

Training on Listening and Peer Support

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The problem of bullying in schools represents now one of the most discussed and studied themes in the school and educational contexts. The element which emerges from the researches carried out on this phenomenon is the silence often wrapping the episodes of bullying and their protagonists. As it came out very clearly, the victims who are being bullied, no matter their age, share the attitude of refusing to talk about their situation and respective suffering. It is possible that the victim finds relief within the family, but not always, and, anyway, hardly ever with classmates or adults, teachers or non teachers. One is frightened and ashamed to share his emotions with someone else, and often hopes that pretending nothing has happened and ignoring his difficulties, sooner or later the problems will disappear by themselves.

Silence, however, is not only typical of victims. Classes are full of students witnessing episodes of arrogance addressed to their classmates and they don't dare to interfere, not even reporting to adults what is happening. And when someone addresses reference figures such as a teacher or a parent, is often told that "boys are like that", "one must know how to defend oneself" or "just pretend nothing has happened".

For a victim, on the contrary, the solution of a situation apparently hopeless could lie in the possibility to find relief to his frustrations, fits of rage, fears or problems thanks to a person who is part of the school environment (such as a schoolmate, but also a reliable teacher or caretaker) and can offer his ability as a listener, guaranteeing, in case of need, a suitable intervention. For the witnesses of violent episodes, the fact that a mediating and listening figure, specifically interested in the problem of bullying is made official, guarantees safety conditions and a reason to break the silence which contributes to keep the victim isolated.

Since a few years, in Canada, Usa, Japan and England anti-bullying systems of intervention have been activated in schools. They are based on Peer Support techniques, consisting in groups of students, trained for active listening and support techniques, who offer to help their "mates" in difficulty and who are often supervised by adequately trained teachers.

The Peer Support is usually applied to any context in which some peers share daily a difficult and troublesome situation: colleagues, schoolmates, parents or relatives of terminal patients or people in jail, immigrants in foreign countries, disabled, therapeutical communities users and so on. The basic principle of this technique is that among peers it is actually easier to understand each other, find relief, discuss and find a solution.

The Peer Support was applied in schools after finding out that for young people it is often easier to trust a person of the same age than an adult. Therefore there are many schools where this system is applied and works. However, interviewing pupils attending those schools, who, despite their need, have never used such techniques, it came out that some of them would rather talk with adults as they would feel safer and less exposed. For these people, therefore, the peer, even though presented as a reference, help and

support figure, is anyway perceived as someone who judges, whereas an adult is more reassuring, having nothing to do with the social selective criteria so frequent among young people.

Therefore this course is addressed to that teaching and non teaching staff who are willing to take the responsibility of “listeners towards students who find difficult to integrate with their peers, due to the continual acts of violence and arrogance they suffer, and first of all need to find relief to their emotions, analyse the problem step by step and identify the possible solutions with an adult.

A further aim is to create and develop a Peer Support group among such adults, so that they can help each other in this difficult task, as it is impossible to face and fight alone a problem like this, and also because it is indispensable to create an overall school system to stop bullying.

How to start

To make such an intervention program work, it is necessary that the principal, the teaching and non teaching staff, students and parents take part and share the attitude of the initiative. What follows is a list of elements to take into consideration:

- 1) Discuss the program with the principal;
- 2) Present the program to the whole staff;
- 3) Present the information to the students' parents;
- 4) Give the students suitable information;
- 5) Carry out a training course;
- 6) Select the volunteers taking on the role of listeners;
- 7) Advertise the program;
- 8) Program Supervision and Evaluation.

Active listening

Giving attention (F.E.L.O.R. Method)

Giving attention is the ability to concentrate and focus. The basic condition for supporting and counselling. Giving attention to the other person shows respect, concern, interest, involvement and also establishes a solid base for a helpful relation.

Facing.....Sitting in front of the partner, addressing him: it means “I want to stay on your side”.

Eye contact.... Looking into someone's eyes: it means “I care about you and I am giving you attention”.

Leaning.....Stretching towards the partner: it means “I am involved and interested in you”.

Open.....Open: it shows that you are ready and open to whatever the partner is on the point of saying.

Relaxed.....Relaxed: it's like saying "I have enough energy for our work together".

Respond in listening

It sounds like....

It seems that.....

I wonder if.....

I guess.....

It seems to me that...

What I feel.....

I have the impression....

It makes me think of....

Am I right if I think....?

You seem.....

Well, you feel.....

The "I" Message

The "I" messages indicate that you take the responsibility of your thoughts, your feelings and behaviour.

It is easier to use the "I" message if you:

Speak only to yourself;

Declare what you see and hear;

Declare what you think;

Declare what you feel;

Declare what you want or need.

