

Peer support for mental wellbeing in schools and college

A guide for school and college staff



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Peer support can be an effective way of supporting and building children and young people's mental wellbeing as part of a whole-school or college approach to mental health.

This guide introduces staff to peer support for mental wellbeing and helps them lay the groundwork to co-develop appropriate support for their setting.



It is designed to support staff to:

- understand the nature of peer support for mental wellbeing
- implement the five core principles that underpin successful peer support
- scope and plan appropriate peer support to co-develop with children and young people.

Please note that this guide does not include training or supervision materials for use with children and young people.

What is peer support for mental wellbeing?



Peer support for mental wellbeing refers to a range of peer-led programmes and approaches to support children and young people.

This includes peer tutoring, coaching, listening, mentoring, mediation and counselling, befriending and buddying.

It is a form of preventative support and early intervention that aims to address mild mental health needs.

Programmes usually have three key features:

- ▶ children and young people helping and supporting each other
- ▶ support being offered in a planned and structured way
- ▶ supporters that are trained and supervised to carry out their role safely and effectively.

Who is peer support for mental wellbeing for?

Peer support can be:

Universal: support across a whole population of children and young people (e.g., a whole school or college, or year group).



Targeted: support aimed at specific groups of children and young people where there is a known vulnerability to mental health difficulties, or where they have some experience of mild mental health difficulties.



For further guidance on developing your setting's targeted support offer, see our [targeted support tool and guide](#).

It is important to note that peer support is not an alternative to specialist support, and peer mentors should not be supporting children and young people with complex needs.

Staff should establish clear guidelines and procedures for identifying and referring pupils whose needs fall outside the scope of peer support to relevant specialist services.

Understanding need

The type of peer support that is right for your setting will depend on your pupils' needs, your staff's capacity and expertise, and the nature of your setting.

Any peer support programme should be coordinated with your setting's broader offer and any other universal or targeted support already in place.

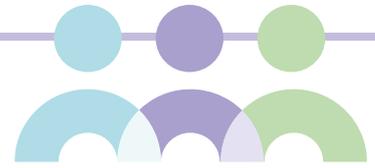
Resource: 5 Steps – Understanding need



Staff should work with children and young people throughout the consultation, planning and development phase to understand what form of support would best meet their needs.

Resource: [Mental health lead resource hub - Enable student voice in schools and colleges](#)

Types of peer support



Peer support can take different forms and be delivered in various ways:

- ▶ **One-on-one mentoring:** mentors and mentees have regular meetings during school or college hours, after school or college, or in a community setting.
- ▶ **One-off or drop-in mentoring:** peer mentors take on roles such as playground or corridor champions, are available for drop-in clubs, or act as mediators to resolve peer disputes.
- ▶ **Peer mentor-facilitated wellbeing sessions:** peer mentors help develop and facilitate training sessions on topics such as bullying or building confidence.
- ▶ **Community-based programmes:** peer support within community organisation settings.
- ▶ **Online support:** peer support through websites and apps for more immediate and accessible support.

Planning peer support for mental wellbeing

When planning and co-developing peer support programmes, settings should designate a staff lead who can act as the programme facilitator.

The facilitator should work with other staff and young people to develop and plan the programme.

From the outset, it's important to work with young people to:

- identify the specific group(s) of pupils who may benefit
- establish the objectives of your peer support programme and how you will monitor its impacts
- consider and address potential risks, confidentiality and safeguarding issues
- ensure leadership support.

[For a full list of key considerations, please see the planning guidance document attached to this resource.](#)

Five Core Principles

The Five Core Principles can ensure your approach to peer support is effective, evidence-based, safe and meaningful.

These principles were developed in consultation with children and young people as part of the Department for Education Peer Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing programme.

1. Work where young people already are

▶ Work with young people to establish what kind of support would work for them, and how, where and when it should be delivered.

▶ Engage young people using creative methods and resources to ensure they are involved as much as possible.

▶ Use resources or activities that are at the appropriate developmental level.

2. Involve the right people

▶ Carefully consider the recruitment of peer mentors: establish a screening process to ensure that peer mentors are suitable for their role.

▶ As well as a designated staff lead and facilitator, build a staff team to ensure leads aren't working in isolation.

▶ Involve pupils, parents and carers and staff in decision-making.

Resource: [5 Steps – Involve pupils, parents and carers and staff in decision-making](#)



3. Focus on relationships

▶ Build trust and create a safe space for mentors and mentees.

▶ Support peer mentors in initiating and building relationships with their mentees.

▶ Emphasise the importance of safe and trusting relationships for promoting positive mental health and resilience.

4. Encourage young people's ownership

- ▶ Consult with children and young people from the start, including as part of the initial planning stages.
- ▶ Co-design, co-produce, and co-deliver the programme with children and young people to ensure engagement and foster a sense of agency.
- ▶ Work 'at arm's length', ensuring children and young people have ownership over the programme.

5. Establish safety and clear boundaries

- ▶ Ensure peer mentors receive adequate training and supervision.
- ▶ Address concerns about safeguarding, confidentiality, and boundaries through training and ongoing support.
- ▶ Establish clear lines of communication for addressing any safeguarding or urgent mental health concerns and linking with wider support systems.

Resource: [5 Steps – Working together](#)



Next steps: training, supervision and sustainability

Before launching a peer support programme, it is essential that all staff and peer mentors receive appropriate training and supervision to carry out their roles.

Appropriate training should include support with:

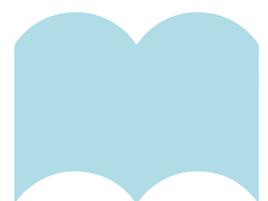
- developing strong leadership and co-ordination from the implementation team
- establishing support from the whole-school or college community (including the senior leadership team)
- ensuring dedicated time for planning and sessions
- co-designing your offer with children and young people
- recruiting committed and reliable mentors
- developing inclusive practice
- monitoring and evaluation
- delivering training and supervision
- developing a sustainable delivery model.



Further support: [See the mentoring programmes](#) on our targeted support tool for training programmes that may be relevant to your setting.

Anna Freud is developing a peer support training to support schools and colleges to co-develop their peer support offer with young people.

[Sign up](#) to our training newsletter to find out when you can book your place on the course.



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Planning guidance

The following planning guidance can help you to plan the co-development and delivery of your peer support programme:

Reflection 	Notes 
<p>Who would benefit from a peer support programme within your setting?</p>	
<p>How will you encourage and generate participation in the development and implementation of the programme?</p>	
<p>How will you recruit and train the peer mentors?</p>	
<p>Is there support from key colleagues to ensure the programme is implemented successfully (e.g., SLT, SMHL, pastoral team, governors)?</p>	
<p>How will you encourage staff buy in? (Understanding context of its need, the process and how they can support the programme.)</p>	
<p>Are there the resources available to ensure the programme is a success? (Funding, timetabling, availability of staff, logistical considerations, etc.)</p>	

Reflection



Notes



How will you ensure that the programme is safe, with firm boundaries? Consider: understanding limits of confidentiality, awareness of safeguarding procedures, provision of supervision or reflective space.

How do the objectives of your programme align with your whole-school approach to mental wellbeing?

Are there structures and procedures in place within your whole school approach to support the success of your programme? (E.g., can supervision be offered to your peer mentors?)

Are peer mentors aware of safeguarding procedures and how to manage disclosures?

How will you ensure that the programme is impactful?

How will you ensure that the programme is sustainable within your setting?