

Promoting positive youth development in schools: A program logic analysis of Peer Support Australia.



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Summary

Peer Support Australia (PSA) is an established Australian charity that offers peer support services to schools to assist young people to experience personal and social growth through mentoring and supporting their peers. PSA also offers school and parent consultancy and training services that supplement their peer support services. This report documents the PSA history, activities and psychosocial processes and summarises the evidence for the service benefits. The PSA programs are noted to have some of the strongest evaluation evidence of any peer support program internationally. This report makes recommendations for implementation research to further understand and apply the underpinning evidence to extend the benefits provided through PSA.

Background

Youth mental health is a priority concern both in Australia and internationally. Peer support programs have been developed and implemented internationally as a method of supporting healthy development and youth mental health (Day et al, 2020: <https://peersupport.edu.au/>). The report that follows documents the work of an Australian charity, Peer Support Australia (PSA) in providing peer support and associated services to schools. The aim of this report was to establish directions for further evaluating and enhancing the PSA services by examining their components, intended benefits and existing evaluation evidence.

Peer Support Australia (PSA) is a national non-profit organisation and registered Australian charity, which originated in the late 1970s in response to the problem of youth drug use. In recent years PSA has broadened to offer a range of services that provide schools with professional development, support, and guidance to address school wellbeing and to implement peer support programs.

Peer Support Programs

Experiences during adolescence are shaped by childhood, and in turn shape the course of young adult development. Relationships with peers are important in psychosocial development throughout childhood but become more central in adolescence. As children transition from family-centred development, friendships take on unique significance providing companionship, social and emotional support, intimate self-disclosure, and reflection for young people (Leung et al, 2014).

During the adolescent pubertal transition, young people experience potentially stressful biological transitions over a relatively short period of time (including appearance, height and sex organ changes) and these physical changes are coupled with shifting personal expectations and new social demands which increase peer influence. This developmental period is also a time of trying new experiences and activities that emphasise socialising with peers and conforming to peer group standards (Leung et al, 2014).

In contemporary times young people spend longer periods of their life grouped with peers in schools than in previous historical ages. In this context, school bullying is a major risk factor for youth mental health and substance use problems (Moore et al, 2017). Recognising the importance of peer groups for adolescent development, varied programs have been developed to attempt to reduce problems and encourage positive influences. In their literature review, Coleman et al (2017) noted differences in how school peer support programs were described (e.g. peer mentoring, befriending, and buddying) and organised in the United Kingdom (UK). The organisation of UK school-based peer support programs included: one-to-one peer relationship support; group peer support sessions; peer training events; on-line programs; and community-based support projects. In what follows, a

brief historical overview of PSA is provided before describing the methodology used in this report to examine the service benefits.

History of Peer Support Australia

The Peer Support Program was first established in 1971 in response to community need. Following the death of a young student from a drug overdose at a Sydney secondary school. Elizabeth Campbell, a Health Education Officer, developed a program to enhance the skills and values vital to student wellbeing. Her program began using cross-age peer groups to deliver the program because she believed that the best people to positively influence and support young people are their peers. As the Peer Support Program developed, it became apparent that a more formal structure was required to implement the program in schools and so the Peer Support Foundation was established in 1983. In 1984, the Peer Support Foundation's first program for secondary schools was introduced. At the beginning of 1984, six secondary schools had adopted the program. By the end of the year, this had grown to sixty schools. The primary schools' program soon followed this in 1989. Once the programs were established in New South Wales, the Peer Support Foundation began to support the delivery of peer support programs in other states of Australia, including Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. The Foundation also provides information and support to schools who have adopted the model in New Zealand, Singapore, Scotland (Ellis, 2004, p 36), and in recent years England and Hong Kong.

The contemporary organisation trades using the name PSA but is still registered as the Peer Support Foundation. The mission is "to work with school communities, placing students at the centre of their learning, empowering them with wellbeing skills and strategies to navigate life" (<https://peersupport.edu.au/about-us/who-we-are/>). The contemporary organisation has emerged from experience providing "training, professional development and peer-led learning resources to support a whole school approach to reducing bullying behaviours in order to build safe and supportive school environments" (Chadwick, 2008, p. 7). Ellis (2004; 2009) completed an important evaluation of the program operating in 2002, which included an extensive qualitative component assessing student perceptions. Findings showed that while most students evaluated the intervention favourably, a proportion were critical of one or more components. In response to the findings of the Ellis (2004; 2009) evaluation, PSA introduced program changes. Year 11 or 12 students no longer act as senior peers, and this is now performed by Year 10 students. The program content has been revised, and a greater range of services now support school implementation.

