

EMPOWER

Peer Education

Objectives:

- To understand peer education and how it might be used to talk about HIV, harm reduction and sexual health with youth.
- To examine the benefits and values of using a peer based model in youth HIV education.
- To think through key questions for using peer education in HIV programming.

What is Peer Education?

Peer education is the exchange of knowledge shared between people with similar backgrounds and experiences. Peer education is particularly useful in exploring issues around HIV and sexual health with youth. Shared language and common cultural reference points help build the trust that is essential to peer education. Shared identities can cut across age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, housing status, etc.

Why do Peer Education?

This project was designed for youth, by youth. We believe that youth need sex, queer, trans, and youth positive spaces to learn and talk about sex. We also believe that these spaces should be designed by youth for youth in ways that are community and culturally specific.

“One size fits all” models don’t work. And it’s no mystery.

We are different people with different needs and experiences. These experiences are based on our gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, where we were born, or how long we’ve been in a specific country. It depends on where and when we’ve gone to school and if we live in a big city or a rural community.

By working with youth from different communities, we seek to create a space where youth can learn and share from each others’ realities, while simultaneously strengthening youth participation within local HIV movements and programming.



What the Research Says...

A UNICEF Peer Education Fact Sheet reports that “qualitative evaluations of school-based peer education have shown that:

- Young people appreciate and are influenced in positive ways by a peer-led intervention if it is well-designed and properly supervised;
- Serving as a peer educator provides a challenging, rewarding opportunity to young people to develop their leadership skills, gain the respect of their peers, and improve their own knowledge base and skills. Peer educators often change their own behaviour after becoming a peer educator;
- It can foster fulfilling relationships between teachers and students;
- It can give girls legitimacy to talk about sex without the risk of being stigmatized as sexually promiscuous (particularly when peer led activities take place in single-sex groups);
- Peer educators can provide a valuable link to health services;
- Peer education has had a positive effect on reported attitudes toward persons living with HIV/AIDS;
- Peer educators have shown in some cases to be more effective than adults in establishing norms and in changing attitudes related to sexual behaviour. However, they are not necessarily better in transmitting factual health information. Peer educators and adult-led education can thus complement each other. One study showed that a mixture of classroom-based and peer-led education is more effective than one or the other in isolation. The combined condition showed the greatest gains in information, motivation, behavioural skills and behaviour.

“My participation in *Empower* has helped me by “allowing me to realize my voice is worth hearing.”

—Empower Youth Participant

Unicef. “Peer Education Fact Sheet.”. Accessed on March 15 2012. http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_12078.html

What we say...

“Most HIV workshops are not led by youth. This is really important—we need HIV and sexual health workshops run by people we can relate to. Conventional models are often rooted in a medical model of education. Many youth (including many of us) have had negative experiences with the ‘medical industry’ and would rather learn about HIV, sexual health, and our bodies from our peers rather than a public health nurse. It often seems like the person facilitating the workshop doesn’t care about our lives, or understand the issues we face. They act as if having safe sex is easy—but they don’t understand that issues like poverty, homophobia, and racism often get in the way. Not only are workshops run by youth, they are also run by people who share similar experiences as people



in the audience. After all, 'youth' is a super broad category. When possible we try to ensure there is shared experience between peer educators and youth workshop participants."

"Conventional HIV prevention models promote fear and judgment. Most conventional workshops promote sex negative attitudes and judgment which can shut down the conversation and decrease participants' willingness to ask questions. Judgment can also lead to even more trauma if someone is triggered. For example, for those of us who have been involved in sex work, we have been fearful of speaking up in workshops because we are afraid that we will be judged, or that someone will try to 'save us' or talk to the police. Similarly, many of us have also been in conventional HIV/sexual health workshops where we have been made to feel bad about our sexual orientation or genders. In our workshops, our fun arts-based, judgment-free and sex-positive activities do the opposite: they open up the conversation leading to lots of question asking and dialogue. Also, because of the role trauma has played out in our own lives, we are very sensitive to creating safe and inclusive spaces."

"Conventional workshops only focus on HIV as if it only exists in a science lab. HIV isn't just a biological virus—it is a disease which plays on larger social determinants of health. Our workshops explore the way issues like poverty, homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, HIV stigma, immigration and colonialism affect our bodies and the choices we can or cannot make."

Peer Education in Action

This discussion guide is intended for peer educators to foster a sense of self-reflexivity around peer education. This could be through praise, constructive criticism, ideas about programming or creating supportive spaces. These are questions that participants can answer individually, or in a group.

- What are the advantages of having peers talk about HIV/AIDS and sexual health?
- How does having peers talk about HIV/AIDS and sex differ from a doctor, nurse or school teacher?
- What are problems that might come up when talking about HIV/AIDS or sexual health with your peers (e.g. privacy issues/disclosure; confidentiality; shared friend groups or intimate partners, etc.)?
- How can peer educators make the group feel safer and included when discussing HIV/AIDS and sex (e.g. creating group policies, taking turns in leading activities, talking about self-care)?
- What kind of changes do you want to see in your community around HIV/AIDS? What support will you need from your peers to see/make these changes happen?



Need Some Inspiration?

Check out *Empower: Youth, Arts, and Activism—An HIV/AIDS Arts Activism Manual for Youth by Youth*. This manual showcases creative ways to do peer-to-peer education in captivating ways that are youth lead. Also, consider surfing over to our website at www.empoweryouth.info, where you can order the above manual, check out all of the amazing training's we have been receiving in the arts, harm reduction, and facilitation. You can even request our energetic crew to come and do an engaging artistic workshop on HIV for your group.

For a rad, interactive and multifaceted online resource check out www.youthpeer.org. Here you can find an interactive FAQ section, an online certification tool in peer education, standards for peer education programs, evaluation tools, and train the trainer information. For any thespians out there, this site even has an extensive resource on incorporating the dramatic arts into your programing. Each resource is available in many languages. Worth a click!

T.E.A.C.H.' s clever acronym stands for Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia. They can be found online and in person at Planned Parenthood Toronto, in the city's downtown core. While T.E.A.C.H. focuses on breaking-down transphobia, homophobia, and heterosexism, the Positive Youth Power Project, another peer based project at PPT, focuses on HIV education, including some Hep C info. Check out www.PPT.on.ca for the best of both of these peer education programs and so much more!

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