

Engaging young people in leadership roles in the prevention of sexual assault: The CASA House Peer Educator Project

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At CASA House (Centre Against Sexual Assault) we operate within a feminist rights/advocacy framework that prioritises individual rights and entitlements and actively seeks to empower individuals to take up their rights. Through our work with both women and men who have experienced sexual assault, we know that empowerment is crucial for victim/survivors to recover from their experiences. We also know that the concept of empowerment is a key principle that underpins broader community involvement in working towards the prevention of sexual assault.

For this reason, we offer a comprehensive Sexual Assault Prevention Program for secondary schools in the north-west metropolitan region of Melbourne. The student component of this program currently entails an interactive five-week program for the Year 9 or 10 curriculum that covers the issues of consent, sex and sexual assault. This program has been developed with important contributions from school students, Victoria Police and CASA House counsellor/advocates. The program is designed to eventually be delivered and managed by the school, with liaison and support from CASA House; therefore it also has a component of staff professional development and teacher training on the issue of sexual assault.

Since 2004, over 1,100 young people from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have participated in the student program across seven secondary schools. In addition, over 300 teachers and support staff have participated in introductory professional development sessions on sexual assault, and 30 of those people have undergone further training in the Sexual Assault Prevention Program.

We are currently in the process of adding another important component to this program: the Peer Educator Project. The aim of this project is to empower young people to take up a leadership role in raising awareness about sexual assault within their school community, where the school has already made a significant commitment to addressing the issue of sexual assault. Both the Prevention Program and Peer Educator Project have evolved in accordance with the input of young people and the school community via various forms of evaluation into every part of the program.

In this article, I will outline the origin of the Peer Educator Project, what role we foresee for peer educators and how this is supported by research, the peer educator training model we are currently piloting, and some of the key issues and dilemmas this project presents.

It is hoped that by publicising information about this project we can assist other organisations and schools embarking on peer educator programs, especially as there are few other peer educator programs focusing on school-age young people and gender-based violence. We also hope to highlight the importance of engaging with young people in creative and empowering ways, and thus contribute to this critical discourse.

For young people, by young people—the history of the Peer Educator Project

The basis and ideas for this project have come about through our ongoing consultation and program work with young people in secondary schools. Throughout the program's history we have tried to provide safe spaces for young people's voices to be heard and to have an impact on school culture.

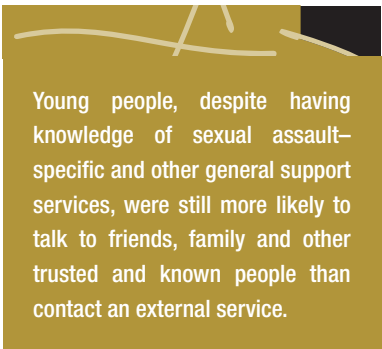
These young people have clearly articulated the significant role of their “peers” in influencing their choices and decisions; they have also expressed a desire to take up a leadership and/or advocacy role on the issue of sexual assault by becoming a peer educator.

In 2006 CASA House commenced a longitudinal evaluation of its Sexual Assault Prevention Program by engaging with young people who had participated in the program one to two years ago. The goal was to assess how much knowledge and understanding they had retained from the program and also to determine what follow-up might be needed to ensure cultural shifts are sustained across the school.

We conducted a series of focus groups with 40 young people who had previously completed the program, discussing rights, responsibilities and common beliefs around sex, consent and sexual assault. At the end of these series, there were still some issues worth exploring individually, and young people were still keen to convey their individual views. So we also conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with these young people, focusing on gender and power and how they relate to sex and sexual assault.

One important finding at this stage was that it was only after these series of focus groups addressing sex, relationships and sexual assault that the young people felt comfortable, open and conversant enough (with an adult) to start discussing the deeper issues of gender and power. This is important information for practitioners and school staff designing programs to address gender inequalities and violence in our society: it is crucial that the program materials allow young people to enter discussion in a safe and respectful way, and this often means starting where they are, with their language, their concepts and their interests and understandings (Keel, 2005; Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

What the program evaluation taught us



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One of the foremost findings from the focus groups and interviews was that young people, despite having knowledge of sexual assault-specific and other general support services, were still more likely to talk to friends, family and other trusted and known people than contact an external service, even when it was understood that the service could provide confidentiality. In particular, in relation to gender and consent, young people reported a strong value attached to the views, opinions and experiences of people who are close to their own age group and are either connected to or understand their context and community.