In 2020, PSA commissioned the Deakin University SEED Consulting Team (SEED: www.deakin.edu.au/research/seed) to document the content and framework for their contemporary services, to identify directions for further evaluation and program refinement. The present report sought to understand key change processes activated within the PSA Program. To do this an evaluation technique known as "program explication" (Bamberg et al., 2011) was used to describe the Program activities and intended benefits. Program explication is a form of program logic modelling (also known as process logic analysis, program theory analysis, and theory-based evaluation), a field of program evaluation concerned with describing the effective components that underpin human services (Bamberg et al, 2011). Program explication was used to assist program leaders to describe program activities using language and tools that align with key concepts used in theory and evaluation research studies.

Method

The program explication method was completed through consulting interviews conducted with relevant staff and review of key documents from June 2020. A literature review was also completed in August 2020. The program explication method was used to document and describe: the main

service activities; the intended benefits for participants; and the existing “level-of-evidence” for the service activities to achieve their intended benefits. Describing program activities using language and tools that align with key concepts used in theory and evaluation research studies supported the literature review, which was conducted to identify the evidence for the service activities. In what follows, this report presents the following content: the program history and description is firstly summarised; then therapeutic processes are identified; next theoretical and research evidence is summarised; later sections make recommendations for further understanding and applying the underpinning evidence for the Peer Support Program.

The literature search used the service benefit statements derived from consultations documenting the service components and activities. Service benefit statements were firstly reworded as research questions using terms that are commonly used in the research and evaluation literature. To identify evidence for the organisational services offered by PSA (component 1), the following question was explored: *What works in encouraging schools to adopt peer support and or positive youth development programs?* The following question guided the search for evidence for the second component of the program, component 2 (school-wide trainings): *What school level interventions enhance the implementation of peer support programs?* To guide the search for evidence for component 3 (student modules), the following question was posed: *What works in peer programs to improve healthy development for students?*

The literature search sought to identify systematic literature reviews and or rigorously designed evaluation studies fitting the inclusion criteria for systematic literature reviews. Papers with relevant titles and abstracts were then retrieved and those that met the inclusion criteria were evaluated and classified according to their relevance to the question(s) under investigation.

Findings for the included studies that were deemed relevant to the activities were finally synthesised to reach overall conclusions. In line with Bamberg et al. (2011), the four level-of-evidence ratings were:

- High: Two or more well-controlled evaluation studies and the balance of findings demonstrated a positive effect
- Moderate: At least one well-controlled evaluation study demonstrating a positive effect
- Some: Indirect evidence for the validity of the activity through descriptive evaluation studies
- Lack of evidence: Does not indicate that the activity is ineffective but rather that little research has been conducted and/ or published to confirm its efficacy.

Results

Table 1 summarises the PSA components, activities, and benefits. The three components of PSA were identified as (1) Organisational services, (2) School-wide trainings, and (3) Student modules. It should be noted that the identified components and activities have considerable integration, with common messages and materials offered. The final column in Table 1 summarises the level-of-evidence for each of the program activities. Later sections describe the information in Table 1 in more detail.

Table 1: PSA Components, Activities, Benefits and Evidence.

Component/ Activity	Benefit	Level of Evidence
Component 1:		
Organisational services		
The four activities in this component include: Organisational advocacy (e.g., submissions and applications), Consultations and targeted advice to schools, brief message dissemination (e.g., through website headlines, Talk and walkathon campaign [TAWAT]) and school leader trainings (e.g., communication with stakeholders at leadership forums).	Increased awareness and understanding of how to enhance peer support in school settings and the advantages it offers young people. School leader motivation to advance positive youth development. Through TAWAT campaign, improved student physical health and social relationships. Increased readiness to implement PSA teacher components.	Level of evidence rating: Some. A literature review of school peer support programs (Coleman et al, 2017) noted the importance of the organisational factors emphasised within the PSA services. No rigorous studies have evaluated which features of charitable services are most important for maximising the reach and benefit of programs (Colbran et al, 2019).
Component 2: School-wide trainings		
Staff, student, and parent talks. 1-hour sessions offered at schools. Mostly attended by a wide range of staff. Videos for stakeholders.	Increasing understanding of the importance of peer support and positive youth development.	Level of evidence: Moderate. The Coleman et al, (2017) review found a lack of evidence for the school-wide benefits of peer support programs. The Ellis evaluation (2009) of an early variant of the PSA program is the only rigorous evaluation to demonstrated whole-school effects through a peer support program.
Teacher 1-day workshop. For 6-20 teachers from different schools or tailored to specific school (see website).	Increasing skills and expertise in organising peer support programs that enhance positive youth development.	It remains unclear how school training components influence school-wide effects (Coleman et al, 2017).
Component 3: Student modules		
2-day leadership training for teachers to train students who work with younger students. 3 modules in secondary. 5 in primary. In school observation and implementation feedback.	Increase positive peer influence. Students develop a corporate responsibility to one another (normalisation of positive behaviours). Most impact after 3 years of implementation. Observational feedback seeks to improve the fidelity of the peer support program.	Level of evidence rating: High. The use of peer support modules has been independently evaluated and found to be effective in more than two randomised trials (Cohen et al, 1982; Petosa & Smith, 2014).

