



# PEER SKILLS

## Helping Skills For Life

**Peer Skills Presentation Office for Youth, Youth Conference 2007**

### Presenters:

Francesca Lejeune, Peer Skills Manager, Queensland, Lifeline Community Care Queensland  
Gay Toohey, Guidance Counsellor, James Nash SHS, Gympie  
Heather Cummings, Youth Support Co-ordinator, Lifeline Community Care Queensland  
Heidi Dickfos, Year 11 student, James Nash SHS, Gympie  
Lewis Spence, Year 11 student, James Nash SHS, Gympie  
Renee Mills, Youth Support Co-ordinator, Community Connections, The Gap State High School

### Introduction

My name is Francesca Lejeune, the Peer Skills Manager for Queensland with Lifeline Community Care. I have been involved with the Peer Skills program since 1999 when I facilitated my first Peer Skills Workshop. I have been managing the program since 2001 and have now run about 25 workshops for young people and 18 Peer Skills Facilitator Training Programs for workers planning to facilitate the workshop as a part of their work with young people. In the Peer Skills, Helping Skills for Life presentation, I was supported by Year 11 students from James Nash State High School, Lewis Spence and Heidi Dickfos, Guidance Counsellor Gay Toohey and Youth Support Coordinator (with Lifeline Community Care) Heather Cummings and Renee Mills from Community Connections who is the Youth Support Coordinator at the Gap State High School.

I started by describing a little of Peer Skills history, what it is and does and what I believe are two elements of the program that help young people develop some skills that are valuable throughout their lives. The team from James Nash SHS discussed how it is implemented at their school and lastly Renee Mills spoke about her experiences with the program at that school. We viewed the dvd about the school's Peer Supporter program that was made with the Year 11 students in late 2006.

### About Peer Skills

Peer Skills was developed in 1994 by Boystown's Kids Help Line national counselling service in response to the many calls the service receives from young people concerned about their friends and wanting support to help their friends in the best possible way. Now with Lifeline Community Care in Queensland and Lifeline ACT, Peer Skills continues to be run throughout Australia with other agencies picking up carriage of the program in the other states.

The Peer Skills Workshop is an empowering, young person centred, fun, interactive two day program run for participants between the age of 12 and 18 that acknowledges and builds on young peoples natural listening skills, helps develop and build problem solving skills, relationship skills and increases participants' confidence in safely assisting a friend or peer. Groups are ideally comprised of between 12 and 16 participants.

As well as enhancing informal peer helping and individual skill development, Peer Skills can also be used to assist the development of supportive networks in schools and communities. Australian Young Leader

of the Year, Tanya Major in her keynote address at the Youth Conference said that it isn't enough to "give young people a voice". She argued that young people need structures and supports that enable them to be active players. I believe that through the Peer Skills Workshop and supported peer programs young people develop strengths and skills through appropriate training and roles and responsibilities that provide them with opportunities to practice and participate in pro-social ways. In doing so, they are able to actively contribute to a climate of acceptance, care and respect within their families, schools and the community.

At the heart of Peer Skills is a belief that young people really care about their peers and want to develop self understanding and effective supportive relationships. Peer Skills also recognizes that young people have an important role to play with each other and within their families and communities.

### **What's in a Peer Skills Workshop?**

There are six sessions in a Peer Skills Workshop which are typically run over two 9am-3pm school days. The first session, "Introducing Peer Skills" sets up the conditions for a safe and supportive environment, explores concerns and strengths of young people in society generally and introduces participants to the concept of peer helping. The second session "Exploring Values" assists the group members to consider their own beliefs and attitudes and how they relate to their own lives and the context of helping others. The last session on the first day is "Really Listening" which includes lots of fun and practical activities to build on participants listening and communication skills.

Day two session three is "Problem Solving" and introduces participants to a particular framework for solving problems (POOCH) in their own lives and for use when assisting others. Session four "Looking After Yourself" encourages young people to be aware of their strengths and limitations when helping friends and peers and to consider strategies to appropriately self care. Lastly the "Getting Help" session explores obstacles to help seeking and identifying when adult or professional help is needed and how to access that help.

Rey Carr, from the Peer Resources Network in Canada refers to the three R's- elements that need to be present in effective peer work programs. I believe this applies equally to peer work training and to resulting peer work programs. The training or initiative must be RELEVANT, meaning that it relates to the lives of young people and is something they need. The next "R" involves RELATIONSHIP BUILDING. This is an important hook for young people because they really want to have meaningful relationships with others and they want to get to know more young people in their schools and communities. REWARDS relates to both intrinsic rewards- for example, the pleasure and sense of achievement gained from doing an activity and drawing meaning from it and extrinsic rewards such as the badge and certificate received on completion of the training.

