

Submission

No 5

## INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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**Submission to the**  
**Parliament of New South Wales**  
**Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW**  
  
from Peer Support Australia

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***“The Peer Support Program makes a significant contribution to  
schools’ endeavours to provide positive outcomes for students.”***

Dr Louise Ellis BPsych (Hons) PhD (Psych), 2003

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**Submission to the  
Parliament of New South Wales  
Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW  
Submission from Peer Support Australia**

**i Terms of Reference**

For the purpose of performing its statutory functions under the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* in relation to the Commission, the Committee is to inquire into and report on children and young people aged 9-14 years in NSW, and in particular:

1. the needs of children and young people in the middle years ie between about 9-14 years of age;
2. the extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage;
3. the activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience;
4. the extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years, including possible changes to workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years; and
5. any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.

*“Childhood and adolescence are particularly important periods for building protective factors, and the evidence indicates programs directed to these age groups can effect significant and long lasting change.” LIFE Framework, 2000, pg 29*

Peer Support Australia is committed to supporting the functions of the Commission for Children and Young People, in particular:

- to promote the participation of children in the making of decisions that affect their lives; and
- to promote and monitor the overall safety, welfare and wellbeing of children in the community through the implementation of an effective schools-based Peer Support Program.

## 1. Introduction

Peer Support Australia is a not for profit, non government organisation. The Peer Support Program is a valuable learning experience for students and in conjunction with other strategies provides a powerful tool for bringing about positive cultural change in school communities. It currently operates in 1,400 schools in NSW, ACT, Queensland and Tasmania.

The mission of Peer Support Australia is to provide dynamic peer led programs which foster the mental, physical and social wellbeing of young people and their community.

## 2. Links to Terms of Reference

The following outlines the terms of reference to which the Peer Support Program aligns.

<p><b>The needs of children and young people in the middle years ie between about 9-14 years of age.</b></p>
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*ASG Student Social and Emotional Health Report, 2007.*

Michael Bernard, University of Melbourne surveyed 11,526 students and 6,860 teachers from 2003-07 which found:

- 4 in 10 students worry too much;
- 3 in 10 students felt nervous/stressed;
- 2 in 10 students have felt very hopeless and depressed for a week and have stopped regular activities;
- 1/3 of students lose their temper a lot and are sometimes mean to others (bully);
- 2/3 of students are not doing as well in their schoolwork as they could; and
- 4 in 10 students have difficulty calming down (poor resilience).

“We know that the years of schooling...are of critical importance to the development of our (children) and young people.” Terry O’Connell, ASG.

*Mission Australia National Youth Survey, 2007.*

- 29,000 young people surveyed aged between 11-24 years.
- 61.8% of 11-14 year olds highly valued friends.
- 20.7% of 11-14 year olds highly valued school satisfaction.
- 22.4% of 11-14 year old stated coping with stress was an issue of major concern.
- 86% of all respondents state friends as valuable sources for information.

*Kids Help Line - Australia, 2006.*

The national Kids Help Line received more than 60,000 calls from young people in 2006.

The top 10 concerns of young people are:

- 17.4% - family relationships;
- 12.1% - peer relationships;
- 9.5% - emotional behaviour management;
- 9.2% - mental health issues;
- 8.5% - partner relationships;
- 5.3% - bullying;
- 4.9% - child abuse;
- 3.2% - homelessness;
- 2.9% - suicidality; and
- 2.8% - grief and loss.

Relationships and family continues to be the number one reason children and young people contact Kids Help Line. Over the past 6 years the proportion of counselling sessions related to mental health issues and emotional and/or behavioural management has increased along with reports of suicidality and deliberate self-harm.

Peer Support Australia has identified a range of protective factors help students maintain mental, physical and social wellbeing and resist bullying behaviours. Some protective factors are social such as interpersonal relationships, family cohesion, social support and a sense of community. Some are life skills such as empathy, resilience, assertiveness, coping, decision making, problem solving, monitoring stress and conflict resolution.

Failure to build protective factors within students has significant long term consequences including difficulty in forming close relationships based on trust and negatively influencing student’s perception of the wider community.

