



We Need A Space to Be Honest: Students Examine the Power of Peer Education

“If you could get all kids to have conversations like this—if we could open up about important, personal things in small groups in school classrooms, we could really make good choices. We could have a *real* conversation, not just a good vs. bad conversation.”

- Kristen, Sehome High School, Bellingham, WA

In January of 2004, twelve teenagers in Bellingham, Washington decided to see if they could shift the perspectives of an entire grade at their suburban high school, in order to prevent their peers—and themselves—from developing negative body images and eating disorders. Supported by What Kids Can Do, the Eating Disorders Prevention Team spent a semester immersed in research, surveying, education, and leadership, offering presentations and guiding discussions.

The student team’s ideas about how to help teenagers avoid eating disorders and negative body images are fresh and dynamic. Yet the students discovered something even more powerful: their intense need to discuss all sorts of important life issues with peers, in a structured setting. As they explored the power of peer-to-peer education to transform both individual viewpoints and a culture within a school, they found an audience ready and eager for real-life conversation in the classroom—and their own visions of education growing.

Freelance writer Abe Louise Young facilitated this conversation with members of the student team during an afternoon roundtable in the Sehome High Career Center.

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Part I

Why Peer-to-Peer Education Matters

I don't think the point of peer education is necessarily to *teach* kids things. The point is to get them thinking about it, to get their mind flowing with it. To get them really feeling what they already know. - Kristen

Peer education means a lot. I think having someone who's your own age stand up there and talk about something means so much more. It leaves people much more open for discussion, because they'll see their friend up there talking, or someone they've seen in the hall, someone that is the same age as them, often at the same stage as them. It's easier for people to open up in front of peers. - Devin

They just see an adult up there, whose job it is to talk to high schoolers, and they lose interest before it even starts. - Kristen

Talking about it with other people, you kind of verify it. You can think something, but when you can talk to people, express your opinion, hear what they say, if it's the same thing, it's like *Wow, somebody else thought that!* And if it's not the same thing, it's like, *Wow, somebody else has a different opinion, let's talk about that.* - Kelly

You might just push out a thought and think it doesn't matter. But when you hear someone else say it too, you realize it's not just a thought. Whenever you know someone else has the same thought, you feel better about yourself. - Devin

Educating about problems in the world and about stuff that's real and that's happening is essential. A lot of adolescents have so much apathy, and they're like, *Well, it doesn't directly affect me, so I don't care.* Through peer education about things like infringements on rights, we can teach a lot. - Devin

Anything that's a teen-related problem would be better to get from other teens. - Matt

If you think about it, it's the kind of thing that could just expand. Even if each year you had it with just one class, like we did with the sophomore class, it can change mindsets. We're not

going to change the entire school into this incredible once-in-a-lifetime community. But even little differences can change your school environment. - Kristen

We Need the Classroom to Discuss Real-Life Problems

We need a class for discussion, because I have opinions about things. I know my classmates have opinions too. We tried to start a discussion about human rights in History this year, and the teacher shot us down, and wouldn't let us finish. He said, "We have to keep to the curriculum." And so you're like, "Well, this is the curriculum! This is what I'm thinking about!" - Daria

It's cool to have discussions like this in the classroom setting. We've had after school meetings where people will get together and try to discuss an issue, but a lot of times only people who care or have just one half of the equation come. So when you have it in the classroom, you get more people thinking about it and more people disagreeing. It's more equal. - Kelly

Last year they had after school forums where they had representatives come speak on the war in Iraq. Someone would come and speak, and then there was a discussion. I found that the only people who came were either strictly conservative and had one opinion, or strictly liberal and had another opinion. - Devin

Yeah. The people who come to after school discussions are the ones who care enough to take time out of their day. What we found when we presented our program during the school day is that the kids who were most affected by what we did were the ones who didn't really know that they cared. They didn't really know that they needed this, or that they needed to get their thoughts out. If we had done this presentation after school, none of them would have come. - Kristen

Only my friends would have come, and only because I said, Please come, I've been working all year! - Devin

And it's so worth it. As much as I know some people have a hard time missing class, there are some things that are going to affect the rest of your life and your children, and are so worth talking about. Missing some classes shouldn't even be an issue. - Kristen

I think we need the classroom to have conversations about anything to do with tolerance in general. - Devin

And drugs and alcohol. - Kelly

And you need the classroom to have discussions with people that aren't your friends. You may discuss important issues with your friends, but your friends aren't as diverse as the people in your class. And when you see everyone caring about an issue, you realize how important it is. - Kristen

The Role of Teachers and Other Adults

Grownups and teachers can help by creating a supportive environment. I'm hoping that when teachers announce that our team will make a presentation to the class two days from now, they're saying "Yeah! The Eating Disorders Prevention Project is going to come, and I want you all to listen, cause this is important!" Instead of being like, "There's other students coming to speak in class, I don't really know what it's about, but I guess it'll be okay." - Devin

It's great when adults try to help students—it's great, when they're not just like, Oh they have their own problems. But it's harder to relate to people who are that much older than you. It's harder. Maybe if you actually just opened up it would be easier, but it's just harder to open completely to an adult. To a teacher that you don't really know, you're not going to come out and say exactly what you think, or a lot of people are just a lot more self-conscious about that. - Kristen

