

Title:

Common Reasons Why Peer Education Fails

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Conclusion:

This article cites common reasons why peer-led education efforts in health promotion often fail, despite the fact that potential benefits of peer-led efforts are well established. The seven common mistakes made in programs are the lack of clear goals; poor program design; lack of financial resources; lack of appreciation for the skills needed by staff; inadequate training and support; lack of clear boundaries for staff; and failure to secure multi-agency support. The paper addresses each problem and suggests potential solutions. Peer education alone cannot maintain long-term health behavior changes, but it has a significant place within a broad range of health initiatives.

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to identify the common reasons that peer-education programs fail. Because there is no clear understanding about what constitutes a peer-education program and no accepted model of practice, programs are implemented very differently and the comparison of these programs is difficult. Currently, there are only a few reviews of peer-education programs examining common problems. These have focused mainly on theoretical issues and process evaluation. The authors reviewed Milburn's research on peer-education programs and various project reports looking for common problems among peer-education programs. The authors also share their knowledge based on 14 years of designing and implementing peer-education programs. The information presented in this paper adds to the understanding of effective practices for peer-education programs and is valuable for program managers who want to avoid repeating common mistakes in the future.

Findings:

Seven common mistakes of peer-education programs are specifically addressed in this paper.

1. Lack of clear aims and objectives - Many projects were unclear of what they originally hoped to achieve. Good program management with realistic and clear objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, and time- specific is important. Good process and outcome evaluation should be in place.
2. Inconsistency between project design and external environmental constraints – The project design needs to fit the targeted group, funds, and people available, timescale, and the setting, i.e. school-based vs. night club based.
3. Lack of investment in peer education – This should not be viewed as the cheap and easy approach, but need to have adequate funds and time available, when possible peer educators should be paid.

4. Lack of appreciation that peer education is a complex process to manage – Peer-led work is often “tacked onto” other responsibilities, while underestimating the time involved and the complexity of managing a peer-led project. Few accredited training courses are available, but peer-led project workers require highly skilled personnel.
5. Inadequate training and support for peer educators – An adequate structured training program that fits the peer-led task and should include not only factual information, but time to reflect on the peer educators own opinions and develop needed interpersonal skills.
6. Lack of clarity around boundary issues and control – Empowerment of young people as peer educators is a process that requires project managers to be likeable, approachable, become an important role model in the young person’s life, yet set clear boundaries.
7. Failure to secure multi-agency support – Multi-agency steering groups assisted the most successful projects with shared ownership, communication problems, opened funding sources, and protected from negative publicity.

Additionally, program managers need to understand that youth workers need to acquire a range of skills to coordinate a youth program. Work cannot be “tacked” on to a staff person’s existing responsibilities without encountering problems. Adequate training is particularly important for young people who may not otherwise be prepared to handle personal or professional issues that may arise. An appropriate training program for youth workers could be helpful. Youth workers must be empowered, but supervision by adult staff is essential to make that youth know the boundaries for personal and professional conduct.

Implications for Prevention:

This paper increases the knowledge about effective practices in peer program design and implementation by identifying the common problems and suggesting potential solutions. Previous research has established that peer-education programs are beneficial and that they have positive short-term effects, however, more research is needed to study the impact of long-term behaviors. Peer-education programs will only be successful in affecting long-term behavior change as part of a comprehensive community-wide effort.

Summary Provided By:

Mark Lomurray and Emi Narita