



Peer relationships: supportive strategies to help build peer relationships

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Peer relationships: support and interventions at school

Many looked-after children find navigating social relationships with peers confusing. When you are fighting for survival in the early years of life, developing cooperative and prosocial skills is not a priority and not essential for survival. In addition, you may not have had an appropriate 'blueprint' (see chapter one) of how to form a positive reciprocal relationship with others. However, like all children, forming relationships with peers is really important to them. When they are presented with challenges, it can be intensely distressing for them and lead to some insecurity in their attachments with their peers. Unfortunately, when a child or young person feels rejected by their peer group, they are vulnerable to exploitation. They are at risk of gravitation to those who provide them with a sense of belonging, even if they are dangerous.

Strategies and interventions

General

The following interventions have been collated through consultation with members of CLA Educational Psychologists in HIEP and education colleagues who have worked extensively with looked-after children

Support children when they are building relationships and provide mediated experiences rather than waiting to respond in a crisis when their relationships start to go wrong. Children and young people who have not had any clear blueprints provided on how to navigate peer relationships need these to be scaffolded by an adult or an older/socially proficient peer.

Encourage children and young people to be involved in **clubs and activities**. They will learn social rules by following the lead of adults and other pupils. **Being involved in clubs and activities outside of school also helps build resilience. However, it is important that the child is not involved in too many activities, so they are 'overloaded'. It is also important to be aware that forming attachments with several people is a challenge for these children and young people, so it is important that they form a close bond with an adult at the club to support them.** This relationship with an adult in an after-school club is key in helping the child/young person develop social skills, as the adult can act as a guide/mediator when the child/young person is forming relationships with their peers.

Provide structure in their free time. Unstructured play and lunchtimes are very challenging socially for these children and young people. Zoning recreational spaces is a good way of providing structure. Ensure that there is a wide variety of activities available at unstructured times.

Adults need to get alongside **younger children and mediate with other children to teach them how to play with their peers. A high level of adult mediation will also be needed for older pupils in structured social group work.**

The **pupil needs to practise games where they are not in sole control** and can, therefore, learn to **cooperate and work with others**. Again, this can be done through games, group work or playground activities for younger children. **The key is they will not learn these skills just from being with their peers, an adult needs to act as a facilitator or mediator to do this.**

Buddying systems

There are various forms of structuring and providing peer support.

It could be argued that every pupil would benefit from having a buddy, mentor or tutor.

Peer mentoring is useful for children and young people who have low self-esteem or have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; this is often also appropriate for able learners who are underachieving.

Peer tutoring is effective for children who need support in lessons (particularly in practical activities such as science investigations), where a more competent peer can act as a guide. It is also good for reading practice and activities, such as learning spellings outside of the classroom.

Circle of friends provides a support network for a child with a disability or behavioural difficulties or a child who is just new to the school.

Buddies: one-to-one support that can work well for children who lack confidence. They can respond well to an older brother or sister relationship with a peer who will look out for them.

Study partners: sharing ideas about how to revise, make useful notes, and plan an essay. These are skills that (older) able pupils can pass on to others in an accessible way.

Peer-mediation: young people are trained to mediate peer disagreements in instances such as name-calling, bullying, fighting and quarrelling. Group support enables children and young people to understand the hurt that they have caused so that each person comes away from the mediation with a positive experience and the sense that the outcome is fair to both sides

Children and young people at risk of exploitation

Many care-experienced children and young people often feel isolated due to their **feelings of difference and lack of belonging**. Yet, like all children and young people, they are also desperate to belong and feel connected to others. However, young people who have complex emotional trauma often tend to be less aware of the dangers some peer groups can pose and struggle to consider alternative perspectives and other's intentions. This is because there are complex relational dynamics at play for young people who have experienced emotional trauma related specifically to abandonment. **They often gravitate to making connections with other traumatised children as they experience feelings of 'being understood' and a 'sense of belonging' that they have not felt before. However, this can also make them highly vulnerable to exploitation by those who only know this too well.**

In short, if peer relationships are not managed sensitively, and vulnerable children and young people are not provided with appropriate support in learning to keep themselves safe and understand the intentions of others, they can become vulnerable to exploitation by others who can groom and manipulate their vulnerabilities.