I think it depends on the subject. If it's eating disorders, you might feel more comfortable talking in front of a teacher about body image. Somehow talking about drugs or alcohol is considered worse. - Kristen

Eating disorders was one thing, it got kids talking, and in small groups, people really opened up. If they could just open up about all sorts of things and hear what other people are thinking, it would make such a difference—if you could get all the kids to have a conversation like this. And not with their teachers. It's hard to talk about annoying friends who smoke weed with your teachers. - Kristen

They're like, wait! Let me write their name down! - Devin

The fact that teachers have a lot more power over things than you do in school settings, that really affects it. - Kelly

You can't ask the teacher to give up all the authority because you want to rant about stuff. - Alex

I think teachers can be there, depending on who the teacher is. Share opinions, just like another student, but definitely not in front of the class leading the conversation. - Kara

I think it needs to be an open teacher. And a teacher who doesn't see you as a grade. - Kelly

It needs to be a person who when you come into class, you can just start talking to them. - Daria

An adult who doesn't talk down to us. - Kara

A person who knows something about you besides how well you did on your history homework. A person who will support you no matter what you think or have done. - Lauren

Teachers have to be there to control the environment. Also, in the group I was in for the intervention, the only way people would talk was if teachers prompted them. - Matt

The teacher needs to be there to protect whatever kids think. If somebody doesn't think the same as anybody else and is a target, the teacher can stop it from happening so much. Even someone who's vulnerable will feel like they can share stuff. - Alex

It has a lot to do with the teacher's personality, and how the teacher behaves inside the classroom and outside. If you were to have a teacher who was there to prompt discussion but was actually engaged and interested in what you're talking about and made the class feel more comfortable as a whole, then they could be really helpful. Other teachers might cause a class to not talk so much, and to be a little less engaged, so it would be a lot better not to have them there. It's a case-by-case thing. - Lauren

If they're willing to have us in their class then I think they're willing enough. - Kara

Qualities that Make a Teaching Intervention Work

A small group. It was cool that we tried to keep it to tenth graders, because we found out that it was more effective if it was smaller groups, a group that you could change. - Emmy

Personally, the smaller the group, the less likely I am to judge. - Kelly

Honesty. If the presenter is honest with you, then it's really good. If you have a teacher standing up there, being like, "My experimentation with drugs and alcohol is my own business," that won't work. Personal experience is really powerful. - Devin

You're going to open up so much more if the person presenting to you is opening up first. Even just getting it started. - Kara

It makes it okay to say what you feel. - Lauren

I think it was important to have the PowerPoint first so that everyone's on the same page, everyone's informed about eating disorders and negative body image. Then afterwards, having a discussion, so that everyone knows what we're talking about, everyone can say their opinions and they're not just sitting in their seat staring at us. - Daria

I don't think the point was to teach them things. Even if they haven't experienced it first hand, we all go to Sehome and we experience this environment, so we're not going to teach them what it's like to be a high school student and concerned about your body image. But we got them thinking about it, 'cause they all deep down knew. We raised the idea and got their mind flowing. - Kristen

Outside speakers are really helpful. - Devin

You don't want students to feel they're being judged. No matter what. You need an environment where students don't feel bad. And you're not going to open up if you think people all around you are just going to be like, What's she talking about? - Kara

I don't know if it matters so much about who the supervisor is, 'cause we had a police officer come into our classroom and there were kids talking about drug use and stuff like that, and he would ask them, "Oh have you guys seen any of this in town, or have you guys ever heard of this, or has anybody ever done this?" and kids were open about it. It was a police officer, and there was a teacher in there as well. So I don't think it matters.

- Alex

I think it would matter to me. If I were the kid who smoked pot, I wouldn't feel comfortable at all, like saying that in front of people who I thought were going to judge me. - Devin

Judgment happens everywhere. You can't stop it from happening. You can stop people from saying it out loud, and that's just not judging, even though they're actually doing it. - Matt



Part 2

Strategies for Tackling Eating Disorders in High School

There are a lot of issues people don't think they care about. Probably 80 percent of the kids we presented to didn't think they cared about eating disorders. "I don't have an eating disorder, my friends don't have an eating disorder, it doesn't affect me!" But you shouldn't just be like, "Oh, they're not interested so we can't present to them." There are things that people don't think they should be interested in until they see how it really does affect them. -Kristen

Just to think if your friend had an eating disorder changes your whole perspective. - Kara

[As we got more into the project] we switched to focusing on body images. We still wanted to educate people about eating disorders, but there are also a lot of people who say, "I don't have an eating disorder, why do I have to listen to this?" But everybody needs a positive body image.
- Kristen

I heard a couple of people being like “Yeah, well, I almost fell asleep during the presentation,” because it seemed like a normal class to them, because they went during class time. But I knew subconsciously that they’d heard the presentation and realized that their peers had worked really hard to put it together to send out a message to them. So even if they’re trying to be like “Oh I’m cool, I’m above it all”—that sounds like what they were saying to me—you know some sort of message got through to them. That’s what matters to me. I agree with Kristen that even the small steps can really help. - Devin

