to finish your assignment, which is also due today."

Proposing Solutions

Students suggest creative options that benefit both parties, generating multiple possibilities before deciding.

Example: "Plan A is you use it for 15 more minutes, then I get it. Plan B is we share the book at the table. Plan C is we ask for an extension."

Reaching Agreement

Students finalize the agreement with mutual consent, such as a handshake or verbal commitment.

Example: "Let's go with Plan B!"

Implementing the Peacemaker Programme

Once students have completed their training in conflict resolution and mediation skills, the Peacemaker Programme can be implemented as a structured approach to peer-led conflict resolution in schools. This program creates a systematic way for students to apply their skills in real-world situations while ensuring appropriate oversight and escalation paths when needed.

Key Components of the Peacemaker Programme:

1. **Daily Mediator Selection:** Each day, two students are selected to act as official mediators. This rotation ensures that all trained students have the opportunity to practice their skills and contribute to the school community.
2. **Visual Identification:** Mediators wear identifying T-shirts, badges, or other markers that make them easily recognizable to other students. This visual cue helps students know who to approach when conflicts arise.
3. **Active Monitoring:** Mediators patrol key areas like the playground and lunchroom where conflicts commonly occur. Their visible presence serves both as a deterrent to potential conflicts and as an immediate resource when issues arise.
4. **Availability:** Mediators make themselves available to help resolve classroom and school conflicts throughout the day. They may have designated times and locations where other students can find them for assistance.
5. **Inclusive Rotation:** The role of mediator rotates among all trained students to ensure equal participation. This approach helps build a school-wide culture of responsibility for conflict resolution.
6. **Escalation Path:** If peer mediation is unsuccessful, a clear escalation path is established. The conflict moves progressively to the teacher, and, if necessary, to the headteacher for resolution. This ensures that no conflict goes unresolved.
7. **Ongoing Training:** Students continue to receive training throughout the school year to refine and enhance their negotiation and mediation skills. Regular refresher sessions help maintain and improve the quality of mediation.
8. **Documentation:** Mediators document resolutions using a mediation report, which both parties sign. This creates accountability and provides a record for follow-up.
9. **Follow-up:** Mediators check back with the parties involved to ensure agreements are being honored and to address any new issues that may have arisen.

The Peacemaker Programme empowers students to take ownership of conflict resolution in their school community while providing the structure and support needed to ensure effectiveness. By involving all students in the rotation, the program helps build a school culture where peaceful conflict resolution becomes the norm rather than the exception (Johnson & Johnson, 2001).

Conclusion: Building Sustainable Peer Support Systems

Effective peer support systems represent a powerful approach to addressing bullying in schools by empowering students to become active participants in creating safe, inclusive learning environments. Throughout this document, we've explored various peer support strategies including peer mentoring, buddy systems, peer mediation, and anti-bullying ambassador programs, each offering unique benefits while sharing the common goal of reducing bullying through student empowerment.



By implementing well-designed peer support systems, schools can harness the natural influence of peer relationships to create powerful change. When students take ownership of creating a positive school climate, the impact extends beyond reducing bullying incidents to fostering a genuine culture of empathy, respect, and mutual support that benefits all members of the school community.

As educators, our role is to provide the framework, training, and ongoing support that enables students to develop and apply these crucial social-emotional skills. Through this investment in peer support systems, we not only address immediate concerns about bullying but also help develop the next generation of empathetic, socially responsible citizens.