### **Two Important Themes-Friendship and Helping**

#### **Friendship and Befriending**

In my years of involvement with Peer Skills two themes consistently emerge and reinforce for me why Peer Skills is such a valuable and important program for young people. The first is the importance of friends and friendship for young people (and everyone in society generally). Peer Skills really supports and celebrates the importance of supportive friendships.

Muhammad Ali said

"friendship...is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."

There is much that schools can do to enhance the meaning of friendship and to create opportunities for young people to build friendships and positive relationships. In many schools where the workshop is run, young people nominate a peer whom they believe has natural listening skills and would make a great peer helper. Young people are then selected from across a range of groups often within the same year level or sometimes across a couple of year levels to participate in the workshop. Depending on the goals of the

workshop this can mean that a group may represent individuals from a mix of ages, gender, cultural backgrounds and the various “groups” that make up a school population. This emphasis on diversity and inclusion makes for a really dynamic 2 day workshop. Young people are excited by the opportunity to build friendships and relationships beyond their existing social groups and take from the experience profound lessons in listening to the experiences and values of others, accepting and respecting their fellow participants and learning relationship and networking skills that they can use in an ongoing way at school and in their everyday lives.

Peer Skills is also effectively delivered in non school settings and tailored for groups of young people from a variety of backgrounds with specific needs. This has included juvenile justice settings, young people undertaking leadership training, culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee young people, indigenous young people, young people living independently and young people in employment training. This mode of delivery enables young people to explore themes common to group participants and to strengthen their networks of support and friendship.

### **Helping Self and Others**

The second important theme for me relates to developing helping skills. This includes skills for helping self and also helping others. Young people need to be able to help themselves if they are to effectively assist others and be aware that skills such as help seeking are learnt and practiced over a lifetime. Young people also learn that through helping others they themselves develop greater self understanding and help themselves at the same time.

Two lovely quotes that illustrate this are from Ralph Waldo Emerson

“ It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself...Serve and thou shall be served.”

And a Hindu Proverb

“Help thy brother’s boat across and lo! Thine own has reached the shore.”

For some young people and schools the emphasis is on “informal helping”. Other groups of young people and school communities actively assist young people to use their skills in formal roles. These may include roles such as; peer helpers, buddies, mentors, peer tutors, peer educators and special projects and events assistants. Whether the roles are informal or formal it is important that appropriate ongoing support is provided by adult workers.

### **Below is a summary of the presentation by the staff and students at James Nash State High School, Gympie**

Gay Toohey, Guidance Counsellor

- How Peer Skills has been helping James Nash SHS for five years, since 2002
- Approximately 150-200 young people have been trained through the program
- We aim to run two Year 9 groups and two Year 11 groups each year
- Target Year 9 as this year presents with a higher incidence of challenging behaviours
- Year 11 as they have more “adult” and relationship concerns
- Follow up support for the workshop, we meet regularly at a morning tea, once a month.

Lewis Spence, Year 11 student James Nash State High School

- Heidi and I both participated in the program in year nine and recently in Year 11
- Before doing the Peers Skills training I thought giving advice was a major part of helping others, but have learned through Peer Skills that allowing people to solve their own problems is a major skill needed throughout life.
- We spent time learning different listening skills and how to apply them to everyday life, which has come in handy as it has enabled me to listen to my friends in a totally different manner.

- Peer Skills this year was helpful as it was a refresher course. I enjoyed participating this year, not so much to learn new things but to listen to others and their stories and how the previous Peers Skills Workshop has changed their life.

Heidi Dickfos, Year 11 Student James Nash State High School

- When I did the Peer Skills Workshop in Year 9, it was more of a game, but this year it was more focused on actually solving problems and understanding how others solve problems, whether they are followers or leaders. For example, we played this game ‘knots’.
- Before Peers Skills, when friends came to me with a problem, I would give them advice as to how I would solve that problem and never actually give them a chance to let them solve it themselves. However, Peers Skills has helped me a lot as I now no longer give advice but allow my friends to solve their own problems
- I also feel that from participating in the Year 9 workshop to this year’s workshop in Year 11 I have grown in confidence. I feel that it is due to this confidence boost that I now don’t view things as negatively as I would have. The environment that the Peers Skills Workshop has created has help me become less judgemental and view things with a clear and understanding mind.

Heather Cummings, Youth Support Coordinator, Lifeline Community Care

- The schools in Gympie have embraced and have quite a few people qualified to facilitate Peer Skills within the schools’ community. Tin Can Bay State School and Mary Valley State College are two other schools that have participated in Peers Skills.
- Gympie SHS in the past has run quite a few of the programs but lost one of the people who run these programs, so we are just getting it back on track. Indigenous support workers at Gympie SHS are looking forward to doing the training.
- It really good to see the interaction of the participants in a Peer Skills group and the facilitators as they tend to bond over the two days as well as after the program. It makes us all equal and helps kids with future directions.

**For more information about the Peer Skills Workshop and Peer Skills Facilitator Training contact**

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Thank you! from Lifeline  
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