A word about dopamine

The neurotransmitter dopamine is associated with low levels of motivation. Even mild levels of stress can impact plummeting dopamine levels in teenagers, which is one reason they may gravitate to more risk-taking behaviours (such as substance misuse). Therefore, it is important to encourage dopamine-replenishing activities, such as daily exercise, and to provide support in accessing enjoyable physical activities. Ideally, this support should come from peers who can provide a sense of belonging and a positive peer group.

Developing positive peer relationships

The following are practical ideas for teachers to draw on in helping the children and young people develop positive peer relationships.

From 2006 to 2008, the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) was contracted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to establish a high-quality, formal and sustainable peer mentoring scheme in 180 schools in England. The scheme was designed to be assessed for its impact on pupils and schools.

For reference:

- http://www.mandbf.org.uk/projects/peermentoring/training_events/ (for training)
- <http://www.peermentoring.org.uk/>
- [http:// www.samaritans.org/](http://www.samaritans.org/)

Whichever type of peer support you are going to set up, the key issues will be:

- the choice of pupils (both tutors/mentors and tutees/mentees)
- formalisation of the project
- appropriate training
- ongoing support for the project
- careful monitoring and evaluation.

The choice of pupils

You may want to approach particular pupils who you know are reliable and sensible, with good interpersonal skills – or advertise throughout the school and be prepared to turn down some pupils. Many schools have found that when pupils with a history of behavioural dysregulation and low self-esteem are asked to accept the role of tutor, they rise to the occasion, their confidence grows, and the tutoring is valuable to both partners.

Recent research by the MBF has shown that schemes seemed to be most successful when students were matched according to similar interests and hobbies or similar personality characteristics. Matching boys to girls was deemed to be less successful than same-gender matching. The child needs to have the approach properly explained in basic terms and be prepared to give it a go. The child's parent or carer will need to have had the approach explained to them and given their

consent and support.

Formalisation of the project

The MBF research findings advocate formalising mentoring schemes so that they have prestige in the school, with appropriate resources allocated to them. This might include:

- mentor-mentee meetings pre-arranged by the scheme coordinator at a set time and place each week
- designated mentoring area within the school
- special badges for mentors
- scheme coordinator available for sessions.

On-going support for the project

The key to success in this approach is a teacher or teaching assistant (TA) who is committed to using it and will be able to give sufficient time to support the tutors or mentors. Regular meetings can provide mutual support within the group and opportunities to discuss tactics, progress and any issues that arise. This interaction also helps to sustain interest and motivation.

Adapted from 'Effective Peer Support: Optimus Education' (Evans, L. 2009).

Unstructured time

To support pupils in making and keeping friends, the zoning of areas during unstructured time has proven effective. This would be in addition to the variety of clubs and extracurricular activities run by members of staff. When zoning recreational space, it is useful to ask pupils to sign up for areas in which they may wish to hang out. This can be done during registration time at the start or at the end of the week, in preparation for the following week. If the school has a virtual learning environment (VLE), it can also be managed electronically. Ask different year groups/tutor groups to lead and run the rooms; prefects can take a key role here. Of course, lunchtime supervisors and members of staff on duty will need to be briefed. See the example below.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Classroom 1 Film	Classroom 1 Film	Classroom 1 Film	Classroom 1 Film	Classroom 1 Film
Drama room Organised activities (senior)	Classroom 2 Peer mentor time for Y7-8	Music suite Mid-week quiz	Classroom 2 Peer mentor time for Y10	Classroom 3 Music and chat KS3
Classroom 2 Peer mentor time for Y9	Library Space for quiet time	Drama room Organised activities (senior)	ICT rooms Gaming KS3	Classroom 2 Peer mentor time for Y11
Room 6 Monday's mystery	ICT rooms Gaming KS4	Learning support Homework	Learning support Homework	Classroom 9 Music and chat KS4