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**Submission to the
Parliament of Australia
Senate Inquiry into Cyber-safety**

from Peer Support Australia

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“The Peer Support Program makes a significant contribution to schools’ endeavours to provide positive outcomes for students.”

Dr Louise Ellis BPsych (Hons) PhD (Psych), 2003

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**Submission to the
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Submission from Peer Support Australia**

Terms of Reference

- a) That a Joint Select Committee on Cyber-safety be appointed to inquire into and report on:
- i. the online environment in which Australian children currently engage, including key physical points of access (schools, libraries, internet cafes, homes, mobiles) and stakeholders controlling or able to influence that engagement (governments, parents, teachers, traders, internet service providers, content service providers);
 - ii. the nature, prevalence, implications of and level of risk associated with cyber-safety threats, such as:
 - abuse of children online (cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and sexual grooming);
 - exposure to illegal and inappropriate content;
 - inappropriate social and health behaviours in an online environment (eg technology addiction, online promotion of anorexia, drug usage, underage drinking and smoking);
 - identity theft; and
 - breaches of privacy.
 - iii. Australian and international responses to current cyber-safety threats (education, filtering, regulation, enforcement) their effectiveness and costs to stakeholders, including business;
 - iv. opportunities for cooperation across Australian stakeholders and with international stakeholders in dealing with cyber-safety issues;
 - v. examining the need to ensure that the opportunities presented by, and economic benefits of, new technologies are maximised;
 - vi. ways to support schools to change their culture to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying including by:
 - increasing awareness of cyber-safety good practice;
 - encouraging schools to work with the broader school community, especially parents, to develop consistent, whole school approaches; and
 - analysing best practice approaches to training and professional development programs and resources that are available to enable school staff to effectively respond to cyber-bullying;
 - vii. analysing information on achieving and continuing world's best practice safeguards; and
- b) such other matters relating to cyber-safety referred by the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy or either House.

“The positive results suggest the Peer Support Program is worthwhile, especially in changing the attitudes to bullying, which is one of the study’s significant findings.”

Dr Ellis, 2003

I. Introduction

Peer Support Australia is a not for profit, non government organisation. The Peer Support Program is a peer led, universal, intervention and preventative mental health program operating in both primary and secondary schools in Australia for almost 40 years. It is a skills based, experiential program with the emphasis on developing and enhancing skills amongst young people for lifelong learning. The Peer Support Program is integrated into curricula and linked to complementary educational initiatives such as the National Safe Schools Framework, National Framework for Values Education, Anti-bullying, Student Welfare/Pastoral Care and buddy programs.

The mission of Peer Support Australia is to provide dynamic peer led programs which foster the mental, social and physical wellbeing of young people and their community.

The Peer Support Program is a valuable learning experience for students and in conjunction with other strategies provides a powerful tool for bringing about positive cultural change in school communities. It currently operates in over 1,400 schools in NSW, ACT, Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Peer Support Australia has been providing training and resources to support schools in addressing bullying behaviours since 1997. The issue of bullying behaviours is an important focus for schools and society in general. There are reports in the media almost weekly about the effects of bullying behaviours on young people and communities. The emergence of new technologies ie mobile phones and computers and social networking has led to the recent prevalence of what is known as ‘cyber-bullying’. The onus is on schools to understand this issue and implement strategies to create safe and supportive social and learning environments within the cyber world.

Peer Support Australia has developed a program for primary and secondary schools to support students, staff and parents to become more aware of bullying behaviours. A whole school approach to creating positive change includes raising awareness, developing strategies and implementing procedures.

Funding provided by the then Department of Science, Education and Training enabled Peer Support Australia to redevelop both their primary and secondary anti-bullying modules in 2006.

In mid 2008, a research thesis was undertaken in conjunction with Deakin University into the efficacy of Peer Support Australia’s anti-bullying module for primary schools’. This study provided evidence to

suggest this module is an effective intervention strategy supporting students to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to make a positive contribution to the creation and maintenance of a safe school environment by reducing bullying behaviours. This thesis was published in 2010 as a book, *They Can't Hurt Me - a peer-led approach to bullying*, authored by Sharlene Chadwick.

Peer Support Australia is affiliated with the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB). The mission of NCAB is to create schools and other environments that are strong, connected and caring, and to reduce bullying and minimise its harm on young people.

