

Peer support

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Peer Support is a program that has been developed by Peer Support Australia (www.peersupport.edu.au) and has been implemented in Australian schools for the past 30 years, and at Avondale School for over 20 years. The purpose of Peer Support in secondary schools is to help the Year 7 group adapt to secondary school by intentionally connecting them with a chosen group of Year 10 or 11 Peer Support Leaders.

Avondale School has recently trialled several potential improvements to the implementation of the Peer Support program: a) the timing of Peer Support Leader training; b) including Peer Support Leaders in the Year 7 Outdoor Education program; c) scheduling all Peer Support sessions concurrently each week; and d) combining the debriefing and briefing of leaders in one session.

The training and selection of the Peer Support Leaders took place during the final week of school for the Year 10s. This worked well as teaching and the School Certificate examinations had finished, so we were able to set aside two days for the required training. Eight teachers facilitated and modelled the Peer Support activities, and gave input into the selection of the leaders, who were then notified in their end of year report packs and given a certificate from Peer Support Australia. The evaluation surveys taken at the end of the two days revealed that staff and students felt it was a fun and purposeful way to end the school year. Our experience this year has shown the value of early training, staff and students were well prepared to engage in the Peer Support Program.

The Year 7 Outdoor Education Day was held in a local park in the third week of Term 1. Peer Support groups consisting of 8–10 Year 7s and 2–3 Peer Support Leaders engaged in a range of team building activities facilitated by staff. It was a full day of building relationships, playing, learning and enjoying each other's company. Staff and students almost unanimously commented that it was a positive way to launch the Peer Support program and introduce the leaders to their groups.

The in-class program began a few days later utilising the activities and resources outlined in the manual. The weekly sessions were timetabled concurrently but during a different class period each week so that the students (as far as was possible) did not miss the same subject each week. This

arrangement has resulted in less disruption to the school program.

The Supervising Teacher Feedback Proforma (from the manual) was used in order to provide timely feedback about the level of preparedness of the leaders, the group dynamics, and how the sessions went in general. This information was used in a debriefing session with the Peer Support Leaders the following day during lunch. This time was also used to brief them on the next week's session, which was emailed to them a week in advance in order to prepare. The manual suggests separate briefing and debriefing sessions, but the one combined session proved better for the Peer Support Leaders. These debriefing/briefing sessions were vital for monitoring and addressing challenges and sharing positive experiences. Challenges that surfaced included difficulty keeping the lively Year 7s on task, and managing a talkative or non-cooperative group. (It was delightful to see them experiencing first hand the joys and challenges of teaching!)

Conclusion

My experience with Peer Support at Avondale School has been very positive and I would encourage schools not offering the program, to consider its implementation. It has been gratifying to see the Peer Leaders take on the leadership mantle. Admittedly, some leaders didn't keep their commitment to attending the debriefing sessions or preparing as well as they should have, and some Year 7s needed to be 'encouraged' to cooperate. However, judging from the feedback received from the Year 7 students, the Peer Support Leaders and staff, the Peer Support Program is a worthwhile inclusion in our Special Character schools because it supports and enhances many of the values we espouse and contributes to improved relationships, which seems to me to be the essence of Jesus' teachings. **TEACH**

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[Photography:
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