In what follows, the information summarised in Table 1 is described in more detail. Each program component is described with reference to evidence-based practices that are further elaborated in later sections.

Component 1: Organisational services

The four activities in this component include: Organisational advocacy (e.g., submissions and applications), Consultations and targeted advice to schools, brief message dissemination (e.g., through website headlines, Talk and walkathon campaign [TAWAT]) and school leader trainings (e.g., communication with stakeholders at leadership forums).

The benefits of Component 1 were identified as: Increased awareness and understanding of how to enhance peer support in school settings and the advantages it offers young people. School leader motivation to advance positive youth development. Through TAWAT campaign, improved student physical health and social relationships. Increased readiness to implement PSA teacher components.

Component 2: School-wide trainings

The activities for this component included. Staff, student and parent talks and teacher 1-day workshops. The staff, student and parent talks are typically 1-hour sessions offered at schools. Mostly attended by a wide range of staff. Videos are provided for stakeholders.

The teacher 1-day workshops are typically attended by 6-20 teachers from different schools. In other cases, these are tailored to specific schools.

The benefits of Component 2 were identified as: Increasing: understanding of the importance of peer support and positive youth development; and skills and expertise in organising peer support programs that enhance positive youth development.

Component 3: Student modules

The activities for this component include: 1-day leadership training for teachers to train other teachers who work with students who work with younger students. These trainings include 3 modules in secondary school and 5 in primary schools. Where schools request this, in-school observation and implementation feedback are also available.

Peer Support Australia (2014) provides an outline of the program logic, stating that once teachers have been trained, they provide Student Peer Leadership Training over 2 days. In these sessions senior students are trained as Peer Leaders (Secondary - Year 10; Primary - Year 6).

The Peer Leaders are then paired with small groups of 8-10 younger students (Secondary - Year 7; Primary - Years K (or first year of formal schooling) to Grade 5). These small groups meet for one class period a week for 8 weeks. PSA resources are used focusing on: “relationships, optimism, resilience, values and/or anti-bullying”. Through these activities the Peer Leaders experience improvements in their “leadership and organisational skills”. In this way participating students are guided to “explore the key concepts underpinning the Peer Support Program and begin to develop a range of life skills” (Peer Support Australia, 2014, p. 3).

“As student skills become more established, they become better equipped to support each other. Peer Leaders become more confident, better leaders and positive role models with improved skills. Group members become more confident, better connected to school and peers, and develop a range of skills. Improvements are demonstrated in relationships, resilience, connectedness, sense of possibility and sense of self. A more positive school culture develops. Classrooms are more productive and supportive. Less bullying occurs. Transitions from primary to secondary school are

improved. Schools have a core of trained and skilled leaders. Mutual empathy and respect develop, between students and staff. The community becomes safer and more cohesive. The school profile is improved. Students have better employability skills, take part in more altruistic activities, and become more responsible citizens (Peer Support Australia, 2014, p. 4).

The benefits of Component 3 were identified as - Increased positive peer influence whereby students develop a corporate responsibility to one another and normalise positive behaviours. Observational feedback seeks to improve the fidelity of the Peer Support Program. Because these programs seek to improve school peer culture, they are considered to have most impact after 3 years of implementation.

Literature review of evaluation studies

In what follows the conclusions for the level-of-evidence ratings are provided for each of the stages of the Program. The sections that follow also summarise the main evidence identified through the literature review.

Component 1: Organisational programs – Level of evidence rating: Some.

There have been no rigorous trials of this component. A literature review of school peer support programs (Coleman et al, 2017) noted the importance of organisational factors emphasised within the PSA services including: commitment and funding from school leaders, implementation support and training, and program monitoring systems.

In their review of charitable services, Colbran et al (2019) identified organisational monitoring activities that enhanced performance. The areas that were recommended for performance monitoring included: service quality; finance; stakeholder perceptions; people and culture; governance and business management; and mission and purpose.