Please note the difference between "you" messages and "I" messages

YOU messages (accusations)

I messages

You never listen to me

I'm frustrated....

You never let me say anything

I get angry when I can't speak

Using Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions encourage people to explore their thoughts.

Close-ended questions impose a specific answer.

Examples of open-ended questions:

- What do you feel?
- Can you tell me something more about...
- How are you feeling now?
- Tell me about....
- Where do you want to start?
- Can you tell me what this means to you?
- How would you like that things were going?
- What have you thought?
- Do you think things are going on?
- What would you like to do about...?
- What is it about?
- What can you think about this?
- What is the most important thing for you now?

Steps towards problem solving

1. Identifying the problem.

Give attention and ask open-ended questions
Clarify feelings and thoughts using active listening
“**You feel angry because...**”

2. Exploring options.

Make a list of the possible solutions of the problem:

“**What do you think you could do about this?**”
or “**What would you like to happen?**”

3. Identifying advantages and disadvantages.

Discuss the consequences of each solution.

“What do you think it would happen if you tried to...?”

4. Making an action plan.

Sum up, select a solution and plan a following action.

“Therefore you’ve decided to... when are you going to do it?”

5. Evaluating the results.

Discuss the results of the action carried out.

“Was it successful?”

Supporting versus Helping

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| - Listen | - Do |
| - Help people understanding the problem | - Solve the problem for them |
| - Encourage them to take their responsibility | - Take charge of their problem |
| - Offer a feedback | - Give advice |
| - Encourage to take control | - You take control |
| - Help them to bear the consequences of their actions | - Eliminate the logical consequences |
| - Promote independence | - Create dependence |
| - Make able | - Make unable |

Remember:

We can't live other people's lives

We can't convince them that everything is all right, when it is not true.

We can help to grow and change so that they are more able to manage all these problems.

Summary of the listener's tasks

- Showing a strong attitude of interest and attention in what people say;
- Accepting people's feelings – you have to reply emphatically;
- Creating a pleasant surrounding where people are encouraged to speak, using:
 1. open-ended questions,
 2. invitations to speak: “tell me about...”, nodding and so on.
 3. helping a little to extend their history and to elaborate their feelings: “tell me something more about...”

- Avoiding blocks in communication: you have to be watchful towards everything that can restrain communication;
- Paraphrasing: offer discussion feedback to make clear to both (you and the other person) what has been said;
- Reflecting feelings: give people the feedback on the emotions they have expressed: “you seem angry, sad, gratified...”
- Summing up: present a summary of the content and the feelings people have expressed during the meeting;
- Applying the first 5 steps of the model concerning problem solving: help people apply the model to their problems.

Guide to discretion

1. Establish a verbal agreement on discretion with the people who have addressed you.
2. You will have to break discretion when:
 - a. People's health or safety are at risk;
 - b. Another person's health or safety are at risk;

3. Examples of when discretion must be broken:
 - a. Evidence of physical, sexual or emotive abuse;
 - b. Menace or attempt at suicide;
 - c. Drug or alcohol abuse which can menace people's life.

4. What to do when discretion must be broken:

a. Discuss with the people the need to break discretion and encourage them to speak with the Authorities Concerned.

b. Discuss the situation with the members of the Peer Support, with or without the person involved.

c. The members of the Peer Support will decide which kind of action undertake and who must be informed.

d. The members of the Peer Support will keep a written report of all the actions undertaken.

e. You or the members of the Peer Support will have to discuss all the actions with the person involved and go on supporting him.

Observer form

Your task consists of observing the person carrying out the role of “listener” in the role-play and giving a score to his behaviour following the scales here enclosed. You have to be particularly interested in measuring how appropriate are the listener’s different communicative canals towards the person expressing the problem.

Here are the scales of measurement:

- 1- appropriate use for the whole time
- 2- appropriate use for most of the time
- 3- sometimes appropriate and sometimes not
- 4- quite irregular and inappropriate
- 5- totally irregular and inappropriate

Direct look	1	2	3	4	5
Interpersonal distance	1	2	3	4	5
Gestures (hands and head)	1	2	3	4	5
Posture	1	2	3	4	5
Facial expressions	1	2	3	4	5
Voice tone	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking time	1	2	3	4	5
General co-ordination of the characteristics above-mentioned	1	2	3	4	5

Now please use the following scales for a further commentary of the listener’s general performance:

1 How clear was the listener’s voice?

Very clear ----- not at all clear

2 How confident did the listener seem?

Very confident ----- not at all confident

3 How interested did the listener seem in the other person's problems?

Very interested ----- not at all interested