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# Supporting Teens in Reading *I'm Here*

## ADVICE FOR ADULT HELPERS LEADING PEER COUNSELING AND PEER MEDIATION PROGRAMS

Peer counseling and other peer support programs started in the 1970s and are becoming more common in schools across the United States. In these programs, young people are trained to take on a helping role to support classmates or others of a similar age. Peer support programs in schools have many benefits. They can help improve student well-being, academic achievement, and social skills. They can also help your school counseling program be more effective and reach more students (ASCA 2012).

Whether you're a seasoned peer counseling supervisor or just starting out with your first group of helpers, you can use *I'm Here: A Peer Counseling Guide for Teens* as a tool to support and train young people in peer counseling, mentoring, and mediation roles. If you're new to this work or looking to start a program in your school or organization, it can be helpful to read this guide from the beginning for advice on setting up a program and working with peer helpers. Seasoned supervisors of established programs and those using the book outside of dedicated peer support programs can skip ahead to page 7 for a list of questions to use when leading discussions with young people reading the book, as well as a Peer Feedback Form that students can use to evaluate one another when practicing helping skills.

When leading peer counseling programs, it is critical to remember to check in regularly with your helpers to make sure they are not in over their heads. They may not always reach out to you first. They might be embarrassed to admit to a mistake they made or fear that you will judge them for not handling a situation well. Recommendations for steps you can take to develop and ensure a safe and effective peer counseling program, as well as resources for more information, are also provided in this download.



## THE ROLE OF ADULT COORDINATORS AND SUPERVISORS

A peer counseling or peer mediation program needs adult coordinators to make sure the program runs successfully and safely. As a coordinator, you will need to:

1. Get permission from school administrators or others to establish a program.
2. Recruit students to join the program.
3. Set up a training program to teach peer counseling and mediation skills.
4. Advertise the program so students know it exists and how to access it.
5. Develop a referral system so students in need can connect with peer counselors and peer mediators.
6. Schedule regular supervision sessions, both group and individual.

The following sections offer advice for each of these tasks.

## SETTING UP A PEER COUNSELING OR MEDIATION PROGRAM

When setting up your program, you'll first need to talk with your school administrators to see if they would support such a program and in what format and to decide whether your program would be offered as a class for credit or an extracurricular activity. School administration would likely need to provide space for the peer counseling program, review methods of getting consent from parents for students to participate, and allocate funding for recruitment, training, and advertising.

In some schools, the peer counseling program is set up as an extracurricular school club that meets regularly. Active Minds ([activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org)) is a nonprofit organization with over 600 chapters across the country that promotes mental health awareness and education for young adults. Chapters are student-led and are located on college campuses and in high schools, and they are beginning to expand into middle schools. The Active Minds website shares useful resources for setting up a chapter in your school, as well as information on other peer counseling programs across the United States. They can be a good option for starting an extracurricular program at your school.

Other schools offer academic credit for becoming trained as a peer counselor. For example, St. John's County school district in Florida offers a series of peer counseling classes ([stjohns.k12.fl.us/courses/hs\\_subject/peer-counseling](http://stjohns.k12.fl.us/courses/hs_subject/peer-counseling)). Broward County, Florida, has a peer counseling program as well ([browardschools.com/Page/32888](http://browardschools.com/Page/32888)). The Orange County school system in Florida has a PAL: Peer Assistance Leadership Program for students in fourth through twelfth grade built upon a philosophy of students helping students ([ocde.us/PAL/Pages/default.aspx](http://ocde.us/PAL/Pages/default.aspx)).



The state of California provided \$10 million in their 2022 budget to fund grants for up to eight high schools to offer peer-to-peer programs. Madison Park Academy in Oakland, California, has a mentoring program where junior high and high school students are paired with students in grades 5 through 8 to help the younger kids increase self-awareness, develop their capacity for empathy and kindness, and learn coping strategies to deal with life's challenges. Students can also take an elective course as part of their training ([madisonpark.ousd.org/resources/mentoring](http://madisonpark.ousd.org/resources/mentoring)). You can visit the websites of these programs for ideas for how to structure your own peer counseling or mediation program.

