

The Power of Positive Peer Influence: Leadership Training for Today's Teens

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SUMMARY: The Peer Group Connection (PGC) is a primary prevention program that enlists the power of peer influence to help teenagers cope with the universal, everyday problems and pressures of becoming adults. It addresses important transitions in young people's lives by building into schools an important set of rituals and practices that reinforce healthy values in students and encourage critical thinking.

PGC offers a variety of large and small group experiences that create a special bond among peers. This kind of team-building is the essential foundation of a strong, diverse, and democratic society.

Those of us who work with adolescents are acutely aware of young people's urgent need to be accepted by their peers and to be members of a group that both supports and reinforces their personal identity at a time of life when physical and emotional changes can affect self-esteem. When rapid and fundamental change is also occurring in society at large, the personal stresses of moving from childhood to adulthood are compounded. In addition to the common anxieties and fears that adolescents experience, substantial numbers of teenagers are affected by the more devastating consequences of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, drug addition, homicide, and suicide (Feldman & Elliott, 1990).

It is far more difficult for teens to draw strength from the family and community when both are being defined in new ways. In such turbulent times, the parental and communal stability that traditionally support a child's development can no longer be taken for granted; in too many cases, they simply do not exist. In suburbs and inner cities, even in our idealized rural and small-town America, children are beset by pressures. Is it any wonder, then, that the adolescent's need to be part of a group of peers is more urgent than ever?

The adolescent's need to be accepted and recognized by peers can affect feelings of security, perceptions of importance, and independent decision-making (Silber, 1961). The transition from eighth grade into a new and often impersonal high school can be a particularly vulnerable time for young people. Unless entering high school students have the good fortune to participate on an athletic team or belong to a singing or theater ensemble, they are unlikely to experience an initial sense of connectedness to their peers or to the school as a whole.

It is the responsibility of those of us who work in schools to insure that all children experience the value of being on a team and of making worthy contributions to others. It behooves us as adults to channel peer influence in positive ways and to utilize the powerful effects that young people can have on one another by encouraging activities in school that promote student leadership, team building, and community service.

These are precisely the goals of the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, a private not-for-profit organization that designs and conducts leadership training programs in schools and other educational institutions. Its mission is to improve the opportunities for young people to succeed in school and in life by helping them develop their leadership skills and by training teams of educators, parents, and interested community adults to work collaboratively to create a positive and supportive education environment.

The mission of the organization stems from a number of fundamental beliefs and principles:

- Leadership is the ability to work effectively in a group, to make a positive contribution to the group process and to stimulate and motivate others to function as a team, as well as to achieve common objectives and solve common problems.
- It is essential to establish and cultivate leadership skills in young people so that they can mature as leaders for the future.
- Collaboration among similar and diverse groups is essential for any organization or educational institution to create positive, lasting change and a supportive learning environment.
- The inclusion of leadership skills in the process of changing and advancing education systems will result in improved education communities and better prepared students.

BACKGROUND

Mental health specialists for decades have agreed that the happiness and adjustment of young people depends significantly on the development of peer group relationships (Mechem, 1943). The American high school has been the primary setting in which adolescent peer groups operate, but systematic use of peer groups to influence adolescent development is a relatively recent phenomenon. Teachers and counselors have traditionally been recognized as role models for children, but the role of students as peer helpers and facilitators has been overlooked (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972).

Educators alone cannot face the challenge of helping adolescents cope with today's problems. Research shows that the most successful prevention models in schools utilize older peers to influence or help their younger peers, serving as tutors, mentors, and peer leaders (Dryfoos, 1990).

Problems such as school violence, drug abuse, and racism are concerns that adults must share with today's teenagers. By sharing roles of authority and leadership with young adults, we can create a more caring and safe school community in which all of us can live and learn together effectively.

When considering peer leadership programs, it is first important to examine the concept of “leadership training.” What constitutes leadership? Can you train people to be leaders? Leaders, it is often said, are born, not made. While there is no denying the fact that some people seem to have an innate talent for leadership, it is also true that talent can be developed – and that *leadership skills can be learned* by those who might never imagine themselves playing such a prominent role in the world.