Peer Support Australia has presented at several national conferences in the area of anti-bullying.

Peer Support Australia has been successful in completing 2 projects since 2007 as part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) with funding from the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA). This recognises the Peer Support Program's positive impact on the mental health, resilience and connectedness of young people.

DoHA has recently approved a third project as part of NSPS. This project will focus on a continued and coordinated approach to delivering the Peer Support Program in Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory during 2009-2011.

2. Links to Terms of Reference

The following outlines the terms of reference to which the Peer Support Program aligns.

- i) the online environment in which Australian children currently engage, including key physical points of access (schools, libraries, internet cafes, homes, mobiles) and stakeholders controlling or able to influence that engagement (governments, parents, teachers, traders, internet service providers, content service providers);

The online environment permeates all areas of society and has become an important medium for young people to connect with their peers and creatively express themselves. Many young people have positive experiences which assist in developing their identities and expanding their social networks. Younger children are predominantly interested in 'playing games' while young people aged 12-17 are predominantly interested in social interaction.

Australians aged 16 and 17 are spending an average of 3 ½ hours every day on the internet with social networking the overwhelming favourite.¹ Children aged 8-11 years are spending 1.3 hours a day online, while 12-17 year olds average 2.9 hours. Up to 97% of 16-17 year olds use at least one social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo and MSN Messenger. The internet is used regularly within both the school and home environments. 67% of Australian households have access to the Internet and in mid 2008 there were over 22 million mobile phones being used, which equates to more than one phone for every person.²

It is critical to understand the significant role and importance of technology to children and young people in the school and wider community.

- ii) the nature, prevalence, implications of and level of risk associated with cyber-safety threats, such as:
- abuse of children online (cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and sexual grooming);

Cyber-stalking and grooming are emerging phenomenon that often do not have their origins offline unlike cyber-bullying. Exact data is not available, however, correlates with trends in other countries estimate approximately 7% of children and young people in Australia are affected by cyber-stalking.³ Those who received sexual solicitations were more likely to share personal information with strangers online and engage in offline risky behaviours. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) report

¹ ACMA 2009

² Edith Cowan University May 2009

³ Edith Cowan University May 2009

'Click and Connect' found 75% of children and young people surveyed claim they know not to disclose their address or phone number online.

Key findings from this report include:

- children and young people have a high awareness of cyber-safety risks and identify activities such as posting personal information as high risk; and
- the tendency toward risky behaviour increases with age.

Of those aged 16-17 years

- 61% report accepting 'friend requests' from people they don't know offline;
- 78% claim to have personal information such as photographs of themselves on their social networking profiles, compared to 48% of 8-9 year olds.⁴

Cyber-bullying is now a significant risk to cyber-safety for children and young people and is more common over the internet than via mobile phones. Cyber-bullying has generally been defined as bullying in an electronic medium or via technology. The nature of electronic media also means cyber-bullying can be a permanent record which can be reviewed at any time.

The majority of students in a recent study, 61%, who had been bullied in any way also experience cyber-bullying. Some 80% of students who engage in face-to-face bullying behaviours admit to engaging in online bullying,⁵ suggesting it is the behaviour that is inappropriate not the medium. Cyber-bullying rates increase with age (or access to technology), 1% of 8-9 year olds, 10% 10-11 year olds, 16% 12-13 year olds and 19% of 16-17 year olds.⁶ Cyber-bullying is not observed by, or reported to, as many teachers as other forms of bullying behaviours.

The impacts and effects of cyber-bullying can include:

- poor socialisation;
- decline in academic performance; or
- depression, which may lead to suicide.

ii) Australian and international responses to current cyber-safety threats (education, filtering, regulation, enforcement) their effectiveness and costs to stakeholders, including business;

Further recent studies highlight the impact of cyber-safety and cyber-bullying on school aged children and young people. The findings from a range of key recent studies are summarised below.

⁴ ACMA 2009

⁵ Edith Cowan University March 2009

⁶ ACMA 2009

Covert Bullying Prevalence Study 2009, Donna Cross, Edith Cowan University, Australia.

Students who are cyber bullied are:

- 13 times more likely to be bullied offline;
- 4 times more likely to cyber-bully others;
- twice as likely to:
 - have their own mobile phone
 - face-to-face bully others; and
- nearly twice as likely to:
 - report poor school grades
 - have wireless internet at home.