Once you've determined the format and guidelines for your program, you can select peer counselors and mediators. This can be done in different ways. Some schools and organizations invite or nominate students to participate based on their observations of traits and skills that make these students good candidates for becoming peer counselors or mediators. This might include perceptions of how well candidates get along with others, how helpful or kind they are, what leadership potential they have, and how they interact with adults. Other programs ask students to nominate their peers based on similar criteria. Students can also volunteer.

Training is the next step. *I'm Here* makes a wonderful training guide for students. If you're using the book as a text for training, you might have your new peer counselors and mediators first read the book on their own and then discuss it during training. Another way to use the book is to read the book together, chapter by chapter. While students won't necessarily need all the skills described in the book, being familiar with them will make it easier for them to use the skills when needed. A study guide for discussing *I'm Here* with students is included on page 7.

You can also find many peer counseling training guides specifically for coordinators like yourself, though you will likely find more resources about peer mediation and mentoring. Some good ones include:

- “10 Lessons for Teaching Conflict Resolution Skills” (Fairfax County Public Schools): [creducation.net/resources/CR\\_Guidelines\\_and\\_10\\_CR\\_lessons\\_FCPS.pdf](http://creducation.net/resources/CR_Guidelines_and_10_CR_lessons_FCPS.pdf)
- Active Minds: [activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org)
- The Center for Supportive Schools: [supportiveschools.org](http://supportiveschools.org)
- *Conflict Resolution and Mediation for Peer Helpers* by Don L. Sorenson (Educational Media Corporation)
- National Association of Peer Program Professionals: [peerprogramprofessionals.org](http://peerprogramprofessionals.org)
- National Mentoring Resource Center: [nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org](http://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org)

- Ocelotl: [ocelotlyouth.org](http://ocelotlyouth.org)
- *Peer Buddy Programs for Successful Secondary School Inclusion* by Carolyn Hughes and Erik W. Carter (Brookes Publishing)
- *Peer Helping: A Practical Guide* by Robert D. Myrick and Don L. Sorenson (Educational Media Corporation)
- *Peer Mentoring Guide* (National Peer Mentoring Center): [ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/peer-mentoring-guide](http://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/peer-mentoring-guide)
- *Peer Support Strategies for Improving All Students' Social Lives and Learning* by Erik W. Carter, Lisa S. Cushing, and Craig H. Kennedy (Brookes Publishing)
- Project PEACE Peer Mediation Conflict Resolution Program: [teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Project-PEACE-Peer-Mediation-Conflict-Resolution-Program-BUNDLE-1775654?st=4e39bb119d6119dd824c8f3cee baa64e](http://teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Project-PEACE-Peer-Mediation-Conflict-Resolution-Program-BUNDLE-1775654?st=4e39bb119d6119dd824c8f3cee baa64e)
- *Resolving Conflict with a Peer Mediation Program: A Manual for Grades 4–8* by Maureen F. Block and Barbara Blazej (The Peace and Reconciliation Studies Program at the University of Maine and Maine Law & Civics Education): [umaine.edu/peace/wp-content/uploads/sites/173/2016/03/PEER\\_MEDIATION\\_FINAL\\_11.pdf](http://umaine.edu/peace/wp-content/uploads/sites/173/2016/03/PEER_MEDIATION_FINAL_11.pdf)
- *Restorative Practices and Peer Mediation Training Manual* by Matthew B. Tolliver (self-published)
- “Start a Peer Listening Program in Your School”: [forhighschoolcounselors.blogspot.com/2015/02/start-peer-listening-program-in-your.html](http://forhighschoolcounselors.blogspot.com/2015/02/start-peer-listening-program-in-your.html)

After you’ve found and trained your first counselors and mediators, advertising your program and sharing ways to volunteer with and access it are the next steps.