Leaders come from every ethnic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic background. They are male and female, old and young and every age in between. The key to their leadership is not to be found in some ascriptive norm, as the sociologists call those traits we are born with, but rather in descriptive or acquired traits, in this case, the ability to inspire and motivate others to dedicate time and energy towards the achievement of goals (Gardner, 1990).

Obviously, there are as many styles of leadership as there are leaders. One well-known model is the authoritarian leader who defines goals and makes decisions, telling people what to do without first consulting them about their needs and expectations. At the other end of the continuum is the person in a responsible position who does not want to dictate but has difficulty accomplishing goals, in part because goals are not clearly defined and the leader has not paid attention to the *process* required to achieve them, and in part because he or she does not know how to work cooperatively with others in groups.

Neither of these leadership models is effective, especially in the context of an effort to change education in America: the first is too authoritarian, the second is too diffuse and untutored in the fundamentals of communications and group dynamics. Neither takes advantage of the process or opportunities of shared decision-making. The Princeton Center’s training programs give leaders the skills they need not merely to avoid both extremes, but to become inspirers, mobilizers, and practitioners of positive change. The goal is to create a caring learning environment, where students and educators alike work cooperatively. It is a program that uses John Dewey’s learning-by-doing approach to develop a commitment to learning that will last a lifetime. Only that kind of commitment will prepare students to succeed in a world where every kind of change – social, economic, political, technological, and scientific – is rapid and far-reaching.

PEER LEADERSHIP TRAINING

All of the Princeton Center’s leadership training programs – whether for educators, parents, or students – focus on communications and group dynamics, the fundamental skills required by those who wish to succeed in today’s world. The peer Group Connection (PGC) is a peer leadership training program that trains educators to work with high school seniors who in turn serve as role models and mentors to groups of incoming students. Teams of educators participate in leadership training conferences conducted by the Princeton Center, and these teachers pass along the new skills they have acquired to student peer leaders in a year-long for-credit course that is an integral part of the school curriculum.

The Peer Group Connection places students in a key role within their schools, one where they share responsibility for the welfare of their younger peers and can use their powerful influence as role

models to contribute to a climate of mutual respect and support. This important responsibility requires a serious commitment of time and study: participants must learn the skills of co-leader facilitation and effective group management, practice shared decision-making and learn the tools of individual and group assessment.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM

The Princeton Center has developed a leadership training program that emphasizes three important goals:

1. To build caring, safe, and effective learning communities where ethnic, racial, and cultural differences are respected;
2. To motivate students to stay in school, improve their academic performance, and develop a lifelong commitment to learning; and
3. To develop leadership skills among educators and students so that they can work cooperatively for positive change in their school communities.

PGC succeeds in schools where teachers are willing to become learners and where they encourage a process whereby students become teachers of themselves and of others. PGC succeeds when educators and students are willing to pass along their skills in communications and group dynamics to ever-broader segments of the school community, not feeling threatened by competition from those who also acquire high-level skills, but instead celebrating the accomplishments of others which benefit everyone who participates in the group process. More specifically, the Peer Group Connection program has four objectives towards which measurable progress is made:

1. Increasing participants' *competence* as members and/or leaders of groups. A fundamental assumption is that leaders play a variety of roles during the course of a group's existence: facilitator, summarizer, clarifier, to name but a few. Moreover, every member of any group assumes one or more of these roles, permanently or intermittently, and therefore each participant functions as a co-leader of the group. The Princeton Center's training teaches educators and students how to observe their own behavior and that of others, how to identify the roles members take on in groups, and how to become more aware of the effects of that behavior on the group. Communication skills are very much a part of this process. Participants learn how to ask thoughtful questions that prompt critical thinking and how to listen actively to what other members of the group are saying.
2. Increasing participants' *confidence* in their ability to act as leaders. Competence without confidence is inadequate to the task of bringing about change. The Princeton Center's training provides a supportive environment in which each group member can risk trying new leadership roles while receiving the kind of feedback that promotes personal growth. In this context, shy young people, for example, can become negotiators instead of non-participating observers, and domineering people can practice being supporters.