*Michael Sawyer 2004 found:*

- 14% of 4-17 year olds suffer from mental health problems;
- young people with mental health problems experience problems in most areas of their life; and
- rates of depressions increase for young people when:
  - their relationship are poor
  - they are less connected
  - they are less involved.

*The Peer Support Program links to the COAG National Plan for Mental Health 2006-2011:*

- mental health promotion - aims to protect, support and sustain the emotional and social wellbeing from the earliest years through adult life;
- knowledge about risk and protective factors for mental health contribute to emotional resilience;
- opportunities to improving mental health knowledge and skills are suitable for education; and
- protective factors give people resilience in the face of adversity.

<p><b>The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience.</b></p>
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Resilience can be developed within students through a recognition of the protective factors already present in their lives and by providing opportunities to foster a range of skills and coping strategies.

In the last 10 years, research has shifted the focus from factors common to students at risk to those prevalent amongst students who had faced adversity and triumphed. Educators recognise the importance of social and emotional support in contributing to the ability of young people to respond to life's challenges in a positive manner. Indeed many teachers have personally affected the lives of their students through appropriate role modelling and consistency of their interactions. The encouragement and support a teacher provides can be instrumental in helping a young person develop more effective coping strategies. It is no coincidence that such an environment fosters quality student learning.

Students additionally cite school achievement and the associated support as significant contributors to their ability to cope. Academic success contributes to increasing a student's self esteem, optimism and sense of possibility. Resilience was the natural product of such studies as it seeks to crystallise all the factors and processes necessary to take opportunities when they arise.

The International Resilience Project identified 3 factors that contribute to resilience:

- I *am*,
- I *can* and
- I *have*

These describe the external supports and structures, the internal personal strengths and the social and interpersonal skills. No one factor can be specifically identified as contributing to resilience, rather a complex combination that contribute to an individual's ability to recognise opportunities and to respond in a positive manner.

While a complex skill to teach students, research indicates that with time and opportunity, protective factors that build and enhance resilience can be developed and maintained over time. It is important to acknowledge with students that trials and difficulties are a feature of every individual's life.

Researchers highlight the significance of protective factors in contributing to an individual's ability to demonstrate resilience. Resilience can be enhanced through explicit instruction involving a range of coping strategies. Indicators of good mental health among young people may include:

- feeling connected to their school;
- having positive family-school links;
- feeling connected to peers;
- feeling cared for and supported by teachers;
- having a sense of belonging and worth;
- having one caring adult outside the family;
- knowing how to think optimistically;
- having skills for being resilient;
- demonstrating competence in social skills; and
- being emotionally literate.

Peer groups at school are a powerful protective factor for young people. Over 96% of young people believe that being connected to peers is an important protective factor in their own lives and that friendships and socialising are the most important factors in liking school. This suggests



that for young people who are alienated from their families, peer connectedness may be their most important protective factor.

The Peer Support Program develops skills of resilience by the inclusion of learning experiences that provide avenues for students to develop a sense of belonging. Feeling connected is one factor that has been shown to be prevalent amongst resilient students. Werner (1996) found that these individuals were not necessarily the most popular, but were good at developing and maintaining a few very close friends. Quite often it is the accumulation of everyday stresses and trials that require the greatest level of resilience to manage. Werner also states that informal relationships were the most significant ones in developing resilience. Interactions with peers, teachers, relatives and other important adults in students' lives, support the development of resilient characteristics.

Schools can play a critical role in providing resilient environments. School connectedness is particularly important for those students who are not connected to highly resilient families. An approach that incorporates ways to build environments that foster resilience as well as teaches the personal coping skills of resilience has a much greater chance of success than a program that addresses only one set of factors.

Henderson and Milstein (1996) recommend the following in fostering resilience:

- increase prosocial bonding;
- set clear, consistent boundaries;
- teach life skills;
- provide caring and support;
- set and communicate high expectations; and
- provide opportunities for meaningful participation.

There are many other strategies and approaches which teachers and schools can adopt to create more resilient classrooms and schools, where students feel valued, engaged, achieve academic success, feel a sense of belonging and can learn personal and social skills.

The Peer Support Program:

- enhances wellbeing and resilience;
- develops coping skills;
- develops a sense of self efficacy;
- connects older students with younger students;
- develops responsibility and ownership; and
- engages students in fun activities.