Options include:

- school newspapers
- flyers sent home with students
- morning announcements
- posters
- in-class demonstrations of role-play sessions
- school social media

Your peer counselors/mediators will likely have additional creative ideas for advertising the program.

## GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISING PARTICIPANTS

When supervising peer counselors or mediators and coordinating a program, your first goal is to create an atmosphere that is conducive to sharing problems. This means not being overly critical of helpers as they are learning to implement new skills or improve existing ones. Let them know that they will make mistakes. This is part of the learning process.

In supervising young people, you will need to be more direct than you would be with adults. During supervision sessions, you might start with an open-ended question, such as one of these:

- “How’s it been going with your helpees?”
- “What troubles or situations have you come up against so far?”
- “Which skills have been easiest for you to use? Which have been harder?”

In these sessions, be sure to also ask more specific questions, especially regarding safety issues. Here are some examples:

- “Have any of the people you are helping talked about having suicidal thoughts or made any attempts?”
- “Have any of your helpees shared information that made you uncomfortable? How did you respond?”
- “Has drug or alcohol use come up with your helpees?”

Group supervision will likely be your helpers’ preferred format. Meeting with all your helpers at once facilitates their learning from each other. It also makes it easier for you, since your time is probably limited. Along with group supervision, you should be sure to occasionally check in with helpers individually in case there are issues they haven’t felt comfortable sharing in the larger group setting.

## TEACHING HELPING SKILLS

Role playing is going to be an excellent strategy for teaching helping skills. Having your peer counselors and mediators take turns playing the helper and the helpee gives them an idea of what it feels like to be on both sides and an opportunity for practicing skills.

You can lead 10- to 15-minute role plays during training and/or supervision sessions. Hand out sample problems helpers are likely to encounter (helpers can suggest situations based on their experiences with helpees) and split the group into pairs or small groups. Have the pairs or small groups play out the scenarios while the rest of the group watches. When the role play is finished, you and the helpers who watched can give feedback on what you saw. Guide the feedback session by asking the group which attending and helping skills they observed in the role play and giving positive feedback first. Then they

can share suggestions on what could have been done better. Be sure to remind the group to be gentle in their feedback so as not to come across as too critical. Adults have a hard enough time with criticism, and teens are likely to be more sensitive.

Page 13 can be used as a rating/feedback form for role plays. Peer counselors and mediators can rate each other on how well they used the various helping skills.

## REINFORCING GUIDELINES FOR PEER COUNSELORS

Don't expect that once young people are trained, they will remember everything they learned and be able to easily put it all into practice. Professional counselors have continuing education for this very reason. Therefore, it is important to review with peer counselors and mediators on a regular basis the importance of confidentiality, reporting risky behaviors, being good role models, and reaching out to students they see are having trouble.

## GETTING HELP FOR YOURSELF

Supervising peer counselors can be challenging, especially in today's climate. Be sure to consult with your colleagues as well, especially if you are uncertain as to how to advise your peer helpers on issues that may arise.

One of the most rewarding aspects of working with kids and teens is seeing them use the skills we teach them and the support we give them to make positive changes in their lives and in the lives of those with whom they interact. Teaching them to listen to each other respectfully and be supportive of each other's struggles, and providing safe spaces for them to talk about serious issues when they are young, helps them become better students today and better partners, parents, and people in the future. As an adult mentor, you can play a major role in their lives!





# I'm Here Discussion Guide

The following is a list of discussion questions for each chapter in the book. The questions can be useful during peer counseling training sessions as a guide for group discussions, or they could be used as a self-study where participants write down their responses and share with each other. In large groups, participants could ask each other the questions during breakout sessions.

Whatever format you're using for discussion, remind the group to be as honest as they can in their self-reflection.