Students who cyber bully others are:

- 18 times more likely to bully others offline;
- 4 times more likely to be cyber-bullied; and
- nearly 3 times more likely to have their own mobile phone.

NetAlert 2009, Australia.

An online survey conducted by NetAlert and Ninemsn found:

- 61% of young people said they had been bullied online;
- 14% were bullied via mobile phone;
- males and females experienced similar levels of bullying; and
- 56% thought it was easy to be bullied online.

Mission Australia National Youth Survey 2009.

- 47,735 young people surveyed aged between 11-24 years.
- 23.4% of respondents ranked bullying/emotional abuse as the fifth most frequent issue of concern.
- This represents a decrease since 2006 (27.5%), however physical/sexual abuse, coping with stress, school or study problems and discrimination are all separate categories so the real figure may be significantly higher. Suicide ranked number two.
- 22.5% of respondents indicated the internet as the number one source of advice and support. However, friends are the main source of advice for 85% of respondents.

Kids Help Line - Australia 2009.

Between 2005-2009 Kids Help Line received a total of 14,471 counselling contacts where the primary purpose of the contact related to bullying/assault (including cyber-bullying). On average 57 contacts per week. In July 2008 a separate problem type specific to cyber-bullying was added in recognition of the increasing number of contacts relating to this new form of harassment. 51% of cyber-bullying contacts in 2009 were aged 10-14 years. Ages 15-18 years was the 2nd most common at 44%.

Australian National Social and Emotional Wellbeing Survey 2007.

Michael Bernard, University of Melbourne, surveyed 11,526 students and 6,860 teachers from 2003-07.

- Bullying behaviours were displayed at all levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Greater percentage of bullying behaviours occurs at the lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- 57% of students who bully display positive self-esteem.
- 59% of students who bully display under achievement.
- 59% of students who bully do not relate well to classmates who are different.

Michael Carr-Gregg 2007, Australia.

In conjunction with *Girlfriend Magazine*, an online survey of 588 13-18 year olds revealed the following:

- 75% know someone who has been bullied online;
- 27% admitted to having bullied someone online;
- 67% of females have been bullied online;
- 58% do not know where to report online bullying;
- 49% freely give out their mobile phone numbers at school;
- 24% have been bullied on their mobile phone;
- 85% who have been bullied on their mobile phone know the person; and
- 87% of cyberbullies do so via SMS messaging.

These findings gave impetus to the "I Delete Bullies" Campaign in 2009.

Christina Salmivalli, 2000, University of Turku, Finland.

KiVa is a National Anti-bullying program funded by the Finnish Government. Program results revealed interesting facts regarding the role of bystanders. A summary follows:

- 2 categories - reinforcers (audience) and assistants (join in);
- 20% are reinforcers;
- 8% are 'bullies';
- 12% are 'victims';
- 7% are assistants;
- 17% are defenders; and
- 24% are outsiders.

In addition, findings indicated successful anti-bullying programs should be universal in nature, that is, all students participate in the program.

- vi) ways to support schools to change their culture to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying including by:
- increasing awareness of cyber-safety good practice;
 - encouraging schools to work with the broader school community, especially parents, to develop consistent, whole school approaches; and
 - analysing best practice approaches to training and professional development programs and resources that are available to enable school staff to effectively respond to cyber-bullying;

Schools have a duty to implement systemised policies and procedures to deal with inappropriate behaviours. Schools need to be able to demonstrate they have taken reasonable steps to address the risk of cyber-safety and cyber-bullying and education should underpin a whole school approach. Effective preventative measures practised by schools include the following elements:

- content in curriculum to develop pro-social attitudes and skills;
- modelling and rewarding positive behaviour;
- promoting activities that engage students;
- reducing opportunities for engaging in bullying behaviours;
- taking steps to resolve conflict before it escalates into bullying; and
- partnerships with parents.⁷

Schools need to consider establishing a cyber-safety education team which should include not only members of the school leadership team but also a specialist in ICT, members of the welfare staff as well as parents and students.

