

## **P.E.P : Peers Empowering Peers**

The P.E.P. (Peers Empowering Peers) program evolved from a pilot program named Y.A.P. (Youth Assisting Peers) that was run at Lester B. Pearson High School, Aldershot High School and Q.E. Park High School in Burlington and Oakville, Ontario. The pilot was run between December 1997 and March 1998. The program was written by Ray Pidzamecky, M.S.W., Co-Director of Lifecycle Counselling/Parent Watch and Susan Kozbor, Substance Abuse Nurse for the Region of Halton Health Department.

The focus of the Y.A.P. program was as follows :

- To dispel myths held by younger students re: substance abuse and the broader social culture among older adolescents.
- To give youth information coupled with harm reduction messages that don't necessarily require abstinence from drug use.
- To address any issues that grade 9 students are faced with.

A number of things quickly became apparent as the pilot program continued:

- A majority of grade 9 students stated that they had been exposed enough to the drug issue and in some cases drugs prior to entering grade 9.
- Some students felt that current drug prevention programs had little to do with students' choices of whether to use drugs or not.
- Grade 9 girls appeared to have been more "adultified" than boys in both presentation and appearance.
- The topic of eating disorders was a significant issue for the girls.
- Grade 9's were more eager to want to discuss issues surrounding dating, sex, gender attitudes, parents, relationships.
- The issue of harassment and discrimination were important topics.

The decision to have senior students (grades 12 to O.A.C.) inservice grade 9's was in fact an empowering tool that allowed a number of grade 9 students to express their fears and concerns in ways that they were never able to before. The grade 9's overwhelmingly expressed the following opinions :

- They liked having senior students inservice them.
- They wanted more sessions and follow-up.
- They wanted co-ed classes to follow.
- The forum helped to make them feel more comfortable and more willing to speak.
- Other grades should be inserviced by seniors.
- Students felt more comfortable around seniors and felt that they were more approachable.

As a result of the comments and topics generated by the grade 9's and current Addiction Research Foundation Statistics, we believe that drug prevention programs have not, for

the most part, been successful. As a result of drugs now being a significant part of our youth's culture, we believe that the focus should be both on abstinence and harm reduction.

It would appear that students find peer mentors to be a more effective medium than adult educators with regard to current social issues. The issue of drugs was not the most important topic of discussion for the grade 9 students. Rather, drugs are only one part of the larger culture that students find themselves dealing with. Therefore, we have taken the next step and created the P.E.P. program. The P.E.P. program is an attempt to offer the broadest base of discussion pertaining to youth issues.

### **P.E.P. (Peers Empowering Peers): A Senior Led Peer Education Program**

**Target:** Grade 9 students

#### **Objectives:**

- To dispel myths held by younger students.
- To give youth information coupled with abstinence and harm reduction messages.
- To encourage discussion around the issues of harassment, discrimination, intimidation abuse and violence.
- To address any issues that grade 9 students struggle to cope with/understand/deal with.
- To help foster a sense of community between senior and junior students.
- Impact is a meaningful way as to reduce the risks of death and harm to our youth whether that be through intentional or accidental actions

#### **Strategy:**

To achieve the above objectives by utilizing senior students to communicate information, share opinions and respond to questions from grade 9 students under the supervision of social workers.

#### **Selection of Peer Leaders/Educators:**

*Criteria:* Cross representation of grade 12 to OAC students who have familiarity and/or comfort in discussing selected issues. The students are perceived as "social" leaders and respected by their peers. A minimum of 3 senior boys and 3 senior girls per grade 9 class.

*Process:* School Social Worker, in conjunction with Heads of Student Services, Physical Education and interested teachers will select potential seniors

#### **Student Leader Training**

The School Social Workers to meet with selected students for one class of training.

#### **Implementation**

- Grade 9 classes to be divided by class period and gender.
- Each gender will separately meet with both the male and female senior students to be completed within on week.

-Next, each student will be in one mixed class combining male and female grade 9's so that they can receive an inservice dealing with harassment and discrimination, conducted by the Regional Police Service High School Liaison Officers.

-At the end of the week all grade 9 students will be brought into an assembly for one class period. Their respective period teachers, along with any others who are available and the police will also be in attendance.

## **Class Outline for grade 9's**

### **Introduction:**

Ray Pidzamecky M.S.W. & Penny Smith M.S.W.