Students who are resilient:

- talk about accomplishments and personal achievements, skills and competencies of which they are proud;
- have a trusted adult outside the family;
- express a sense of belonging and connectedness to peers, groups and school;
- are good at maintaining a few close friends;
- demonstrate a sense of autonomy and personal responsibility when they talk about their lives;
- have definite plans and positive views about their futures; and
- have at least one skill that gives them a sense of pride and acceptance in a peer group.

<b>Any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.</b>
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- The Peer Support Program is one of the interventions articulated in the KidsMatter Program Guide which outlines a range of mental health programs available for use in Australian schools.
- Peer Support Australia has been successful in receiving long term funding from DOHA for the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. This is in recognition that the Peer Support Program increases resilience and connectedness of young people. One of the goals stated in the framework is to:
  - enhance resilience and resourcefulness, respect, interconnectedness and mental health in young people, families and communities, and reduce the prevalence of risk factors for suicide.
- The NSSF incorporates existing good practice and provides an agreed national approach to assist school communities address the issue of bullying behaviours.

*“The school develops programs and strategies to empower students to participate in a positive school culture, eg peer support systems.”* National Safe Schools Framework, 2004.
- Peer Support Australia has formed a partnership with The Alannah and Madeline Foundation (AMF) in recent years. NCAB is an initiative of AMF and brings together a group of individuals from key organisations to draw national attention to the issue of bullying and to bring about a social change in our community.

- The Peer Support Program supports the National Framework for Values Education for Australian Schools which states schools provide “values education in a planned and systematic way.” Values education is essential in fostering relationships, personal achievement and improved student wellbeing across the school community.

### **3. The Peer Support Program**

Peer Support Australia has been supported by the NSW Health Department, Centre for Mental Health, for a number of years in recognition of the significant positive benefits on the mental health of children and young people. Recently Peer Support Australia has been successful in securing funding and developing partnerships with Federal Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA); Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, Queensland Government, Mental Health Branch and Federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

The Peer Support Program is:

- a promotion and prevention program;
- peer led;
- schools-based;
- a universal early intervention program;
- targeted to children and young people;
- skills based and experiential; and
- linked to curriculum areas and other complimentary educational initiatives across a number of states.

In addition, the Peer Support Program is aligned with national frameworks including the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), National Framework for Values Education, MindMatters, KidsMatter and the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB).

Peer Support Australia provides an integrated program of training and learning materials for both primary and secondary schools, which can support schools in achieving positive cultural changes successfully. Peer Support modules have been designed to be used in conjunction with teacher and student leadership training.

In primary schools, peer groups are facilitated by two Year 6 students with small multi-age groups from Kindergarten-Year 5. In secondary schools, the traditional approach is Year 10 facilitating small groups for Year 7 to support them through their transition phase to secondary school. Both primary and secondary students are trained as Peer leaders through a 2 day leadership training program. Peer leaders work with students for approximately 30 minutes per week for 8 sessions using Peer Support Australia modules.

Students are supported at every stage through briefing and debriefing sessions conducted by teachers. Briefing and debriefing are vital to the success of the Peer Support Program. Some modules have Teacher Debriefing Notes to be used in class. Newsletter items and Parent Information Leaflets have been included in modules to encourage schools to involve parents in the Peer Support experience by providing ongoing information.

Student learning materials, known as modules, are underpinned by current pedagogy, have a cross curricula focus and are consistent with key educational policies and perspectives. Curriculum areas provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate a range of skills. The Peer Support Program enhances this skill acquisition. In addition, the program:

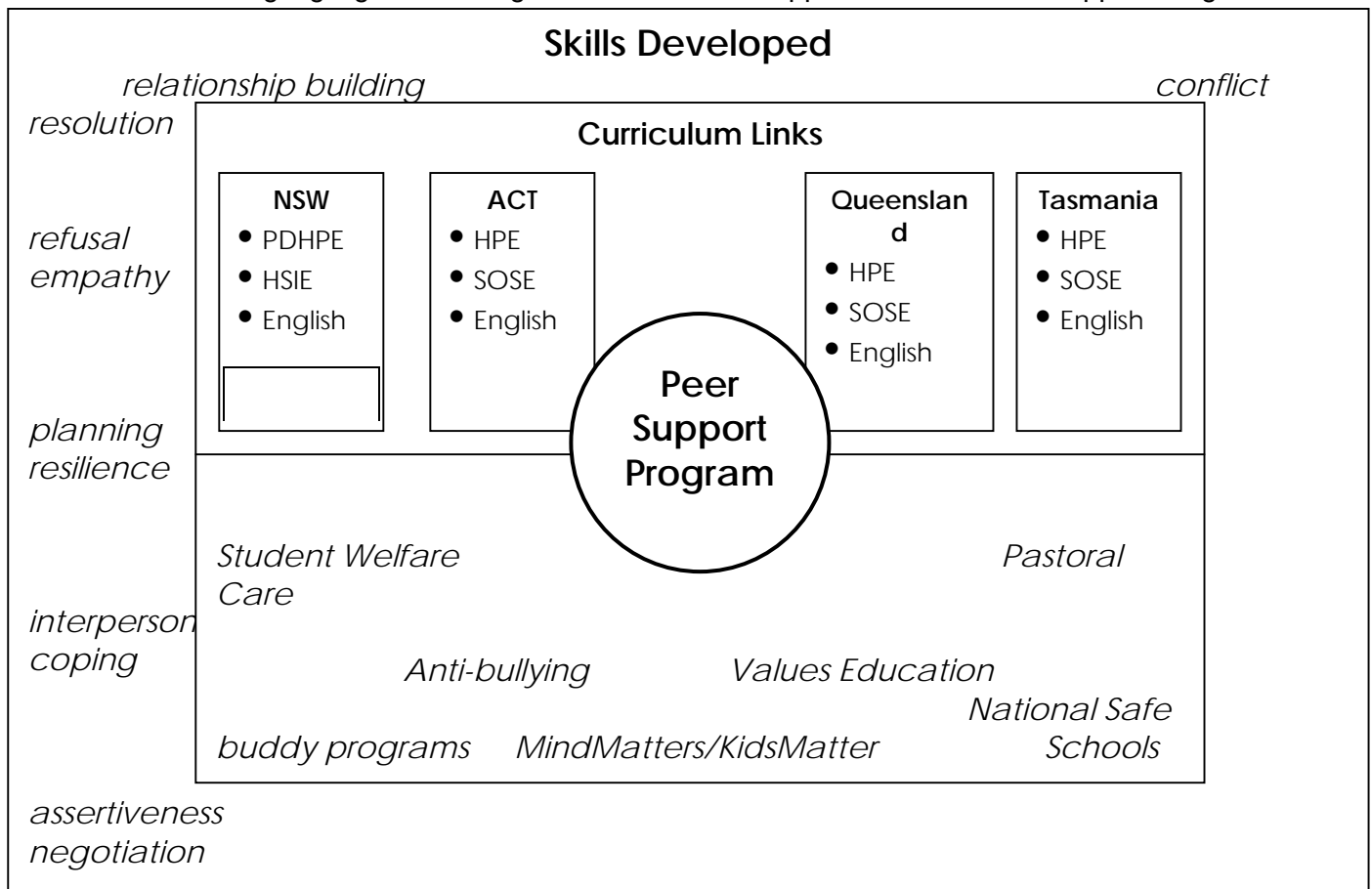
- assists students to develop protective factors;
- empowers students to become more socially connected; and
- encourages lifelong learning.

Modules cover a range of focus areas such as:

- transition;
- relationships;
- optimism;
- resilience;
- values; and
- anti-bullying.

Sessions within all modules include opportunities to develop positive relationships with others; engage learners; develop skills, understandings and attitudes; work cooperatively and collaboratively; and reflect on their experiences. All of these enhance a young person's mental health over time.

The following highlights the integrated whole school approach to the Peer Support Program.



Many forms of peer support have been implemented in Australian schools and have been given a range of titles such as peer education, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, buddy programs, peer mediation, peer counselling, peer support, and peer support groups.

The outcomes of an effective Peer Support Program include:

- building positive relationships;
- developing skills;
- enhancing mental health;
- taking personal responsibility;
- embracing lifelong learning;
- developing key concepts; and
- encouraging participation.