## CHAPTER 1: TEENS HELPING TEENS

1. Do you have friends or family members with mental health or addiction problems? How do you think these problems affect their lives?
2. In what ways do you think being a teenager today is stressful? How well do you think adults understand the stresses young people have?
3. What are your personal stressors? How do you manage them?
4. What experiences have you had when talking with friends about their problems? Do they seem comfortable confiding in you?
5. What has been your experience with societal issues such as racism, gender identity and gender roles, and LGBTQ+ matters? What concerns you about how they are handled in your school or community?
6. How comfortable would you be standing up or intervening when you see someone being teased or bullied? How about approaching someone who is left out or doesn't seem to have friends?
7. What are the differences between a peer counselor, a peer mentor, a peer mediator, and a peer ambassador? Which role(s) are you most interested in and why?
8. What are some reasons you decided to learn more about peer counseling? What are some advantages of learning how to help peers with their problems?
9. How might being a peer counselor and learning skills to help others help you in your life? How do you think being trained as a peer counselor might help you in your relationships with family and friends?



10. Do you think you would be interested in helping others for a career?  
Why or why not?
11. Do you think there is a need for peer counselors, mentors, and/or mediators in your school? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 2: PEER COUNSELING

1. What is peer counseling? What are some ways peer counselors help?
2. What are your feelings about becoming a peer counselor? What aspects of counseling make you feel nervous or anxious? What aspects are you excited about?
3. What might help you maintain a positive attitude when helping others? How well do you do with encouraging others and giving them hope that things can get better? Why is this important?
4. What are the goals of peer counselors? Are these goals that you share?
5. What does *confidentiality* mean? Why is confidentiality important in peer counseling?
6. What are some ways you can help advertise your peer counseling program?
7. Do you think it might be hard for you to avoid giving advice or telling people what to do to solve their problems? If so, why? What are some things you can tell yourself to make sure you stay respectful?

## CHAPTER 3: CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE HELPING

1. What pressures do you think you might feel as a peer counselor? How might you handle them? What might help you take care of your own mental health while trying to help others?
2. What qualities do you have that would make you a good peer counselor?
3. Of the list of qualities on pages 28 and 29, which ones do you think you have? Which ones do you think are more challenging for you and that you may need to develop further?
4. How comfortable would you be asking people who know you well which qualities they think you have and which ones you need to improve?



5. How well do you think you could handle risky situations, such as people who are using drugs or having suicidal thoughts? Who are the adults you would turn to for help?
6. Do you think it would be hard to avoid talking about yourself too much? Why or why not?
7. How good are you at keeping secrets? What might make it difficult for you to keep things that people tell you private?
8. What are some of the ethics of being a peer counselor that you should keep in mind when helping others?
9. What is compassion fatigue? What are some strategies you can use to take care of yourself to avoid it? What can you do if you start to feel stressed about what people tell you?

## CHAPTER 4: BASIC HELPING SKILLS

1. What are the three tasks for helping others? Do you think any of these tasks would be or are difficult for you? If so, why?
2. How comfortable are you with attending skills? How do you do with using eye contact and the other attending skills when listening to or talking with others?
3. How might you handle silence in a peer counseling session? What might make silence difficult for you?
4. How comfortable do you think you would be with acknowledging and respecting cultural differences when helping others? Can you be nonjudgmental in your approach?
5. What is the difference between open, closed, and clarifying questions? What makes asking open and clarifying questions more helpful than asking closed questions?
6. Why is it important to reflect feelings back to the person you're helping?
7. What might make it hard for you to deal with people when they are having big feelings, like sadness, anxiety, or anger?
8. Why is restating or summarizing what people share with you helpful?
9. Why is it important to be cautious when using self-disclosure?



10. What are some examples of unhelpful reactions or comments? What makes them unhelpful, and what are some better alternatives?