Component 2: School-wide trainings – Level of evidence rating: Moderate.

A literature review (Coleman et al, 2017) found a relatively small amount of evidence for the school-wide benefits of peer support programs. Most studies are qualitative. There is only one published study that included quantitative evaluation of whole-school effects using follow-up and comparison schools (Ellis et al, 2009). This study focussed on an earlier variant of the Peer Support Australia program.

A large school trial of peer support programs in the UK failed to demonstrate school-wide benefits (Day et al, 2020). The recommendations flowing from this trial identified the need for many of the services that are provided by PSA including: clearly structured curricula, guidance, and training for schools, and resources for peer mentors.

Although less rigorous, the qualitative studies have identified a range of potential benefits that include increased happiness and wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, emotional resilience, social skills, relationships, and positive school environment (Coleman et al, 2017). Whilst PSA emerges as an effective service structure, to date there is insufficient research to distinguish between the benefits of the different methods used to organise peer support programs.

A well designed quasi-experimental study evaluated the version of PSA services (Peer Support Foundation program) administered to Year 7 students by Year 10/11 students peer leaders in 2002 (Ellis, 2004; 2009). This version of the 8-week student program emphasised students understanding the school rules and working together to solve problems, but also included peer tutoring. The evaluation design included a 3-wave longitudinal student survey completed at baseline [pre program], 8 weeks later [post program] and at 4-month follow-up.

The control condition were students in three NSW schools in 2001 who completed a matched survey and were compared to students in the same schools in 2002, when the intervention was offered. Structural equation models were used to analyse effects, while statistically adjusting for cohort differences.

The longitudinal analysis in the Year 7 students (Ellis, 2004, N=930, p. 194 - 196) found, in line with hypotheses, that students in the intervention cohort (compared to the control cohort) showed significantly improved trends (small effect sizes around 0.1 standard deviation) in:

- general school self-concept (an indicator of school commitment)
- verbal ability self-concept (an indicator of academic achievement)
- unfavourable attitudes to bullying
- students with lower baseline levels on the above variables showed greater benefit from the intervention
- confidence with opposite-sex social relationships
- peer support
- indicators of work skills including: cooperative teamwork, time efficiency, problem engagement, open thinking (creative problem solving)
- stress management
- self-efficacy and self-confidence
- enjoyment of school

The intervention cohort showed no overall differences compared to the control cohort on:

- same-sex social relationships
- support seeking
- problem solving strategies
- coping with change
- self-esteem
- emotional stability
- active involvement

Analyses demonstrated that the above effects were consistent across the three participating schools and 45 peer support groups within these three schools. There was no evidence that the intervention was harmful on any of the variables.

This study also evaluated the intervention effects on the Year 10/11 students who acted as leaders in running groups for the Year 7 students (Ellis, 2004, N = 858, p. 259 on). Year 10/11 students in the intervention cohort (compared to the 2001 control cohort and 2002 cohort that did not participate as peer leaders) showed significantly improved trends (small effect sizes around 0.1 standard deviation) in:

- perceived leadership ability
- those with lower baseline ability especially benefited from the intervention.
- unfavourable attitudes to bullying
- honesty/trustworthiness
- self-confidence
- self-esteem
- same-sex and opposite-sex social relationships
- open thinking

- physical appearance
- social effectiveness
- quality seeking

The intervention cohort showed no consistent overall differences on:

- cooperative teamwork
- peer support
- school self-concept
- resourcefulness
- sense of possibility
- school self-concept
- coping with change
- time efficiency
- stress management
- self-efficacy
- enjoyment of school

Taken together, Ellis's (2004; 2009) findings suggest the program had significant benefits for school adjustment and positive youth development for both year 7 program participants, and participating 11/12 student leaders. Although effect sizes were small, they applied to large school populations.

Component 3: Student modules – Level of evidence rating: High.

The use of peer support modules that include peer tutoring and mentoring have been independently evaluated and found to be effective in multiple randomised trials. Cohen et al, (1982) reported a meta-analysis of 22 quasi-experimental and 30 randomised trial evaluations of school tutoring programs, which revealed positive effects on academic performance and attitudes both for those who received tutoring and also for peers providing tutoring. Compared to usual practice controls, students receiving peer-tutoring demonstrated significant improvements in academic performance (effect size [*ES*] .49 standard deviation units, based on 28 studies [$k = 28$]). Peer-tutoring led to larger improvements than other forms of tutoring ($ES = .29, k = 24$), such as from adults. Tutoring programs had significantly larger effects where they were: well structured, shorter (less than 5 weeks), in the subject area of maths rather than reading, and focussed on skills that were easily taught. Improvements in academic performance were also significantly larger compared to controls, for peers who provided tutoring ($ES = .34, k = 22$).