Key concepts, determined by research and which are evidence based, form the basis of the Peer Support Program and all training programs and student learning materials. Peer Support Australia believes the development of these key concepts will contribute to students' physical, social and mental wellbeing. The key concepts are:

- sense of Self;
- resilience;
- connectedness; and
- sense of possibility.

#### **4. Research on the Peer Support Program**

##### **4.1 University of Western Sydney 2003**

A longitudinal study by the University of Western Sydney, Self Concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre was published in 2003. The research was conducted to determine the efficacy of the secondary schools Peer Support Program and the development of the key concepts espoused by Peer Support Australia. This research proved the Peer Support Program gains positive long term benefits for students and school communities.

Funded by the Australian Research Council and involving 2,300 secondary students across NSW during 2001-2002, some of the findings demonstrated the Peer Support Program:

- assists students to successfully negotiate transition from primary to secondary school;
- improves relationships with others - peers and teachers; and
- successfully changes attitudes toward bullying behaviours.

These results are relevant to educational practitioners and highlight the Peer Support Program can be specifically used as a means of countering aggressive behaviour, decelerating anger arousal and reducing bullying in schools. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours.

The Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program and early intervention is paramount in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours as one example of mental health concerns amongst young people. Effective intervention programs require whole school communities to work together to encourage a sense of belonging and the involvement of all members of the community.

Research suggests students who experience bullying behaviours are more likely to speak to their friends about it, making a peer led approach to addressing the issue more appropriate. In evaluating the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in 2003, Dr Louise Ellis wrote "The positive results suggest the program is worthwhile, especially in changing the attitudes to bullying, which is one of the study's significant findings."

The implementation of the Peer Support Program has the potential to make a significant contribution in addressing students' mental health problems.

- 1) previous research indicates adolescents' willingness to both provide and receive support from their peers; and
- 2) evidence to suggest young people prefer their friends rather than adults as a source of support and assistance.

Given these findings, traditional mental health programs may not succeed in providing effective intervention. Schools remiss in capitalising on the help seeking patterns of young people may be forfeiting valuable opportunities to address students' wellbeing.

#### **4.2 James Cook University 2006**

Case study vignettes, conducted by James Cook University, were published in 2006. This study comprised the Teachers And Educators Around Castle Hill (TEACH) cluster of 7 primary schools in the Values Education Good Practice Schools (VEGPS Stage 1) project in Townsville. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students and findings have been reported in *Values Education and Quality Teaching, The Double Helix Effect*, Professor Terry Lovat and Ron Toomey, 2007

The VEGPS project for TEACH cluster focused on the implementation of the Peer Support Program and to evaluate the impact of the Peer Support Program in each of the 7 schools.

Significant findings included:

- constructing a common language for discussing and shaping values;
- developing social relations and interactions;
- contributing positively to whole school activities;
- demonstrating understandings of abstract concepts; and
- applying understandings to concrete instances.

Lovat, 2007, pg 89 discusses immersing the “whole person in a depth of cognition, social and emotional maturity, and self knowledge” is required. Evidence from these case studies clearly demonstrates an holistic approach to the implementation of values education is apparent through the Peer Support Program.

#### **4.3 Current study 2007-2009**

Recently secured long term funding from DOHA, as part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, is a further recognition of the Peer Support Program's positive impact on the mental health of young people. The DOHA funding will provide the opportunities to promote and expand the Peer Support Program in Queensland and Tasmanian schools.

Over the next 2 years an extensive evaluation strategy will be undertaken to further provide evidence of the outcomes of the Peer Support Program and its efficacy as a prevention program.



## 5. Conclusion

Peer Support Australia's work with school communities over the past 30 years aims to provide a positive and safe learning environment for students and staff. Taking a whole school approach allows staff to support their students to become young people who can:

- take responsibility for their own wellbeing;
- deal positively, proactively and resiliently with their life experiences; and
- be actively involved in, and supported by, their community.

The Peer Support Program's strength is in being a peer led, skills based, experiential learning program which is integrated into curricula and sustained through all year groups. The Peer Support Program:

- provides students with a supportive learning environment in which to develop the skills, understandings, attitudes and strategies to make healthy life decisions;
- enhances peer connections throughout the school;
- develops and maintains positive relationships within the school community;
- develops skills in resilience, assertiveness, decision making, problem solving and leadership; and
- is endorsed by all education sectors.