Another important finding was that young people felt that there were strong norms and social pressures governing their behaviour around sex and consent. Peer expectations and normative gender roles have a powerful influence, for example, on whether young men choose to ensure their partner is freely agreeing to sex and how they go about obtaining consent. These factors also impact on young women’s ability to give or request explicit verbal consent or to express non-consent to sex. In most of the scenarios discussed in the focus groups, young people identified that fear is a significant barrier to engaging in sexual communication—that is, fear of judgement by their partner, friends and broader peer group. This fear seemed to operate in complex ways, depending on the relationship between partners and the role of the individual in their peer group, and seemed to inhibit young men differently to young women.

Despite being aware of these social pressures, the young people felt under-equipped to challenge or break out of expected patterns of gender behaviour. They consistently reported a very important role played by peers in influencing values, normalising choices and working out what’s right and wrong. On the whole, these findings are consistent with research done with young people in other Western societies on the issue of pressure, sexual coercion and sexual decision-making (Carmody & Willis, 2006; Hird & Jackson, 2001).

Young people’s existing social support networks and relationships are absolutely pivotal in influencing how they make decisions about sex. Young people are currently relying on each other for norms, information and support on their choices and decisions—including those that relate to consent, sex

and sexual communication. The strength and importance of these trusting relationships could mean that an opportunity for creating cultural shifts around gender and sexual assault lies in equipping young people to encourage each other toward respectful behaviour and providing a vehicle for them to do so.

It was very clear from these consultations that when young people use the word “peer” they mean other young people who are very close to their own age who understand their specific context and community, and with whom they identify and trust. It was also very clear from our consultations that these peers could play an important leadership role in encouraging respectful and responsible behaviours.

Why we think this project will work

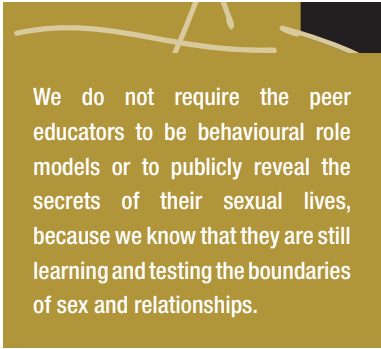
Peer education programs are becoming more popular within schools and the broader youth and community sectors, especially where there are health promotion goals. However, it is not yet clear that such models directly or definitely support positive change in young people’s behaviour, choices and decision-making (Turner & Shepherd, 1999).

Our Peer Educator Project is founded on our consultations with young people and also on research that identifies two important facts of young people’s lives:

- young people are most likely to ask *each other* for help/support, before contacting teachers or specialist agencies (DVIRC, 2005); and
- young people provide strong reinforcement for each other’s behaviour, both positive and negative (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Mills, 2001).

In this project, we are hoping to gather evidence to show that if we can provide opportunities for young people to take leadership on issues of gender-based violence and to have their learning about sexual assault reinforced, then young people are more likely to encourage positive behaviours among their peers. We are also aiming to support recent research that recommends that young people—particularly young men—be provided with achievable goals, continuous mentoring and positive reinforcement for their involvement in violence prevention (Crooks et al., 2007; Flood, 2006).

We do not require the peer educators to be behavioural role models or to publicly reveal the secrets of their sexual lives, because we know that they are still learning and testing the boundaries of sex and relationships. Nor do we require them to be experts on the issue; rather, they are experts on their own lives, and that alone means they have something to contribute to prevention initiatives. We are simply providing an opportunity for them to show their school community that they take the issue of sexual assault seriously enough to commit time and energy to it. This alone sends a powerful message to younger students and also to school staff about the significance of sexual assault as a crime that has detrimental impacts on victim/survivors, families and communities.



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What the pilot project looks like

We are working in close partnership with two secondary schools that have collaborated with CASA House over recent years to address the issue of sexual assault. At each schools there is a significant group of 15- to 18-year-olds (in Years 10 to 12) who have participated in the five-week education program and participated in follow-up evaluation, and have therefore had an opportunity to re-visit and re-focus on the program’s key messages relating to sex, consent/free agreement and sexual assault.

In 2007, the Peer Educator Project will be piloted with around 40 young people. We are providing these senior students with hands-on training to fulfill a peer educator role in their school community. The peer educator role entails two key responsibilities:

- assisting with discussion and activities in the Year 9/10 program; and
- being identified within the school community as a source of information and contact for issues related to program content (that is, relationships, consent, sexual assault).

