

Positive Peer Groups: “Helping Others” Meets Primary Developmental Needs

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Successful peer helping or peer group treatment interventions for at-risk youth engage the curative power of some primary child development strategies. Coaching at-risk adolescents to help others has been a primary therapeutic tool in peer helping programs for over 50 years. High and moderate risk youth can benefit greatly from programs that utilize key child development strategies imbedded in the practice of helping others.

A properly functioning adolescent peer group treatment program will include many sound childhood developmental elements in its program format. Peer group treatment, sometimes called Positive Peer Culture (PPC), has systematically utilized “helping others” as its mantra. Over the years, the PPC treatment modality has been altered and improved, but its paramount practice is to walk adolescents through a series of appropriate child development stages that help prepare them to become functional young citizens. When working with high and moderate risk adolescents, implementing these age-appropriate, developmental strategies is an important ingredient to properly meeting adolescent needs.

Peer influence is a considerably potent force in the lives of teenagers. Peer bonding meets powerful social needs, in particular with vulnerable youth that find themselves disconnected with family and school (Seita & Brendtro, 2005). Young people who are considered high risk will naturally seek someone with whom to relate, especially if this person or group meets their need to be wanted. At-risk youngsters will go to great lengths to become part of a group, even if it means they must harm themselves or others. Peer helping programs take advantage of these forces in a positive way by meeting the critical developmental need to bond.

Experienced peer group practitioners have long known that practicing the art of helping others on a daily basis gives participants a new sense of worth. The helping process resembles an on-the-job-training routine for the participants, where socially ill-equipped adolescents spend many hours a day helping and caring for others. Most young people desire and enjoy being a part of a peer group and, in fact, will find or recruit one if a group is not readily available. The essence of a sound peer helping group program is having trained adults as group facilitators, adults who understand how to organize and motivate young people in the art of helping others. A peer helping group process makes use of the natural instinct youngsters have to bond and interact with each other. Providing properly trained adults to guide the peer group will help insure that the group engages in positive and productive business.

“Helping Others” Is Childhood Development

“Helping others” teaches children that they have a sense of connection and interdependence with other human beings. Learning that they are interrelated to each other in the community helps form a sense of obligation to other people and caring beyond one’s family (Lickona, 1983). Being “connected” to the community is a commonly missing developmental piece in the life of a high risk juvenile. Many troubled juveniles feel alienated from their community and school and thus

feel no guilt or responsibility for hurting their neighbors or classmates. Receiving help and helping others is a way to develop the interconnectivity that is needed to bind people together in common community. Connectivity is an important stage of moral reasoning, which can help a troubled adolescent begin making better decisions.

In our modern era of technology, it is easier than ever to retreat from the community into the self-centered world of computer games or the World Wide Web. This relatively new world of technology can create adolescent loners who experience diminished interaction with friends, family, and community. With all of the wonderful things that advanced computer technology can bring to human beings, its worst downside might well be the destructive way it can isolate and impede our children's social skills.

Teaching a child to be kind, just, and responsible takes some skill on the part of the parent. Being considerate and caring toward other people is behavior that we link to a person having a good moral foundation (Schulman & Mekler, 1994). Within most schools or communities, a child with poorly developed moral reasoning will stick out like a sore thumb and is easily recognized. This youngster will generally make poor decisions, hurt self or others, and generally lack the ability to behave within normal school or community expectations. These youngsters typically end up within the juvenile court or social service systems.

In dealing with high risk troubled children, juvenile social service and correctional systems have tried to deliver—to these children and their families—all types of treatment services, supportive interventions, consequences, and even punishment. Not all of these actions have appropriately met the individual child's need or problems, nor have the solutions been age appropriate or gender specific. Effective intervention strategies must take into account the individual child's developmental needs. In particular, girls develop their sense of morality and social relationships somewhat differently than do boys (Gilligan, 1982). A child who has not successfully proceeded through appropriate stages of child development may lack the necessary maturity and skills to adequately function in the community.

The ability to receive help and support is as important as the phenomena of helping others. Children need to have resilience to survive in a brutal society that can cause them much pain. Being strong and resilient is not enough by itself. Children need the support of adults and peers to help them through the difficult and painful times they experience (Brendtro & Larson, 2004). Developing adolescents can get strength from helping others. However, they must also be open to the guiding advice and support from caring adults and peers. The strength and endurance of a survivor usually can be attributed to the existence of a life saving figure. Resilient adolescents will usually recognize the presence of a supportive person in their lives (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Children can learn new behavioral skills simply by watching other people. Parents teach their children both good and bad behaviors in the daily process of modeling. Research has demonstrated that a wide variety of behaviors can be learned, strengthened, weakened, or facilitated through modeling. Imitation or observational learning refers to the learning of new behaviors that a person has never before performed (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Modeling and imitation are very important features within the adolescent peer group treatment milieu. One of the basic foundations of operating a positive peer group is to have the leaders in the group model caring and helpful behaviors. Many of the weaker, less experienced group members will follow and imitate the positive modeling of a few leaders.

Restorative justice practices in Minnesota have begun incorporating the "circle" process within communities to help re-establish faith and help support one-time juvenile and adult felons. The circles are deeply ingrained in the traditions of indigenous peoples, yet the circles do have some similarities to other peer group helping processes. The circles generally consist of people who

have an interest in helping a juvenile return to the community after being incarcerated. Victims are at times allowed to join these circles and become part of the overall community healing process. The focus of the circle is more about repairing the harm caused by a crime than merely punishing the offender (Engel, 2000). Restorative justice circles are excellent examples of how a group of community citizens can help to reconnect, heal, and support a once-alienated adolescent.