3. Increasing participants' sense of *connectedness* to other members of the group. Confidence develops when each member of a group enjoys a feeling of belonging, when each is assured that his or her contribution towards achieving the group's objectives is valued. Again, the training provided by the Princeton Center is experiential. Educators and students spend time practicing the arts of sharing roles and responsibilities and of giving and getting support.
4. Increasing participants' *understanding* of group dynamics, that is, how groups come together and what happens during the five-stage group cycle of development (Stanford, 1977). An understanding of group stages is key to the design and implementation of the Peer Group Connection program. The Princeton Center's leadership training not only teaches educators and students what can be done to move a group from one stage to another as it progresses towards success; it also allows enough time for them to *practice* the skills required to communicate effectively with others and to participate in groups at all stages of their existence.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Given the breadth and depth of the problems that are said to plague our schools, especially high schools, it is no wonder that educators and their critics occasionally fall prey to programs that promise quick and total remedies. The Peer Group Connection makes no such claims. Nor does it assume that there is nothing right about our schools. On the contrary, it recognizes that much that is happening is good, that educators and their students are struggling to cope with virtually unprecedented problems in families and society, and that we can build on our successes while learning from our failures. Using this knowledge can help us determine what must change and how to accomplish that change.

Training in communications and group dynamics takes time, too, because PGC seeks to create certain kinds of leaders who commit themselves to their own growth as well as that of others. It is important to explore together those new styles of leadership which will be effective for a very diverse world. (Theobald, 1986)

That kind of leadership style comes naturally to only a few; the rest of us can learn how to do it however.

The establishment of PGC begins with an in-service day during which administrators, faculty, and staff are introduced to the program and to its philosophy. The PGC program works best when a team of three faculty work with and train a class of 12-14 senior peer leaders who, in turn, run small-group activities each week that reach approximately 100 incoming students. To reach larger numbers of students, two additional faculty can be added for every peer leadership class of 14 seniors who work with another 100 first year students.

TEACHER SELECTION AND TRAINING

A team of three faculty, a PGC coordinator and two advisors, are selected by their high school principal to run the program. Faculty teams should represent the diversity of their school's student population, have a good rapport with their students, and be open, flexible, and well-organized. These newly-selected PGC teams join teachers and counselors from other urban and suburban, public and private schools for an intensive four-day training conference conducted by Princeton Center staff. This exhilarating and demanding program begins at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 10:00 p.m. each day and includes time to experience PGC activities firsthand and to discuss, practice, and reflect on personal learning and group observations.

The four-day conference is followed by two all-day training workshops and two on-site visits by Princeton Center staff who observe the PGC program in operation, help team members evaluate its effectiveness, and suggest ways to improve it. The entire process includes another four-day conference and two one-day follow-up workshops during the second year of training, when more advanced skills in communications and group dynamics are taught and practiced by PGC coordinators and advisors.

Training conferences include sessions on the Peer Group Connection program itself, so that the members of each school's faculty team become thoroughly familiar with its purposes, learn the logistics of establishing the program in their school, practice using the activities described in the Peer Group Handbook (Powell, 1988), and develop the competence and confidence to adapt and augment those activities as appropriate to their own students' needs. The PGC faculty team also learns how to work together to supervise not only the peer leaders, but also the large number of incoming students who participate in the program. The team of faculty will learn how to become role models for their students, demonstrating by their own behavior the skills and responsibilities of co-leadership and the kind of commitment to cooperative, lifelong learning that is essential in a rapidly-changing world. Because they are themselves a leadership team with complementary strengths, they are comfortable with the idea of taking on different leadership roles, and with allowing students to be leaders, too. It is strongly recommended that no single teacher run the program. Instead, teachers who work as a team serve as role models for a program that is built around the insight that peer groups are effective teaching and learning resources for today's adolescents.

STUDENT LEADER TRAINING

During the two-year training period, the school's PGC faculty team works directly with peer leaders, who have been carefully selected to represent the diverse groups within the student population. Students interested in participating in the program must apply in the spring of their junior year in high school; invariably, there are many more applicants than places. As part of the application process, students answer essay questions about how they could contribute to the program and what they expect to gain from the experience. In addition, applicants participate in group problem-solving interviews where they are asked to discuss hypothetical peer-related problems and to demonstrate solutions in skits where they assume appropriate roles.