Bullying behaviours are learned behaviours and the family environment can contribute to the development of these behaviours. Contributing factors include attitudes held by parents, modelling of inappropriate behaviour, how families resolve conflict and the interaction of all family members in general with good communication at home helping students develop a more positive sense of self, as well as effective coping and social skills.⁸

School culture also has a significant impact on bullying behaviours. Bullying behaviours can be entrenched in the culture of a school and the way in which teachers respond to bullying behaviours is imperative in dealing effectively with the issue. In some instances, the level of bullying behaviours perceived to occur in the school can impact upon its reputation. Schools need to continually build positive relationships with and among students and to give the issue.

⁷ Rigby and Thomas 2003

⁸ Noller and Callen 1991

The first step in dealing with the complex issue of bullying behaviours is to acknowledge it occurs by raising awareness. Peer Support Australia encourages schools to consider the following elements to assist in understanding bullying behaviours and create an environment of change management:

- common understandings;
- parents;
- beliefs and attitudes;
- bullying triangle;
- power of language;
- gathering information; and
- modelling.

Schools need to develop strategies to achieve shared understandings, informed planning and collaborative action among all groups within the school community to develop effective anti-bullying strategies.

Peer Support Australia advocates a whole school approach to create an environment for change to deal with bullying behaviours. Investigating the key elements form part of the comprehensive training and professional development undertaken by teachers. Schools are guided with this framework.

The enhancement of a safe and supportive school environment is a broad concept and its effective implementation will involve a range of integrated and collaborative strategies. A whole school approach ensures students learn appropriate behaviours and skills through the formal and informal curriculum, classroom practices and Peer Support groups. These are further supported by an individual schools' anti-bullying policy, procedures for reporting and current practices within their student welfare or pastoral care policies. Organisational and leadership practices in schools can sustain and strengthen management practices, the level of supervision and enhance prevention strategies.

b) such other matters relating to cyber-safety referred by the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy or either House.

- Peer Support Australia is part of the Wellbeing Australia Advisory Group whose primary purpose is the development of caring, inclusive school communities which foster the wellbeing of all students, teachers and families. This is linked to improving the wellbeing of communities in general and the development of a civil, safe, inclusive and just society.
- Peer Support Australia is a signatory to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) commitment to Young Australians. This is a statement of principles to guide ARACY member organisations in their decision making and actions related to children and young people.

Member organisations are assisting in creating social, cultural, political and economic environments which support the wellbeing and development of children and young people.

- The Peer Support Program is one of the interventions articulated in the KidsMatter Program Guide which outlines a range of mental health programs available for use in Australian schools.
- Peer Support Australia aligns with The Alannah and Madeline Foundation (AMF). The National Centre for Anti-bullying (NCAB) is an initiative of AMF and brings together a group of individuals from key organisations to draw national attention to the issue of bullying and to bring about social change in our community.
- The Peer Support Program supports the National Framework for Values Education for Australian Schools which states schools provide “values education in a planned and systematic way.” Values education is essential in fostering relationships, personal achievement and improved student wellbeing across the school community.

The Peer Support Program links to the COAG National Plan for Mental Health 2006-2011:

- mental health promotion - aims to protect, support and sustain the emotional and social wellbeing from the earliest years through adult life;
- knowledge about risk and protective factors for mental health contribute to emotional resilience;
- opportunities to improving mental health knowledge and skills are suitable for education; and
- protective factors give people resilience in the face of adversity.

3. The Peer Support Program

Peer Support Australia has been supported by the NSW Health Department, Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, for a number of years in recognition of the significant positive benefits on the mental health of children and young people. Recently Peer Support Australia has been successful in securing funding and developing partnerships with DoHA; Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, Queensland Government, Mental Health Branch and Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

The Peer Support Program is:

- a promotion and prevention program;
- peer led;
- schools-based;
- a universal early intervention program;
- targeted to children and young people;
- skills based and experiential; and
- linked to curriculum areas and other complimentary educational initiatives across a number of states.

In addition, the Peer Support Program is aligned with national frameworks including the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), National Framework for Values Education, MindMatters, KidsMatter and NCAB.

Peer Support Australia provides an integrated program of training and learning materials for both primary and secondary schools, which can support schools in achieving positive cultural changes successfully. Peer Support modules have been designed to be used in conjunction with teacher and student leadership training.

