

{ MENTAL HEALTH }

School's in for self-help

A national peer support program is helping students of all ages deal with emotional issues

PENNY LANGFIELD

SCHOOLCHILDREN face a barrage of issues that can affect their emotional wellbeing: divorcing parents, taunts from bullies, forging relationships with peers or even being picked last for a sports team. Such factors can influence mental health, an area experts say is one of the biggest health challenges confronting youths.

Compounding the dilemma is that school curriculums typically do not directly address life skills such as resilience, optimism and relationship development.

That is where Peer Support Australia steps in. The nationwide charity aims to help young people develop the personal skills to deal with their problems and improve their mental, social and physical wellbeing. A range of programs are integrated into the school curriculum through initiatives such as professional development for teachers and parents and student leadership training.

When high school music teacher Lindsey Grenet was looking for a career change, she sought a role that would complement her skills and experience, and opted to become an educational consultant at Peer Support.

"It has been encouraging to be involved in something that helps teachers by addressing the emotional and social wellbeing of students," she says. "Supporting teachers in this process can only benefit the students, which

in the end is what it's all about."

Grenet says the programs help children foster a strong sense of self and confidence in their ability to handle different situations.

"They can use their own personal strengths and acknowledge all the things that they're good at and remember to rely on these and use them when they're having a hard time," she says. "In terms of mental health and mental wellbeing, the skills they [learn] are life skills that will help them forever."

The late Elizabeth Campbell, a health educator, launched the not-for-profit program in the early 1970s while trying to help classmates deal with the death of a 15-year-old Sydney high school student from a heroin overdose. Today, it covers about 1000 schools and 200,000 students across Australia and is committed to tackling mental health issues.

The need is clear. In Mission Australia's national survey of young Australians last year, respondents indicated family, stress, body image, alcohol and drugs were among their greatest concerns. Peer Support has been hiring new education consultants, who are the heart of the initiative. They help schools implement programs and are also responsible for writing the content that appears in the student-led activities.

"A lot of the modules are based around life skills, so we're talking about things like values and re-



BRENTON EDWARDS

Year 10 pupils from Adelaide High School involved in peer support; top right, Lindsey Grenet

specting each other and inclusion, and developing relationship skills, resilience and looking to be optimistic. They're values that cross over to a lot of different life skills," Grenet says.

Most of the education consultants are former schoolteachers. Grenet took part in some workshops with Peer Support a couple of years ago before joining the group last year.

"I thought I'd like to try something else and moving into training and working with adults was

the next step," she says. "It's a really wonderful and rewarding job. If teachers are looking for something else, then a role where you can still work in schools in a program like this would be ideal."

Grenet believes her experience as a teacher and knowledge of how timetables and curriculums operate have been crucial to relating to the teachers she trains. "When you're talking to teachers they need to know you understand how difficult it is to fit anything extra in and it's that under-

standing that makes a difference in explaining it to them."

Grenet had to complete a certificate IV in training and assessment through a vocational education course to qualify for the consulting role.

The Peer Support program encourages young people to help themselves, with students running school-based activities with the backing of teachers. For example, in primary schools the older students are trained as peer support leaders and interact with stu-



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dents from kindergarten through to the higher grades. In high schools, Year 10 students deliver activities to younger students.

"That supports the transition from primary school into secondary school and then they work together in their peer support groups in areas looking at optimism and values, anti-bullying, resilience and relationships," Grenet says.

Teachers also facilitate leadership training programs for students that address skills involved in decision-making, problem solving, communication, assertiveness and group management.

"Students then have the opportunity to be a mentor and leader for the younger kids in the school, which I think they take a lot of pride in doing," Grenet explains.

Peer Support receives funding and support from government and philanthropic groups, and Governor-General Quentin Bryce is vice-regal patron.

Grenet acknowledges teaching adults is an entirely different dynamic from instructing children but says her passion for teaching and helping students is still fulfilled even though she is no longer in the classroom.

"That's one of the things about teaching that I loved, being able to impact on lots of different kids. I feel like I'm able to still make a difference to kids and contribute."