Those students who are selected should, as a group, include an equal number of young men and women who participate in a variety of extracurricular activities and who come from ethnically and

racially diverse backgrounds. Selected students should also have demonstrated that they are responsible and caring individuals who can serve as positive role models for their peers. It is important that this group include students who have clearly demonstrated their capability as leaders but who have never been in leadership positions within the school. In this way, many more students will have opportunities to experience leadership than was previously possible before PGC.

The student peer leaders make a commitment to attend training classes five days each week in an elective, year-long for-credit course that begins with a three-day retreat held at the end of summer. During this retreat, their training emphasizes creating an atmosphere of support and trust, essential to group cohesiveness. Through a series of carefully-designed games and exercises, the peer leaders become acquainted with each other and learn how to cooperate in a group. They examine and express their ideas on a variety of topics related to PGC, learning how to become active listeners and to give constructive feedback to others in the group. They learn how to develop their own behavioral objectives and how to measure the attainment of these goals through individual and group analysis.

An important aspect of the training includes an introduction to the concept of group stages and then frequent opportunity to experience these stages firsthand. The five stages of groups (Bion, 1961) include:

Stage 1: Forming

Group members define the purpose for which they have come together, while paying attention to getting to know each other, assessing their own and others' strengths and limitations, and establishing what they have in common.

Stage 2: Norming

During this stage, the group establishes the ground rules for their work. These mutually agreed upon guidelines include creating group rituals and healthy practices that promote development of self-discipline and the sense of belonging to a team engaged in a worthy enterprise.

Stage 3: Storming

A critical stage in the group cycle is the inevitable moment when differing visions of the nature of the problem and the preferred solutions give rise to stalemate, conflict, and a sense of chaos or futility. At this point, groups are most in danger of failing because unhealthy practices such as scapegoating, denial, or polarization can impede progress toward achieving the goals defined in Stage 1, and can undo the group cohesion developed in Stage 2. The Princeton Center's training will help people to recognize "storming," to stop and analyze the particular form it is taking, and to engage in a process that helps the group move on to the next stage in the group cycle.

Stage 4: Performing

During this stage, each group member develops a personal stake in the achievement of the group's objectives. Each understands his or her responsibilities as a co-leader and recognizes the value of every member's contribution. Consensus (not necessarily unanimity) is achieved, and the end of the group's existence is in sight. Its goals – short-term and/or long-term – are accomplished.

Stage 5: Mourning/Morning

Every group ends, sometimes in the sense that its task is finished and its members disperse, sometimes because a new group forms with new members and different objectives. In either case, however, the group must prepare for the time when the close relationships members have established with each other will be changed. During this stage, group members should spend time on assessment of the project and their contributions to it, on focused reflection, and on preparation for new beginnings as members of different groups.

This theoretical knowledge of group stages helps leaders to anticipate the concerns that members may have at different stages of development, the breakdowns in group cohesion and productivity that are likely to occur, and the needed roles and interventions that are required for leaders to be effective in groups.

Finally, peer leaders organize themselves into teams comprised of two people who have not been close friends prior to their participation in PGC and learn how to work cooperatively, sharing responsibilities for running small-group discussions. Whenever possible, it is best to have co-leader teams comprised of one male and one female. This is one of the rare opportunities for students of the opposite sex to work together closely in a non-dating relationship, and the benefits are many.

The experience of working with a co-leader can also become one of the most serious obstacles in the program. For some peer leaders, a co-leader's differences can quickly get in the way of building a bond. Even those co-leaders who initially feel comfortable together may soon discover that their expectations will not all be met, thus creating a certain degree of tension.

It is inevitable that in any close relationship there will occasionally be misunderstanding, disappointment, competition, jealousy, and anger. It's important to identify problems when they arise and to get beyond them without threatening the co-leader bond. Better yet, co-leaders can take steps to enhance the trust and respect between them which can prevent misunderstandings from erupting.

