

Relative Experience

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Introduction

Peer to peer support is when an individual receives support by someone who is trained and has experienced a similar situation to them. It is a successful support mechanism due to the trusting relationship between the peer support provider and peer support receiver.

This briefing discusses what peer-to-peer support is with a particular focus on its role for vulnerable groups in society. Using evidence from case studies and policy implications, this briefing addresses how peer-to-peer support can benefit vulnerable groups.

What is Peer Support?

Peer support is when people provide knowledge, emotional, social or practical help to each other. It is delivered by an individual who is trained in providing support and shares a common experience with the peer support receiver. It is recognised that the support offered is more caring and timely than that provided from a professional and can be delivered in various ways including one-to-one peer support or community peer support groups.

The following definitions of peer support have been cited within the literature:

“Peer support is social emotional support, frequently coupled with instrumental support, which is mutually offered or provided by persons having a mental health condition to others sharing a similar mental health condition to bring about a desired social or personal change” (Gartner and Riessman, 1982).

“...support, companionship, empathy, sharing and assistance.” (Stroul, 1993).

“...a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful.” (Mead, Hilton and Curtis, 2001).

The sharing of experiences between two people is a unique characteristic of peer support. Within the mental health domain, peer support has become a dominant component of mental health recovery, where peer support workers enrich the work provided by professionals through offering support based on personal experiences. Nevertheless, a myriad of concerns for example medical conditions, addictions, bereavement or parenting advice can be addressed by peer to peer support.

Advantages of peer support

Important components of peer to peer support are trust and understanding between the support recipient and supporter. With the presence of these components, fewer conflicts of interest can hinder an individual's progress or circumstance. The advantages of peer to peer support stem from how these components facilitate the individual.

Belonging to a community

Peer support groups offer individuals the opportunity to belong to a community of people who are all experiencing or have experienced similar circumstances. Peer support groups have reported an increased level of warmth and humour which act as a coping mechanism for the individuals. The community feeling from a peer support group is a contrast to the isolation experienced outside of a peer support group.

Unreserved acceptance

There is an underlying respect and trust between the peer support provider and the peer support receiver as a consequence of both experiencing the situation in hand. This respect creates a level of empathy within the group which contributes to the feeling of acceptance.

Practical knowledge

Peer support groups provide individuals with expert knowledge and outlooks from someone who has experienced the issue or situation previously. The practical element of the information offered in peer support groups allows individuals to become empowered with their situation.

Strengthened relationships with family and friends

Peer support groups have benefitted the relationships between the support receiver and their family and friends. This is due to support groups alleviating the burden of care or responsibility from family and friends or increasing overall wellbeing of the individual receiving peer support.

Benefits to the peer support provider

Providing peer support has reciprocal benefits for the provider and the receiver. The acknowledgment that someone who is struggling with concerns that you have experienced and recognising the progress that this person is making as a consequence of your help, is both inspiring and encouraging.

Challenges of providing peer support

Hard to control the topic of interactions

The nature of peer support interactions are hard to control or regulate, so consequently there is no guarantee that the support provided will be beneficial to the individual.

Conflict

As peer support groups are based on respect and trust between the provider and receiver, there could be an opportunity for peer relationships to break down and the benefits of peer support to diminish. Alternatively, some individuals may find that peer support hinders their progress as you can be forced into patterns of behaviour or thinking that are not beneficial to you.

Relationships between support provider and receiver

The Department of Human Services (2012) commented that the peer support is not a friendship per se between the supporter and the receiver. The reason being that peer supporters need the skills and confidence to say what the boundaries are which could be compromised if a friendship was developed.

Can be viewed as an expensive resource

Although there are few material resources required when providing peer support, it can be an expensive resource in terms of the recipient and supporter's time and effort. Normally, peer to peer support is delivered over a duration of time therefore it is a commitment for both parties involved.

Case studies: peer-to-peer support in action

Relative Experience Project

Relative Experience is a project funded by the Big Lottery Fund Silver Dreams Fund and run by Grandparents Plus, Family Lives and Family and Childcare Trust. The project is based in the North East, where peer-to-peer support is provided by trained volunteers to grandparent kinship carers who are bringing up a relative's child.

A high proportion of kinship carers have a long term illness, disability or multiple caring responsibilities and are often facing adverse challenges including poverty, isolation and lack of support, receiving little or no support from children's services. The aim of the Relative Experience project was to use a peer-to-peer support programme to respond and help grandparent kinship carers who may be experiencing isolation, anxiety or who were facing challenges raising the children in their care.

This project has been independently evaluated by Coram. The evaluation has found that the peer befriending model has been an effective approach for kinship carers who have benefitted from the support offered, improving their self-confidence and reducing levels of anxiety. In particular the evaluation found that the project has achieved the following outcomes:

- *The project has had a positive effect on kinship carers' mental well-being and self-confidence about their ability to cope.*
- *Volunteers have found the experience challenging but highly rewarding, gaining personal satisfaction from helping kinship carers.*

Because of the nature of kinship care and the challenging experiences that many kinship carers have had, participants felt strongly that peer befrienders need to as far as possible have lived that experience too or at least have direct relevant life experience to bring to it.

Parent Champions

Parent Champions is a project funded by the Department for Education and is run by the Family and Childcare Trust. In 2007, Parent Champions was piloted in three London boroughs, which tested whether parents with good experiences of childcare can act as advocates in their communities and provide peer support to influence the childcare choices of other parents. Since this pilot phase, the Family and Childcare Trust have continued to deliver a number of projects around the country, working in partnership with local authorities and local community organisations.

