

Pathways to Partnership



Tips for Incorporating Peer-to-Peer Support into Your Program

From the Partnering with Youth and Families Committee
National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The Role of Peer-to-Peer Support

Peer-to-peer support is a unique and valuable resource for families and youth in treatment. By linking new clients with families/individuals who have been through treatment, peer-to-peer activities:^{1, 2}

- Provide information about the clinic (therapists, interventions, clinic culture) from others who have “been there, done that,” thereby encouraging families to engage in services
- Let families know that they are not alone, and reduce the stigma, isolation, and blame that many caregivers feel
- Help youth and families to believe that treatment can help
- Help caregivers to become more effective advocates for themselves and their children

Peer-to-peer support also benefits those who have completed treatment. Survivors of trauma may find meaning in sharing with others what they have learned from their treatment experience, and in speaking with and for others. By working with trauma service organizations and providers, survivors can help restore a sense of safety and protection that is undermined by traumatic events.

Peer-to-peer support often is developed for program- or organization-specific reasons, and varies based on the populations served and the structure, budget, and administrative supports of the organizations involved.^{3, 4} Peer-to-peer support typically takes one or more of the following forms:²

- Parent partner programs—in which caregivers who have been through specific programs are linked with other caregivers new to the process
- Peer paraprofessional programs (such as *family navigator* or *family support programs*)—in which parents/caregivers who have experience in the program receive clinical training and are supervised as they work with families new to the program
- Informational programs—in which caregivers who have completed the program provide basic information and support to parents/caregivers going through similar circumstances. This form of support can be given in-person or through print or video materials

Implementing Peer-to-Peer Support

The first step in implementing peer-to-peer support is to define your purpose and determine your organization’s policies regarding peer-to-peer support. It is important to evaluate your program’s or organization’s goals and the resources required to develop a new initiative. Critical areas include:

- **Leadership support** for the needed investment of staff time and resources

- **Financial resources** for program-related expenses, including child care, transportation, and reimbursement of family advocates' expenses and time. (For more on financial issues, see the NCTSN's companion tip sheet, *Pathways to Partnership: Frequently Asked Questions on Compensation for Family, Youth, and Consumer Involvement*.)
- **Staff and client "buy in."** Spending time with family members outside the context of therapy may be challenging for mental health professionals who have been trained to establish and maintain boundaries with clients. In addition, family members have multiple demands on their time and some may feel that their input is not needed.

Some examples of peer-to-peer processes include:

- **Phone outreach**, particularly with families who are awaiting services. Peer counselors can provide some assurance that treatment can help and is worth the wait
- **Welcome packets** that provide information on how to help children while waiting for services including words of hope from other clients
- **Orientation videos** in which families where families and youth share their experience with the program
- **Community outreach** to youth groups, family organizations, and other groups that can help with political action and advocacy

For More Information . . .

The National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health has developed an excellent guide to the issues involved in developing and sustaining peer-to-peer programs. *Family Peer-to-Peer Support Programs in Children's Mental Health: A Critical Issues Guide* is available at: <http://www.ffcmh.org/research%20and%20publications/researchandpublications/Family%20Peer%20Support%20-%20Critical%20Issues%20Guide%2010.8.08.pdf>

For assistance with your peer-to-peer support, activities contact the NCTSN Partnering with Youth and Families Committee at youthandfamilies@nctsn.org.

References

1. Robbins, V., Jolmston, J., Barnett, H., et al. (2008). *Parent-to-parent: A synthesis of the emerging literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, Department of Child & Family Studies.
2. National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. (2008). *Family peer-to-peer support programs in children's mental health: A critical issues guide*. Rockville, MD: National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health.
3. Hoagwood, K. E., Green, E., Kelleher, K., et al. (2008). Family advocacy, support and education in children's mental health: Results of a national survey. *Adm Policy Ment Health*; 35:73–83.
4. Johnson, E. (2008). *Minnesota peer support implementation: Consultant's report*. Phoenix, Arizona: Recovery Innovations. Accessed July 10, 2009 from <http://www.californiaclients.org/pdf/Sue%20Watson%20Presentation%20Attachment.pdf>

In 2008, the NCTSN released *Pathways to Partnerships with Youth and Families* to provide trauma-treating entities with a method for considering the role of youth and families in their organizations. Many sites have requested more technical assistance to begin their efforts. This tip sheet is meant as a starting place for organizations seeking to develop a peer-to-peer component in their programming.

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