Co-leaders can decide on the best way to approach each other before a problem occurs. It's useful to know what irritates co-leaders, to share expectations (hopes and fears) about the relationship, and to anticipate the kinds of problems which create barriers.

When there is a conflict between co-leaders, it is important to speak directly about the problem. If a peer leader is tempted to complain to others about a co-leader's incompetence or strange habits, then it is time for a face-to-face discussion before "talking behind your back" gets started. Co-leaders

can set aside a regular time to meet and talk each week so that it will not be as difficult to find the time for this exchange when a conflict is apparent.

It is also important, when discussing a problem, to identify each co-leader's role in the problem and to share responsibility for making the working relationship a better one. This includes learning to give constructive criticism tactfully and how to receive it without getting defensive.

After listening to a co-leader's concerns, it would certainly be more useful to respond, "Thanks for letting me know what's on your mind; let's try to work something out," rather than "I don't know what you're talking about; I do more than my share of the work as it is."

Working through conflict takes practice, patience, and a willingness on both sides to be honest and thoughtful. Learning how to be clear and direct when communicating is not easy, but there are many opportunities within the PGC program for this to happen.

In their training class, peer leaders examine their values and attitudes on a variety of topics, including peer relationships, boy-girl intimacy, drug and alcohol use, academic pressures, and conflicts with parents and other adults. They discuss common problems of adolescence and explore options for solving them. They develop skits to illustrate both the problems and alternative solutions. As part of learning how to lead discussions, they practice stating objectives, asking open-ended questions, encouraging active participation by all members of the group, thinking through problems and exploring alternatives.

A second two-day midwinter retreat reinforces and extends their skills and gives them the opportunity to share successes and concerns. They become better observers of what is happening in groups, learning to analyze the roles being played, the nature of interactions among group members, and the messages being conveyed by body language. They discuss issues of authority, hidden agendas, and conflict, and practice ways to deal with them. They also re-examine their own performance as peer leaders, emphasizing the effect of the program on their attitudes, behavior, and hopes for the future, and defining the ways in which they need to change.

Peer leaders and their faculty advisors also participate in an exciting annual event sponsored by the Princeton Center: the Urban-Suburban Peer Group Connection Conference. This event brings together 600 to 800 students and educators for a day of workshops, skits, and conversations organized around a theme such as "A Celebration of Diversity." The students are assigned to small groups that do not include anyone else from their own school, and they spend much of their time at the conference interacting with this new group. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and they leave with new friends, renewed energy, and new ideas for working with their own groups of ninth graders back home.

PROGRAM FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

The program for first year students begins in late September with an all-day retreat led by peer leaders and supervised by faculty. Then, once each week from September until May, PGC co-leaders

meet with groups of 10 to 15 younger students for a 45-50 minute class period during regular school hours. Faculty coordinators and advisors observe the sessions, giving feedback to the peer leaders. The learning objectives for students are:

1. To identify and appreciate the roles and responsibilities they have at school, at home, and with their friends;
2. To examine values and understand how values affect relationships with other people;
3. To become aware of and sensitive to the problems experienced by young people today, and to learn how to find solutions that promote healthy emotional, physical, and social development;
4. To improve communication skills, including the ability to express themselves clearly and to listen attentively;
5. To become more accepting of others and more respectful of differences;
6. And – extremely important to young people – to increase their self-confidence and sense of self-worth.

An important aspect of the PGC program includes reaching out to parents and encouraging their increased involvement in the school-related activities of their children. The program sponsors a Family Night attended by faculty, peer leaders, first year students, and their parents. This event has proven to be a high point for participants and has been so successful that it prompted the Princeton Center to expand its training programs to include a special series of conferences and workshops for parents, formalized as the Parent Involvement Corps. At the PGC Family Night, parents, extended family members, and even neighbors get a taste of the training in communications and group dynamics that educators and students have been given, and invariably ask for more. Perhaps the most popular activity is the “Fishbowl,” where parents sit silently in a circle around a group of students who discuss questions raised by parents; then the groups trade places and parents talk about their concerns and their dreams for their children, while the students listen. Both groups come away from this exercise with new respect for each other, a better understanding of what motivates parents and young people to behave as they do, and with increased resolve to spend more time together talking about their lives and sharing their hopes for the future.