We anticipate that the peer educators will be recognised as “opinion leaders” on the issues addressed in the program sessions and may be approached by younger students who are requesting information and/or support. With this in mind, we encourage the peer educators to focus on providing information and referral for these younger students, rather than ongoing personal support. This is addressed clearly and repeatedly in the training and in the role description to be designed with the young people during their training.

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We are endeavouring to develop a thorough and supportive training process and to focus on young people’s learning and skill development on the issue of sexual assault. Our partner schools have already committed extensive time and resources to this project; in particular they are involving specific staff members in the pilot project to enable the school to adopt the peer educator model into its future programs.

Here is an outline of the training program we are currently piloting with our partner schools:

1. *Training sessions*—Two interactive and experiential sessions to work out what is expected in the peer educator role, to prepare to run some program activities and to understand how the peer educator role is different from other relationships they have with young people.
2. *Observation of program*—The young people participating watch and listen to program sessions in action and take note of the open discussion format of the program.
3. *Rehearsal of activities*—The young people participating review their observations of the program and incorporate them into a rehearsal of the in-session peer educator role.
4. *Peer educator participation*—Peer educators assist teachers in delivering the program sessions to younger students; they will be particularly involved in facilitating small-group work and prompting open discussion.
5. *Debriefing and evaluation*—We are currently designing a thorough evaluation process to assess the impact of the Peer Educator Project on peer educators, younger students and the school community as a whole.

Some key issues and dilemmas

While involving school students in the prevention of sexual assault presents fantastic opportunities to educate and empower young men and women, it also presents a number of issues and some potential pitfalls.

Firstly, we must be very careful about how we initiate young people into an advocacy role on the issue of sexual assault, given that most of them will have already been directly or indirectly exposed to it in childhood and adolescence. A key study conducted by Ferguson and Mullen (1999) suggested that a prevalence rate of one in three girls and one in six boys is a reasonable estimate of the number of young people exposed to sexual assault before the age of 18. Sexual assault is a very sensitive issue that most sections of our society have difficulty talking about, so we should not expect it to be entirely comfortable for these young people.

Beyond the content itself, there are a number of questions and practice issues to address relating to the process and the experience of being a peer educator. For example:

- How can we support their skill development and their sense of authority and leadership while also making it clear what is expected of them in their role?
- How can we train young people to become involved in a respectful, open and established program format while also allowing them to fulfill the role in ways that suit their individual needs and personalities?
- How can we ensure the peer educators’ out-of-session support role is carefully managed and contained—and that younger students’ expectations are realistic—when we know that young people already provide each other with extensive support and advice often without containment or adult involvement?

- How can we promote recognition of the difficulty of talking about sexual assault while also encouraging young people to overcome the barriers and speak up about the issue more openly?
- When the pilot program is nearing its completion, how are we going to check what kind of impact this process has on peer educators' own knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, and also whether it enhances younger students' learning and engagement with the issue of sexual assault?

Pilot or pioneer?

An examination of existing literature suggests that there are few other programs in Western societies involving school-age peer educators in programs that address sexual violence prevention. Among the emerging programs that focus on school students and peer education, there is limited evaluation or data to persuade us that peer-based models yield the changes that we aim to bring about.

In this project, we will endeavour to fill these knowledge gaps, particularly in the area of gender-based violence prevention. We will also aim to develop a model that enhances young people's skills and development and, ultimately, improves our society's ability to prevent sexual assault and respond to victim/survivors appropriately and sensitively.

At this early stage, the signs are very positive. From our first intrepid training sessions it is clear that young people are very keen to take up leadership and authority in the classroom setting and are enthusiastic about assisting other people to learn about the issue of sexual assault. In some ways, young men and young women have so far responded to the training and the idea of the peer educator role quite differently, and this may reveal something about gender expectations and the boundaries of being young and male or young and female. However, both young men and young women have shown an extraordinary willingness to commit their free time to the project and, perhaps more importantly, to take ownership of the peer educator role.

CASA House wishes to acknowledge VicHealth, School-Focussed Youth Service (a joint initiative of the Victorian Government's Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training), Moreland Council, Victoria Police (Melbourne West and Fawkner SOCAUs) and our partner schools for their support in this project. For more information about this program, please contact CASA House: (03) 9635 3600 or casa@rwh.org.au

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