A literature review of adolescent peer mentoring programs (Petosa & Smith, 2014) reported a range of health and social benefits. These included reduced: antisocial behaviours, smoking, drug use, and increased adult help-seeking for suicide risk, and for females, physical activity. Clearly structured programs were reported to have clearer benefits.

Reviews have noted that the content taught through peer support programs is an important component in their effectiveness (Cohen et al, 1982; Petosa & Smith, 2014). The early variants of the PSA program included adherence to school rules, while more recent programs cover areas relevant to resilience, character, and positive development. In their review, Dodge et al (2006) provide examples of how inadequately structured peer programs can have detrimental effects. This occurs when peers convey unhealthy attitudes and behaviours through active persuasion or more subtly through unhealthy group norms and or competitive peer hierarchies. These observations

reinforce the conclusions of reviews that note superior benefits for well-structured peer programs (Cohen et al, 1982; Petosa & Smith, 2014).

Implications for further understanding and applying the underpinning evidence

The section that follows examines the implications of the earlier information for further understanding and applying the underpinning evidence for the PSA Program. The information in Table 1 reveals the PSA Program is organised within a coherent framework that offers multi-layered and structured assistance to schools to enhance peer relationships and positive youth development. PSA is the only peer support program internationally to have been evaluated in a published rigorous school trial that demonstrated school-wide benefits (Ellis et al, 2009).

The main benefits that young people are intended to experience through their participation in the service are:

- improvements in emotional literacy/emotion regulation
- social inclusion (including enhanced peer relationships)
- reduction in experiences of bullying
- improved social skills
- positive youth development in domains of care for others

The contemporary PSA program was modified following the Ellis (2004; 2009) evaluation. The Ellis findings showed that while most students evaluated the intervention favourably, a proportion were critical of one or more components. In response to the prior evaluation findings, Year 11 or 12 students no longer act as senior peers, and this is now performed by Year 10 students. The program content has been revised, and a greater range of services now support school implementation.

Internationally, there is increasing interest in the potential benefits of peer support programs (Coleman et al, 2017). There is clear evidence that without adequate structure and support, these programs can have neutral or negative effects (Dodge et al, 2006). It is recognised that the PSA service structure has shown school-wide benefits for students (Coleman et al, 2017). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic it is predictable that there will be increased interest in efficient service systems to enhance student wellbeing and resilience. Given there have been no rigorous trials comparing different peer support programs (Coleman et al, 2017), future evaluation studies should be encouraged to examine this issue.

Implementation science to improve peer support program delivery in schools

Implementation science studies the uptake of evidence-based practices to maximise benefits for populations targeted by service or policy improvements (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). Forman et al (2013) argue that implementation science is essential for the effective delivery of evidence-based interventions in schools.

The current review identifies implementation elements of peer support programs that may be associated with increased student benefits including: coverage of skills that are amenable to peer support, managing negative peer influences (Dodge et al, 2006), well-structured programs (Cohen et al, 1982; Coleman et al, 2017; Petosa & Smith, 2014), and coverage of a range of school implementation support needs (Coleman et al, 2017; Day et al, 2020). In recent evaluations of UK school peer support programs, failure to achieve measurable effects was associated with weakly structured and poorly implemented programs (Day et al, 2020).

Forman et al (2013) outline areas that should be considered to encourage effective implementation in school programs. These include: efforts to understand and overcome barriers to implementation, identifying core intervention components, program monitoring to ensure essential elements are

implemented with fidelity, and continuing evaluation of service user experience including diverse student populations and school settings.

It is recommended that the PSA Program seeks to expand its reach, guided by an implementation evaluation and service improvement system to document, and increase the potential benefits. The expansion of PSA should focus on enhancing school climate, student wellbeing and positive development, while also contributing to international improvements quantified in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

PSA are already actively designing implementation monitoring platforms to support schools. It is recommended that PSA investigate the formation of University partnerships, involving schools and student peers in research tasks to improve implementation systems, while also enhancing valuable academic skills.

Toumbourou (2016) has recommended that positive youth development programs provide students with opportunities to increase knowledge and skills in areas that will advance character and drive future employment including the prevention sciences and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is recommended that PSA investigate the feasibility of involving schools and student peers in coalitions such as Communities That Care (Toumbourou et al, 2019), which support community-school partnerships to implement innovative prevention science practices to enhance child and youth development outcomes (Toumbourou, 2016).

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