## CHAPTER 5: HELPING PEOPLE FIND SOLUTIONS

1. Why is it important to figure out how motivated someone is to make a change in their life?
2. What is a readiness ruler and how can you use it?
3. What are some good questions you can ask to help people figure out their own solutions to their problems?
4. What is a respectful way to offer some of your ideas for what the person might try?
5. What might make it hard for people to be assertive? Is this an area that you have difficulty with as well? If so, what makes it hard for you?
6. What are some examples of positive self-talk? How might this help people feel better about themselves?
7. What is the “miracle question”? How can it help people change their behavior?
8. What are some of the benefits of journaling? Of keeping a gratitude journal? Would you be willing to try this yourself? How might a journaling practice make you a better helper?
9. What is the difference between ANTS and PETS? Do you have problems with thinking too negatively about problems? How can you help others untwist their thinking? How does more positive thinking help?
10. What are some relaxation skills you can share with people you’re helping? How can you use them yourself?
11. What are some good ways to end a peer counseling session?

## CHAPTER 6: TEACHING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

1. What are problem-solving skills?
2. How good do you think you are at problem-solving? What steps do you typically take when trying to solve your own problems?
3. What are some common problems kids and teens need help solving? Do you encounter any of these problems in your life, your school, or your community?



4. What are the five steps of problem-solving? Can you think of a problem in your own life that might benefit from using this approach?
5. Why is it important to figure out what might be contributing to a problem?
6. What is the value of first asking someone what solutions they can come up to solve a problem before offering ideas?
7. What is the value of using a pros/cons list when helping people solve their problems?
8. What is goal setting? What steps can you help people use to figure out what their goals are and how to achieve them?

## CHAPTER 7: TEACHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

1. What are some common causes of conflict for kids and teens in general? What are some common causes of conflict for kids and teens in your school and community?
2. What are the guidelines you should follow when helping people resolve their conflicts with each other?
3. Why is it important to try to stay neutral and not take sides?
4. What is an I-message, and why is it important to use them when dealing with conflict?
5. What is a win-win solution, and how can you help people come up with one?
6. What are the six stages of conflict resolution?
7. What are the six rules for mediating conflict?
8. What are some challenges you might face when helping people resolve conflict?
9. How can you help people resolve conflict when only one person is present? What do you think of the suggestions given in the book? How might these make it more likely that the other person listens to the concerns?

## CHAPTER 8: WHEN TO SEEK ADULT HELP

1. What are some situations in which you should always seek adult help? Why is this so important?
2. What concerns do you have about your ability to help someone who expresses suicidal thoughts? What might make this difficult for you?
3. How is self-harming different from having suicidal thoughts?
4. What are some questions you might ask someone if they are suicidal?

5. What are some questions you might ask someone if they are homicidal?
6. How can you tell if someone's drug or alcohol use is serious enough to tell an adult? How difficult would this be for you to do?
7. How do you think you might react if someone tells you that they are being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused? Why is it so important to talk with a trusted adult about these concerns and not try to handle it all on your own?
8. How common do you think bullying is in your school or neighborhood? How can you help someone who is being bullied?
9. What might make it hard for you to talk with an adult when these issues come up when you are helping others? What concerns do you have about doing so?
10. How can you let a helpee know that you need to tell an adult about their problem? What can you offer to do that might make it easier for them?



# Peer Feedback Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Role Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

Use this form to rate peers' helping skills during role plays. Be sure to offer specific feedback on each helping skill—both positive and constructive—in the Comments column.

**Rating Scale Guide:** (1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = good)

SKILL	USED?	HOW WELL?	COMMENTS
Establish Rapport	Y N	1 2 3	
Attending	Y N	1 2 3	
Listening	Y N	1 2 3	
Open Questions	Y N	1 2 3	
Closed Questions	Y N	1 2 3	
Reflecting Feelings	Y N	1 2 3	
Showing Respect	Y N	1 2 3	
Teaching Skills	Y N	1 2 3	
Giving Information	Y N	1 2 3	
Self-Disclosure	Y N	1 2 3	
Other Comments			