



PEERS HELPING PEERS - RESEARCH INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

A 3 year study has been conducted by the Self Research Centre of the University of Western Sydney into evaluating the effectiveness, strengths and limitations of the **Peer Support Program**.

The **Peer Support Program** is designed to train senior students to work regularly with small groups of younger students. The senior students are responsible for leading groups of younger students through the program content and activities. Broadly, program content delivered by peers addresses goal setting, group decision making, problem solving and the development of support networks. The program is designed to be experiential and to encourage as much participation as possible.

The **Peer Support Program** is a widely used intervention in Australian schools and is administered to Year 7 students by Year 10/11 students and aims to alleviate problems associated with adolescence by enhancing school self-concept, school citizenship, sense of self, connectedness, resourcefulness and sense of possibility for the future.

Participants of the study had not previously been involved in a **Peer Support Program**. Schools were a mix of co-educational and single sex, metropolitan, outer-metropolitan and non-metropolitan.

2,335 secondary school students enrolled in Years 7, 10 and 11 were tested and questionnaires comprised both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Results

- Students who were selected as Peer Leaders indicated that being a Peer Leader was valuable to their personal growth and development and improved their leadership skills. Most students also felt that the program improved their communication skills.
- The majority of students indicated that the program helped students to make new friends not only in their own year, but with older and younger students with whom previously they would have had no contact.
- The program changed students' perceptions of bullying. Students explained that the program encouraged them not to bully others and informed them of who to turn to for assistance if bullying occurs. Interestingly, a student also identified that the program had resulted in establishing a rapport with a person who had previously bullied them.
- The program was proven to be beneficial in enhancing students' problem solving and decision making skills. Some students mentioned that their stress management skills also improved.
- The Program enhanced students' self-confidence and sense of worth. It gave them the confidence to be themselves and not to be influenced negatively by others or submit to peer pressure.
- Year 7 students said that the program had taught them to think positively rather than negatively.
- The program increased enjoyment of school, relations with peers and perception of support from those around.

Summary

Participation in the **Peer Support Program** improved students' feelings about themselves, their ability to cope with pressure, their relationships with their peers and changed their attitudes towards bullying. It assisted Peer Leaders in developing leadership skills and increased self-understanding for Year 7 students. The effects of the program increased over time even after finishing the program and the program was most beneficial for those students with lower skill levels prior to starting the program. Interestingly there was little variance in the effects of the program across participating schools and across Peer Support Groups.