In primary schools, peer groups are facilitated by two Year 6 students (or Year 7 in some states) with small multi age groups from Kindergarten-Year 5 (or to Year 6 in some states). In secondary schools, the traditional approach is Year 10 (or Year 11 in some states) facilitating small groups for Year 7 (or Year 8 in some states) to support them through their transition phase to secondary school. Both primary and secondary students are trained as Peer leaders through a 2 day leadership training program. Peer leaders work with students for approximately 30 minutes per week for 8 sessions using Peer Support Australia modules.

Students are supported at every stage through briefing and debriefing sessions conducted by teachers. Briefing and debriefing are vital to the success of the Peer Support Program. Some modules have Teacher Debriefing Notes to be used in class. Newsletter items and Parent Information Leaflets have been

included in modules to encourage schools to involve parents in the Peer Support experience by providing ongoing information.

Sessions within all modules include opportunities to develop positive relationships with others; engage learners; develop skills, understandings and attitudes; work cooperatively and collaboratively; and reflect on their experiences. All of these enhance a young person's mental health over time.

Many forms of peer support have been implemented in Australian schools and have been given a range of titles such as peer education, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, buddy programs, peer mediation, peer counselling, peer support, and peer support groups.

Key concepts, determined by research and which are evidence based, form the basis of the Peer Support Program and all training programs and student learning materials. Peer Support Australia believes the development of these key concepts will contribute to students' mental, social and physical wellbeing. The key concepts are:

- sense of Self;
- resilience;
- connectedness; and
- sense of possibility.

4. Further research on the Peer Support Program

4.1 National Suicide Prevention Strategy 2007- current

Peer Support Australia has conducted evaluations focusing on the impact of the Peer Support Program as a suicide prevention initiative. This evaluation formed part of the NSPS projects for DoHA. The results suggest the Peer Support Program promotes mental wellbeing, resilience and social connectedness. As part of the project, an Evaluation Package was designed and developed for schools who implement the Peer Support Program. The aim of this package is to enable schools to evaluate the impacts of the Peer Support Program on their students and the school as a whole over time.

Within this context the evaluation data generated by teachers and students in both primary and secondary schools across Australia demonstrated the implementation of the Peer Support Program has a positive impact.

A random sample of 749 schools across Australia completed surveys which then formed part of the Evaluation Package. The following summary is provided:

- 325 primary schools implementing the Peer Support Program; and
- 237 secondary schools implementing the Peer Support Program.⁹

Results in primary schools

In a survey completed by teachers in 325 Primary Schools from NSW, Queensland and Tasmania implementing the Peer Support Program in 2007, the main reasons identified for implementing the Peer Support Program were:

(*the percentages are the percentage of schools ranking the item as the most important or 2nd most important)

- *66% opportunities for authentic student leadership;
- 56% building student friendship networks;
- 35% overall impact on the school community; and
- 25% vertical student connections within the school.

Results in secondary schools

In a survey completed by teachers in 237 Secondary Schools in NSW, Queensland and Tasmania implementing the Peer Support Program the main purpose identified for implementing the Peer Support Program were:

(*the percentages are the percentage of schools ranking the item as the most important or 2nd most important)

- *81% easing transition to secondary school for Year 7 students (or Year 8 in some states);
- 45% opportunities for authentic student leadership; and
- 42% building student friendship networks.

⁹ Peer Support Australia 2009

4.2 Pilot study in conjunction with Deakin University 2008

This pilot study examined the efficacy of Peer Support Australia's anti-bullying module for primary schools'. A quantitative questionnaire was used to survey 77 students from two primary schools (mean age 10.1 years) in the greater Sydney, Australia area. One school implemented the anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, (intervention school) the other school did not (non-intervention school). Students completed a survey containing questions relating to bullying behaviours in their school. This questionnaire was developed from Peer Relations Assessment Questionnaire Students (PRAQ) devised by Rigby and Slee (1993).

This study has provided further evidence to suggest intervention programs are effective in help seeking behaviours. It has quantified the assumptions made regarding the efficacy of *Speaking Up* as a module which reduces bullying behaviours which was the principal purpose of this study.

The study into the anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, provided further evidence for the following:

- students developed friendships across the year groups;
- students were more inclusive of others;
- students developed the skills to support target students; and
- students developed the skills to report bullying behaviours.

The anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, was shown to:

- reduce the incidence of bullying behaviours;
- change attitudes towards bullying behaviours in the culture of the school;
- provide greater awareness of the different types of bullying behaviours;
- provide support for the longer term benefits of the intervention program.

Peer Support Australia's primary schools anti-bullying module, *Speaking Up*, is an effective intervention strategy supporting students to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to make a positive contribution to the creation and maintenance of a safe school environment by reducing bullying behaviours. The findings of the current study make a contribution to research already undertaken in this area.¹⁰ This thesis was published in 2010 as a book, *They Can't Hurt Me - a peer-led approach to bullying*,

4.3 James Cook University 2006

Case study vignettes, conducted by James Cook University, were published in 2006. This study comprised the Teachers And Educators Around Castle Hill (TEACH) cluster of 7 primary schools in the Values

¹⁰ Chadwick 2010

Education Good Practice Schools (VEGPS Stage I) project in Townsville. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students and findings have been reported in *Values Education and Quality Teaching, The Double Helix Effect*, Professor Terry Lovat and Ron Toomey, 2007.

The VEGPS project for TEACH cluster focused on the implementation of the Peer Support Program and to evaluate the impact of the Peer Support Program in each of the 7 schools.

Significant findings included:

- constructing a common language for discussing and shaping values;
- developing social relations and interactions;
- contributing positively to whole school activities;
- demonstrating understandings of abstract concepts; and
- applying understandings to concrete instances.

Lovat, 2007, pg 89 discusses immersing the “whole person in a depth of cognition, social and emotional maturity, and self knowledge” is required. Evidence from these case studies clearly demonstrates an holistic approach to the implementation of values education is apparent through the Peer Support Program.

4.4 University of Western Sydney 2003

A longitudinal study by the University of Western Sydney, Self Concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre was published in 2003. The research was conducted to determine the efficacy of the secondary schools Peer Support Program and the development of the key concepts espoused by Peer Support Australia. This research proved the Peer Support Program gains positive long term benefits for students and school communities.

Funded by the Australian Research Council and involving 2,300 secondary students across NSW during 2001-2002, some of the findings demonstrated the Peer Support Program:

- assists students to successfully negotiate transition from primary to secondary school;
- improves relationships with others - peers and teachers; and
- successfully changes attitudes toward bullying behaviours.

These results are relevant to educational practitioners and highlight the Peer Support Program can be specifically used to help strengthen student connectedness. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in increasing communications and social skills and enhancing optimistic thinking and resilience.

The Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program and early intervention is paramount in decreasing mental health concerns amongst young people. Effective intervention programs require whole

school communities to work together to encourage a sense of belonging and the involvement of all members of the community.

Research suggests students who experience suicide ideation are more likely to speak to their friends about it, making a peer led approach to addressing the issue appropriate. In evaluating the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in 2003, Dr Louise Ellis wrote “The findings suggest the Peer Support Program provides an excellent mechanism for facilitating social interchange across year groups and hence creating a positive school climate.”

The implementation of the Peer Support Program has the potential to make a significant contribution in addressing students’ mental health problems.

- 1) previous research indicates adolescents’ willingness to both provide and receive support from their peers; and
- 2) evidence to suggest young people prefer their friends rather than adults as a source of support and assistance.

Given these findings, traditional mental health programs may not succeed in providing effective intervention. Schools remiss in capitalising on the help seeking patterns of young people may be forfeiting valuable opportunities to address students’ wellbeing.¹¹

¹¹ Ellis 2003

5. Conclusion

Peer Support Australia's work with school communities over almost 40 years aims to provide a positive and safe learning environment for students and staff. Taking a whole school approach allows staff to support their students to become young people who can:

- take responsibility for their own wellbeing;
- deal positively, proactively and resiliently with their life experiences; and
- be actively involved in, and supported by, their community.

The Peer Support Program's strength is in being a peer led, universal, skills based, experiential learning program which is integrated into curricula and sustained through all year groups. It is a program which is evidence based.

The Peer Support Program:

- provides students with a supportive learning environment in which to develop the skills, understandings, attitudes and strategies to make healthy life decisions;
- enhances peer connections throughout the school;
- develops and maintains positive relationships within the school community;
- develops skills in resilience, assertiveness, decision making, problem solving and leadership; and
- is implemented across all education sectors.

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