Accessing childcare information can be a challenging task for many parents when the childcare market is changing constantly and resources are not up to date or easily accessible. In addition to this, research has shown that the most popular way to receive childcare information is through word of mouth. Consequently, the objective of the Parent Champion schemes is to engage parents, provide accurate information and encourage an increase in participation in early learning activities and take-up of childcare and children's services through a peer-to-peer support programme.

An evaluation of the Liverpool Parent Champions project in 2012 highlighted several benefits to parents who had been offered peer support by the parent champions, of which included:

- *Improvement in childcare attendance which has contributed to improved child behaviour, language development and access to healthy eating options.*
- *Improved relations between parent and child as a result of a parent acquiring tips on behaviour management.*
- *Development of friendships amongst parents.*

- *Increased awareness of services available for parents such as the Family Information Service.*
- *Parents considering new employment, education or training opportunities.*

National Dementia Strategy

The National Dementia Strategy is five year strategy proposed by the Department of Health in 2009. The strategy stated numerous guidelines for local service providers to address the needs of their communities. Peer support was recognised within the strategy with the development of peer support networks such as support groups or dementia cafes for people with dementia and their carers.

Dementia sufferers and their carers face numerous challenges within their daily lives, therefore the purpose of the peer groups alongside other initiatives raised in the strategy were to provide practical and emotional support, reduce isolation suffered by the individuals with dementia and their carers and to promote self-help.

The evaluation report published in 2013 highlighted that the peer support groups provided beneficial outcomes to both people with dementia and their carers including:

- *Identifying with other individuals with dementia or carers who are in a similar position enabling greater confidence and increased independence.*
- *Enabling people with dementia and carers to re-narrate their lives and consequently finding a new way of life. Although this new path was different from previous life experiences, it gave the people with dementia meaning, value and purpose and allowed signposting to appropriate services to be more effective.*
- *Increasing awareness of social networks and community groups enabling social inclusion.*

Home Start

Home-Start is a national family support charity who helps parents as they learn to cope with family life, improve their confidence and build better lives for their children. This support is provided by volunteers who visit the family's home once a week and develop a trusting relationship with the parents. Reaching over 32,000 families each year, Home-Start is a fine example of how peer-to-peer support can reach in need families in the UK.

Home-Start acknowledge that children who are raised in a stable, loving family environment are more likely to have a positive and healthy future, however circumstances can affect this from happening. Therefore, Home-Start's vision is one where every parent in society has the support they need to give their children the best possible start. The impact of this work includes parents feeling more involved in their children's development, able to manage children's behaviour better, increased self-esteem and reduced feelings of isolation.

Policy context

Troubled families agenda

In December 2011, the Government discussed that the state was spending £9 billion on 120,000 troubled families per year, an amount which was not sustainable in a climate of budget cutting. As a result, the troubled families agenda was proposed where the Government pledged £448 million over a period of three years, approximately 40% of the total money needed to work successfully with the 120,000 troubled families. This investment was available to local authorities partly through a Payment by Results (PbR) scheme, with the remaining 60% being funded by the local authorities from existing budgets.

Under this agenda, it is the role of the local authorities to identify troubled families in their areas and create intervention strategies. These strategies could use peer support programmes to help troubled families return to employment or address anti-social behaviour problems. In November 2013, a half way review of the project was undertaken and successful outcomes can already be seen with 62,000 families being worked with and over 22,000 have been turned around: children returning to school; reduced youth crime and anti-social behaviour; and over 1,400 adults now in continuous work. It has been proposed that 92,000 families have been identified by local authorities, which is over 3 quarters of the 120,000 originally proposed.

Outreach to vulnerable groups

When the coalition government was elected in May 2010, they pledged to concentrate on Sure Start's original aim of early intervention and focus on the neediest families. Sure Start plays an imperative role in providing early years services, however reaching vulnerable groups require more than locating a sure start centre in the most deprived areas. Outreach workers are essential and often are the only way to reach and support vulnerable families, which they do by encouraging parents to understand what children's centres provide and the benefits from accessing them. However, according to the National Audit Office too few local authorities are employing outreach workers to target vulnerable groups. This is a consequence of depleting Sure Start budgets due to the Government's budget cutting. Many children's centres have also been subject to closure which will adversely impact families.

Sources

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About this paper

This briefing has been produced for the Relative Experience North East Pilot project. This project is being delivered in partnership with Grandparents Plus, Family Lives, and Family and Childcare Trust. It is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and Silver Dreams Fund. The authors are Jill Rutter and Katherine Stocker from the Family and Childcare Trust.

Who we are

Grandparent Plus is the national organisation that champions the role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives, through the provision of advice and support, research and campaigning. We reach up to 5,000 kinship carers nationally through our peer support network and advice service. *Reg. charity no: 1093975*
www.grandparentsplus.org.uk

Family Lives is a charity that has over three decades' experience in helping parents deal with the changes that are a constant part of family life through a range of national and local services including a 24 hour helpline, live chat service and local services in community venues across the country. *Reg. charity no: 1077722*
www.familylives.org.uk

The **Family and Childcare Trust** work to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK. *Reg. charity no: 1077444*
www.familyandchildcaretrust.org



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