Ground rules: sensitive issues, speak for yourself only, don't name names, ask questions for yourself, seniors will not respond to personal questions unless they choose to do so, attendance taken by teacher at the start of the class, then teacher will leave. Although we cannot guarantee confidentiality, you are encouraged to not mention anyone's name outside the class. Everyone is permitted an opinion.

### **Seniors Introduce Themselves :**

Name and grade

### **Break Up Into Three Smaller Groups To Discuss Topics:**

Break students into small groups to discuss 7 topic areas. Each student will be encouraged to write one question on a piece of paper with regards to the 7 topics. Questions will be read out loud to seniors by social worker.

Senior girls inservice gr. 9 girls (discussion from female perspective). Senior boys inservice gr. 9 boys (discussion from male perspective). Senior girls inservice gr. 9 boys (discussion from female perspective). Senior boys inservice gr. 9 girls (discussion from male perspective)

Top 7 Topics To Discuss With Grade 9's (Write on blackboard before class breaks into three small groups)

- Drugs / alcohol
- Intimidation / violence / harassment
- Fitting in / friends
- Rumours
- Parties / dances
- Parents / teachers
- Body image / sexuality

### **Compile List of Issues**

Back into large group. Large Group Discussion (Social Worker reads questions from pieces of paper). Question and answer interaction. If grade 9's are slow to begin, senior students start off discussion.

## **Regional Police Service High School Liaison Officer Inservice On Harassment/Discrimination**

All of the grade 9 students will receive an inservice for one period on harassment/discrimination. This topic is of particular importance because of the incidents of date rape, assault, and harassment that occurs amongst our young people today. This portion of P.E.P. is a concerted effort to help grade 9's empower themselves and reduce levels of risk and harm.

### **Grade 9 Assembly**

#### **Welcome and Review of P.E.P.: Social Worker**

##### **Yes/No Warm-up Activity:**

- Introduction to activity: Social Worker
- Activity: Senior led
- Read statement and ask students to respond yes or no by raising hands. (E.g. raise your hand if you have seen drugs on school property)
- Summary: Senior led
- All of you are unique but yet most of you share the same issues/concerns.
- Senior students and adults also share some of your issues/concerns.

Police officers interviewed on their impressions of grade 9's and their issues  
Social Worker to interview officers

##### **Personal stories and perspectives on issues:**

At least four senior students to speak (2 from each gender). Also have one female student read "Death of an innocent".

##### **Gender statement activity:**

- Introduction by social worker
- Activity: Senior led
- Read statements made by gr. 9 males about gr. 9 girls and gr. 9 girls about gr. 9 males with regards to their perspective of the opposite sex's issues. Grade 9's asked which sex they think made the statement by a show of hands

##### **Panel discussion with senior students:**

Social worker to interview senior students  
Request for feedback from grade 9's, seniors and teachers at assembly.

##### **Wrap up & thank you. Social Workers.**

##### **Comments of students**

I liked the idea that we got the chance to talk to the OAC, 11, 12's about problems that they might have gone through. I'm glad because they are from our school as well and know about the stuff that goes around and it's easier because they can give us advice

about the situation. I'm also glad because they have us some helpful advice, because we have a lot in common with them because some of them might be our friends or because they related more to the "students" than the teachers and it's more helpful.

I felt it was really helpful in some ways, it was fun, it wasn't really serious like taking notes and stuff, but yet it was. It was a good idea to have students talk to students because they understand more because sometimes older people don't realize that kids our age are actually going through some serious issues. They think we are so innocent when we are not. It helped us, as grade 9's to get to know older students. I think it was a good idea to talk about these issues. It would be a good idea to do this next year for the new grade 9's.

I thought the seniors coming in to talk to us this year for health was a really good idea. I was thinking before class "why do we have to learn about drugs again?" But I found it very informative, and I think they should do this every year for the gr. 9's. One thing I think we should have done, is mix the girls & boys class and have the senior girls and boys come talk to us together. I really had fun talking to these people and I think the gr. 9's might have made a few new friends.

*Peers Empowering Peers  
Lifecycle Counselling  
1011 Upper Middle Rd east, suite 1415  
Oakville, Ontario L6H 5Z9  
Telephone : (905) 319-9026  
FAX : (905) 319-9022  
e-mail : [lifecycle@sympatico.ca](mailto:lifecycle@sympatico.ca)*