Teenagers’ need for social bonding is, of course, fundamental, especially in large, often impersonal high schools where feelings of anonymity can overwhelm young people. This concern is addressed in a series of PGC activities that are a regular part of the weekly class sessions. For example, a valuable peer group activity looks at “Who has it harder in life: men or women?” Students explore the pressures and problems of being male and female from birth to old age in a debate-style format; however, there is an interesting twist. When students who support one side of the argument hear a member from the opposing side make a convincing statement, then they are obligated to switch positions. Thus, students are frequently changing sides and learn the value of an open mind, an appreciation of different points of view, and the importance of active listening.

This activity can also be an important learning experience for parents who, when discussing a controversial subject, learn to become less dogmatic and practice patience and tolerance for differences.

Evening social events are also an important component of the PGC experience. Students organize Peer Group Cabarets, olympiad activities, and beach parties – held indoors in the dead of winter – to help them become more comfortable socially, to learn how to get along across typical clique boundaries, and to develop an esprit de corps.

Finally, at the end of the year, the senior leaders and their younger peers plan a special closure experience. They examine individual and group changes, share what they have learned and how they can use the experience in other situations, and help each other through that last stage of a group's existence – Mourning/Morning – when they say goodbye to the past and welcome the future.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

According to one researcher who completed a year-long study of the program in eleven public and private schools in Atlanta, Georgia, the Peer Group Connection can help schools change in positive, constructive ways as well as help young people cope with the personal changes and challenges in their lives (Gaines, 1990). The program has been subjected to continual internal and external evaluations, and the results for schools, for educators, and for students are encouraging. According to an evaluation by the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, schools that establish PGC can expect a significant reduction in the number and severity of disciplinary incidents, and they can anticipate an improvement in attendance and in academic performance (Hannaway & Senior, 1989).

Teachers who serve as PGC coordinators and advisors also benefit from the program. Their evaluations of the training they receive indicate that they have developed the skills needed to reach out to today's teenagers. They welcome the opportunity to build professional relationships, ending their isolation from their colleagues and mitigating their feelings of frustration. The energy and enthusiasm that they carry away from training conferences conducted by the Princeton Center markedly reduce "teacher burnout;" in fact, many teachers who seriously considered leaving the profession find that, by working with each other and especially with their students in new ways, their enjoyment of teaching increases. They also learn how to incorporate cooperative learning experiences into their academic classes, regardless of the subject that they teach. Principals report that these teachers become more vocal at faculty meetings, often taking on new initiatives with a renewed sense of commitment and drive.

Although PGC is especially valuable for working with disaffected and high-risk teenagers, who can be found in every high school in the country, its effectiveness is by no means limited to those groups. On the contrary, it is a primary prevention model that works for *all* adolescents, including those who are or seem to be well-adjusted, helping them develop important social and coping skills.

By encouraging students to establish healthy relationships across the barriers of race, culture, socio-economic background, and age, PGC can have a positive effect on the social climate of a school. Both the first year students and seniors set ambitious goals for themselves and expect more from each other, thus encouraging more socially responsive behavior in and outside of school.

Finally, one of the most important outcomes of the PGC program derives from its modular, replicable design. It is not only the three members of the faculty, nor the dozen or so seniors, nor even the hundred or more incoming students who benefit from PGC in any single year. By acting in ways that support everyone's efforts to grow, their example inspires others to behave in a like manner. Equally significant, however, is the fact that they have been trained to pass along to others what they have learned at PGC conferences, retreats, and classes. Moreover, the entire system in which faculty, seniors, and first-year students function as teams can be multiplied as necessary throughout a school simply by increasing the number of modules.

Faculty who have experienced two years of training with the Princeton Center are able to run the PGC program in their schools, independently of the Center and with complete autonomy. In fact, over 100 high schools that have started PGC since its inception have continued the program, and in most cases, expanded it. While initial funds to implement this program may come from a combination of sources – including corporate and foundation grants – most schools pick up the ongoing costs to run this program once PGC becomes established. The exceptions include districts that have an outside corporate sponsor making a long-term commitment to this primary prevention model.

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