

Peer Education

Peer education is a type of IPC program in which well-trained and motivated members of a social group undertake informal or organized educational activities with their peers (similar to themselves in age, background, or interests), aimed at developing their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, and enabling them to be responsible for and protect their own health. Although peer education is typically used in reference to programs for youth, the term is also applicable to programs for any high risk group that may be particularly sensitive to and skeptical of receiving messages from outsiders. As with all IPC programs, peer education focuses on the individuals becoming active participants rather than utilizing traditional didactic educational approaches.

Peer education operates on the principle that people are more likely to be genuinely influenced by members of their own group rather than by outsiders, such as adult authorities or health care personnel. Peer education makes use of peer influence in a positive way. The credibility of peer educators, is therefore incredibly important, as this is the base on which peer education programs are built. Peer education is less likely to be seen as utilizing authority figures who preach from a judgmental position, and is more likely to be perceived as receiving advice from a friend who is “in the know” and who shares similar concerns of other group members. People often get information from peers on issues that are especially sensitive or taboo. Using peer education, therefore, is also beneficial in communicating such delicate information. Peer education programs are also grounded in the idea that target group members gain more from an experience when they are actively involved. Such programs can empower target group members by providing them with an opportunity to participate in activities that affect them and access the information or services needed to protect their health.

Peer education can take place with small groups or individuals in a variety of contexts such as schools, clubs, universities, churches, on the street or in a shelter. Examples of peer education programs include:

- a street theater play for injecting drug users followed by a peer educator led group discussion
- former or current sex workers who have been trained to give condom demonstrations
- youth who are recovering drug addicts who have been trained to teach a school-based life skills program

A peer is a person who belongs to the same social group as another person or group. Peer educators should share the characteristics of their peers based on the target social group. Social group may be based on age, sex, sexual orientation, occupation, and socioeconomic, or health status. Training of peer educators should include an explanation of program objectives and health messages, specific programmatic information, communication techniques, and how to balance being a peer and being an educator. It is important for peer educators to practice these techniques, and roll plays are a useful tool to hone these skills outside of the field setting.

Be Careful....

The term peer educator should not be used to distinguish between health professionals and non-health professionals, or those internal and external to a given social, political, or bureaucratic system. This misconception implies that anything that falls outside of an official or typical method of programming can be labeled as peer education.

Establishing peer educators should never be the main, or only goal for a peer education program. Peer educators can not function on their own and must be integrated into a programmatic structure in which they are used as messengers, facilitators, or teachers.

Furthermore, peer educators are really only meant to impact their peers. In a program that uses peer education to target sex workers, for example, it is unrealistic to think that the trained sex workers could also be used to target clients or bar/brothel owners. Peer education, therefore, is most effective as part of comprehensive program.

Peer education can become difficult if feelings of jealousy or competitiveness arise between members of the target group. With any peer educator program, there is always a risk that peer educators might be shunned due to the perception that they want to appear more knowledgeable or powerful than other peer group members. Peer educators should find a balance between being an insider and being an outsider. Such issues should be addressed during peer education trainings.