The productive restoration of an adolescent back into the home community has been a missing or infrequently used practice within many juvenile justice systems. Restoring an adolescent to the community speaks more to the individual's strength, instead of focusing on their weaknesses or problems. The restorative justice circle encourages communities to learn positive ways to restore juveniles back into the community. A successful restoration process not only helps the offenders regroup themselves, but also increases the chance of reducing recidivism.

“Helping Others” Develops Strengths and Assets

Peer helping programs that build strengths can prepare a troubled young person to become a more caring and functional citizen. The thrust of peer helping ideology is to teach young people to become more productive and positive in their social interactions. Many high to moderate risk youth have been deeply bound in negative and destructive interactions with adults and their peers. One theoretical underpinning of peer treatment programs is a belief that all young people have inherent strengths and potential that must be nurtured and coaxed to become part of their daily living habits. As in any skill we build, one generally has to practice the new skill on a regular basis. The daily rehearsal of helping and caring for others will build important people skills.

Young people who are engaged in helping others are learning to strengthen their relationships. In her “seven resiliencies,” Sybil Wolin describes relationships as connecting with people that matter (Wolin, 2003). Having the ability to develop and maintain relationships is seen as an important strength. Adolescents can best develop meaningful relationships when they begin to display traits like empathy, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and respect. Therapeutic programming aimed at teaching youth to care must have children practice these developmentally appropriate skills in a controlled, safe setting. A well-operated PPC or peer-helping program designed to teach strengths and resiliencies will help its participants build constructive relationships.

Teaching young people to help other human beings is to equip them with a practical set of social skills that will assist them throughout life. Showing concern for others teaches empathy and understanding and encourages a host of positive behavioral traits. Instead of working on the elimination of negative behavior, peer group practitioners encourage and support the practice of new social strengths and skills. Emphasis on building the assets and strengths of a young person is a much healthier practice than pouring hours into the analysis of problematic behaviors and traits.

Peer group practitioners do not put adolescents into the traditional patient role, which can imply weakness and frailty. It has become important to empower young people to care and contribute to their families, friends, schools, and communities. Troubled youth especially need more than to have adults care about them and help them (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Productive activities and interests in people can help adolescents develop a connection with their communities. Helping young persons to find a positive role in the community is giving them a useful and productive asset.

The rehabilitation process for troubled youth has traditionally focused more on helping children understand their problems and teaching them to eliminate the unacceptable behaviors. The child

treatment field has gradually turned away from a problem focus to a strategy of identifying and promoting assets and strengths. Today, understanding and developing assets in children is a more commonly accepted focal point for professionals working with at-risk children. However, articulating what assets actually are is not always clear. The Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, adapted a list of 40 developmental assets, which help identify what personal assets are. The specific assets are defined and broken down into external and internal assets. Assets are basic, common-sense ideas like family support, honesty, self-esteem, and the ability to care about other people's feelings (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998). Identifying positive assets helps us understand how to better target areas of growth in the development of children.

Barriers to Peer Helping Programs

Unfortunately, peer group treatment has often been misunderstood, misused, and improperly implemented. PPC has suffered from the inappropriate use of the original methodology. This misapplication of PPC has created some blemishes that have plagued the peer group treatment modality (Quigley, 2003), causing a reversal of the once historic lightning spread of peer helping programs and slowing the development of a practice that has deep roots in child development theory.

Another major impediment to peer group helping is that current funding trends have a tendency to recognize and pay for individual mental health services, not peer group treatment services. In the bureaucratic nightmare of funding reimbursement such as Medicaid and third party insurance payment, group helping is not well understood, defined, or recognized. Many agencies that once practiced peer group helping have changed their philosophy and programs to meet more favorable funding opportunities. Bureaucratic reimbursement practices are mainly tuned into credentialed clinicians and do not understand the restorative and strengthening aspects of peer helping programs.

These funding issues and public relations problems may have created a steady decline in the number and type of PPC adolescent programs available. Given these troubling obstacles, the growth and development of peer group treatment practice has been dealt serious setbacks. Many troubled adolescents will not be afforded the opportunity to learn and strengthen themselves through the art of helping others.

Even with some decline, peer group programs still flourish and gain prominence because the practice of "helping others" has inherent developmental elements, which clearly strengthen children and also demonstrate consistently successful outcomes. To the peer helping professional, helping other people continues to be a healthy activity which benefits all who participate. Old-fashioned common sense would tell us that the art of helping others is a very healthy and noble practice. The concept seems so simple and understandable, yet peer helping principles are not as widely accepted as one might think. Perhaps a re-examination and better understanding of the principles of peer group helping will take place at some point in the future, but for now its growth seems somewhat stalemated.

Conclusion

"Helping Others" proves to be a very strong conduit for building moral reasoning in adolescents and empowering them to do positive things in their communities. "Helping Others" is about

learning new positive behaviors, some of which can be taught through the use of modeling. Encouraging youth to observe and imitate helping behavior can teach them to try out these new behaviors for themselves. Guiding youth to help others strengthens their feeling of self-worth and can help young people bond with others.

Many federal or state funding bureaucracies do not view peer group helping as a reimbursable service to children. Peer group professionals must educate funding bureaucrats about the relevancy and strong developmental strategies within the art of “helping others.”

“Helping Others” is a powerful tool to utilize when working with at-risk youth. Teaching and encouraging adolescents to help their peers meets many critical developmental needs. The process of peer helping offers a great wealth of strategies that can help reconnect troubled youth to their families, schools, and communities. Peer group helping can build social skills, strengths, and assets in at-risk youth.

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