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The Peer Activities in Sexual Health young people's peer education project

The PASH (Peer Activities in Sexual Health) young people's peer education project is co-ordinated by the Centre for HIV & Sexual Health and forms part of Sheffield's Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Strategy for NHS Sheffield and Sheffield City Council. The project began delivering peer-led education sessions to young people in May 2004.

Since the project began, six training courses have been delivered, resulting in 52 young people (16-19 years) having successfully completed the initial training requirement (10 sessions). PASH currently has 5 female peer educators delivering sessions in schools, colleges and youth projects. A seventh cohort of young people is being recruited for the next volunteers' training course, which will run from September to November 2009.

Peer educator comments:

"PASH is more than just about volunteering as you actually gain a lot of things from being part of it. This includes things like meeting new people whom you actually gradually become very close to and feel very comfortable with. You also pick up good habits like learning how to not speak when someone is speaking, demonstrating the right body language when in an audience and speaking at a tone and speed everyone can hear. All these things I have also applied outside the programme like at college and at home. You also tend to have an overwhelming feeling because you feel that what you have done or are doing is an accomplishment to yourself and you are

giving out information that is relevant in teenagers' lives. What I have gained mostly from PASH is more knowledge on sexual health and the services available which make me more confident to talk about the subject. Overall, PASH is an experience I am most certainly glad I had the opportunity to experience." (Lupupa)

Education sessions

Between April 2008 and March 2009, education sessions were delivered in nine of twelve months. In total, 38 sessions were delivered in 12 settings including secondary schools, colleges and youth groups. In addition to delivering education sessions to young people, the volunteers were active in a range of other initiatives including: 'Feeling Hot' a summer campaign, volunteer recruitment, local media interviews, 'Stand & Deliver' training course (establishing peer education) and 'In it Together' - peer approaches seminar.

Peer educator comments:

"Being a PASH volunteer, I feel, is one of the most challenging yet most rewarding experiences that you can have. It enables you to develop in confidence while learning vital skills such as team work and also developing into the role of a leader. Not only is this experience a learning one, but also a very enjoyable one and that is what makes PASH so unique and worthwhile." (Saba)

Targeting

Information about the project is regularly distributed to schools, colleges and other

young people's groups/settings. As PASH has developed, there has been an increased drive to target the project to geographical areas of Sheffield with the highest teenage pregnancy rates and to prioritise the needs of particular 'at risk' groups of young people. The project is always keen to increase its reach and to develop new links in the city.

Peer educator comments:

"I've been a PASH volunteer for over 2 years, and have gained an infinite number of positive experiences from the project. My self-confidence, public speaking and communication skills have vastly improved, as has my knowledge and interest in sexual health and relationships education. I have progressed from 'A' Levels to Medical School during my time as a volunteer, and found that during my application to study medicine, my interviewers found the project particularly unique in comparison to many volunteer projects undertaken by prospective medical students, meaning that not only has PASH been an exciting personal experience, but an asset to my CV too. Another appealing aspect of the project is that the volunteers come from a variety of different backgrounds, which has allowed me to make a fantastic new group of friends which are added to at the end of each training programme. PASH has definitely been influential in my life over the last couple of years, and I would recommend similar projects to anybody." (Alice)

Evaluations

Pupil/Young People Evaluations

Since the start of the project, evaluation forms have been distributed to young people receiving a PASH session. During this period, approximately 600 young people received a PASH session and a total of 463 evaluation forms were obtained from young people. On a scale using *Unsatisfactory/Satisfactory/Good*, 78% of the young people rated the PASH sessions *Good*.

Staff Evaluations

As in previous years, staff were asked to complete retrospective evaluation forms giving their impressions of their pupils'/young people's learning as well as the performance of the PASH peer educators.

Within this period, fourteen staff evaluation forms were sent out and twelve completed evaluations were received by the project. The overall response by staff was positive and specific comments included:

"I think the closeness in age made it easier for the group to feel comfortable and discuss sexual health. The activities were also of a good length and the peer educator was brilliant at facilitating the sessions." (Learning Mentor)

"The volunteers were able to pitch the sessions correctly and create an atmosphere that was safe and secure for any questions." (Teacher)

"The PASH volunteers made our young people feel comfortable discussing a difficult subject. I would use the service again and recommend to others." (Prevention Officer)

"The girls (peer educators) provide excellent role models for our students who are only one or two years younger than them." (Foundation Studies Tutor)

"Students were very focused when led by someone nearer their own age." (Teacher)

Conclusion

Sheffield has a strong background in using peer approach methods in sexual health promotion work with a variety of communities, including young people. It is an approach that is valued across the city, and which we continue to pursue - particularly now targeting the more vulnerable communities. Peer education is neither a cheap nor an easy option; however experience demonstrates that it significantly increases young people's confidence and participation in decisions that affect their lives.