

## School Programs and You

As a parent, you might think about lobbying your child's school about providing students with programs and workshops designed to improve their life skills and support their emotional health and wellbeing.

Children spend a lot of time in school. As a rule, however, schools do not see themselves as equipped to provide help with the sorts of problems that your child or other children may be experiencing. They do not see it as their responsibility or as a feature of their mandate to provide life skills classes or issue-oriented classes on dealing with, for example, toxic family interactions or self-esteem and self-image issues. Some schools create peer counseling programs and in other ways try to help their students deal with their distress and difficulties, but most don't—and often simply can't.

What a school is relatively able to do, however, if its administration decides to stretch a bit, is to bring in outside programs designed to help youth with exactly these issues. These programs have many virtues. Not only is valuable information provided but it is also provided in a way that allows students to sit back in the audience and take the information in without having to react in the sort of defensive way they might in a one-on-one situation, say in a therapist's office, a psychiatrist's office, or in a heated exchange with their parents.

Consider an analogy with Alcoholics Anonymous. There are many reasons why Alcoholics Anonymous is so helpful. One important reason is that you can walk into a meeting, whether or not you are ready to get sober, and sit anonymously among your peers and hear someone recount stories about his or her drinking that are relevant to you. You aren't obliged to share; as a newcomer, you're only asked to introduce yourself. Even as a regular you don't have to share unless you feel like it. This is a very useful feature of the AA model, being able to sit there without being scrutinized, questioned, or put upon in any way.

What sorts of programs might a school bring in? Take Nicole Gibson's offerings. Nicole brings programs to schools across Australia. A finalist for Young Australian of the Year in 2014, named one of Australia's top 100 most influential women, appointed onto the National Mental Health Commission as the youngest-ever commissioner, and winner of the Pride of Australia Inspiration Medal in 2014, Nicole established The Rogue & Rouge Foundation to help Australia's young people deal with body image issues and self-esteem issues.

Taking her programs into both primary schools and high schools, she's facilitated workshops in hundreds of schools and reached hundreds of thousands of Australian youth. Her programs include nine-week well-being programs, youth motivation days, teachers' and parents' nights, a "hero within" prevention program, and more. Nicole explained to me:

"It's important for schools to remember that they can't be everything for their students. There are valuable community organizations that specialize in the delivery of the sort of education that we do and it's the school's role to take initiative and form those crucial relationships with external organizations.

"The relationship an objective facilitator can form with a student, in my experience, is a necessary consideration when it comes to this work. Young people will often tell me it's far easier to open up to someone who's a little bit removed from their everyday world, who's closer in age and more easily relatable. For schools, it's essential to create on-going opportunities for young people to engage with this work at different ages and different intellectual and emotional levels."

Your child's school can only do so much. At the same time there are many useful avenues your child's school might pursue that have proven to be of great help to students. Among the most effective are peer counseling programs. Sande Roberts has worked in the crisis and behavioral health field for over twenty-five years and is a certified trainer of trainers in suicide prevention and crisis intervention, a board member of the Arizona

Association for Conflict Resolution, an advocate for peer-led programs in schools, and the author of *We Need To Talk About Suicide*. Sande explained to me:

“I’ve worked with teens in various settings since 1990. Programs that work are ones where the youth themselves are mentored and taught skills to help themselves and their friends. The teen years are challenging and confusing. Youth are experiencing dramatic changes in their bodies, relationships, limits, and values. Peer pressure, rebellion, and curiosity frequently guide decisions. This is a time when people are wondering if the next suicidal, homicidal, or physically or emotionally bullied teen they hear about in the news will be someone they know: someone who lives next door, sits across the aisle at school, or is related to them.

“Peer-led teen programs have been around for a long time. Teens talk to, listen to, and believe other teens long before they consult with an adult. Schools with peer helper and conflict resolution programs have teens who are trained in peer education, leadership, listening and helping skills. The focus is identification and early intervention. My personal experience has been that teens become enabled to help themselves and their peers cope with a mega-list of relevant issues, including but not limited to suicide, violence on campus and in the community, intergenerational conflicts, relationship breakups, dangerous relationships, scholastic pressure, and teen sexuality.”

Might you consider suggesting peer counseling to your child’s school administration? Here’s an interesting article to share with your child’s principal that appeared in Education Week. It’s called “Schools Explore Benefits of Peer Counseling.” Maybe alert someone at your child’s school to the powerful resource that is peer counseling?

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/04/23/29peerconnection.h33.html>

Parents already have enough to do and to think about without supposing that they should also consider themselves responsible for suggesting resources to their child's school administrators. On the other hand, doing some suggesting of that sort might appeal to you and might prove a blessing to both your own child and to your child's peers. If your child's peers are helped—to bully less, to act out less, to respect others better— isn't that good for your child, too? Give this some thought. And if you happen to locate an excellent resource, please let us know about it!

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Eric Maisel is the author of more than fifty books, among them *Overcoming Your Difficult Family*, *The Future of Mental Health*, *Rethinking Depression*, *The Van Gogh Blues* and *Mastering Creative Anxiety*. He writes the "Rethinking Mental Health" blog for *Psychology Today* and lectures nationally and internationally. To learn more about Eric Maisel and his books, services, keynotes, trainings and workshops please visit <http://www.ericmaisel.com>