And I think part of making good discussions is also providing them with enough information that they can make their own decisions. - Kelly

Not telling them what to think, but giving them ideas. - Emmy

We needed to find a way to make it more relevant to everyone. Also in a lot of the studies that have been done, they’ve shown that if you’re not careful about it, you can actually make problems worse by saying what people with eating disorders do, and giving too much information about you know, the purging. - Kristen

If someone has really poor body image, and they’re kind of on the edge of an eating disorder, and they hear so much about how all these people have eating disorders, and this is how they do it, the idea is, you could prompt it. - Devin

Even if they hear that it’s bad, they still think, “Well, some people do that—maybe I could do that, that’s a strategy.” - Daria

I think it can be true in some cases, but it’s not a proved theory. I feel like it’s better to tell the truth about something in order to help the greater good, than to just sit back and be like, Well I don’t want to talk about that, that’s scary, that could prompt a problem! - Emmy

Originally we weren’t planning to do so many presentations ourselves, but then we decided to do more, because in the same research where it showed you could make the problem worse, it also showed that if you did a lot of repeated interventions, that it was better. - Kelly

Becoming a Critical Viewer of Media Images and Gender Roles

Critical media viewing is thinking about what an ad is actually saying, and the reasons why the advertisers are saying what they’re saying. - Kelly

We tried to tell people that in the pictures in the media, of women, they’re chunks of people, they’re not all one person! They’re digitally altered, so it’s chunks of people. Body parts of different people. You can’t look at it like it’s a real person. - Emmy

We talked a lot about what causes negative body image and what causes eating disorders. A lot of people will look in the mirror and cut their body up into pieces, and be like, This part looks

wrong, I need to change this. That's the type of thing that can lead to negative body image. After giving the bad side of the problem, it helped to come up with solutions. - Devin

The media and its influences contribute to eating disorders, but also it can be other factors. A lot of times it's your family, troubles with your family, troubles in your personal life, if you're depressed...so it comes from TV and magazines, but it also comes from peers. A lot of the times it's psychological. - Daria

Or for some people who feel kind of out of control, eating is something they can control, that gives them a feeling of power. - Kelly

After we got general information out, we decided to pose a lot of questions. Some of the conversations were about the pressures on girls. It started with girls talking about the pressures in the media and in our society to be beautiful and skinny. Then a lot of guys started coming out saying there's a lot of pressures on guys, too, to be in shape and fit that ideal male image. It was really interesting, because it got people thinking how engraved it is in their brains what they are supposed to look like, and how that's the only thing they can imagine. I think of myself as my own person, but I've grown up with so many pressures that sometimes I don't know who the real me is. - Kristen

First the girls were like, "The guys push us to be skinny!" And the guys were like, "Well, you push us to be muscular!" So it was like one side knew it and the other side knew it, but they'd never really thought about it. - Emmy

A lot of the guys were saying that they'd rather have a healthy woman—or like girlfriend, or whatever—than an extremely skinny girl. - Kelly

But then there were some guys who raised their hands and made comments like, Well I wouldn't want to be with a *large* girl, and stuff, and everyone would laugh. I addressed it as a matter of examining what we've been taught is attractive by the media, and other outlets like that. If we can learn to be critical viewers, then we can avoid opinions like only thin women are attractive or only muscular guys are attractive. - Devin

We all have it—maybe not a serious negative body image, but just thinking, "Oh I wish this could be different, I wish I could be like that." I watch TV, thinking Oh "My God that girl is so pretty, those clothes are so great, I wish I could look like that." ...Not just size, but how you look and how you act... - Daria

Everyone, at some point in their life, feels like "I wish I was like that." - Kelly

Accomplishing Change

One thing is, instead of focusing on the negatives, you should focus on the positives. Instead of what your body looks like, you should focus on what your body can do. —Emmy

One of the questions we asked focused on women: imagine a woman in your life, a real woman, not a celebrity, a real woman whom you admire, and then think about what they look like. Are they thin and really fit? That was a big deal for me, to think of a parent or even a grandparent whom I really admire, who isn't beautiful and fit. They've made an incredible impact on my life, and if they were skinny, nothing would have changed that! And some girls were like, Well, the person I'm thinking of *is* skinny. But even if she were not, she would still be the same. - Kristen

I've had a lot of people actually come up to me personally, and been like, I have a friend who has an eating disorder or I've had problems with an eating disorder. More people connecting the idea of preventing eating disorders with me and the other people that are presenting. They come to us because we have resources to give them and can talk to them. I mean we've studied the problem. For a couple of weeks after, in the hallway, I would always hear someone say something about it. - Devin

I had a girl come up who found out the day before that her friend of forever had an eating disorder and had had it for a long time. She asked me what she should do to help her friend. - Kristen

A couple of my friends diet, and other friends who were in the presentation started talking to them about it. - Daria

Striving to change your mindset is so important. I know my mindset changed during this project, towards striving for a healthy lifestyle and respecting my body and other people's bodies. I think when other people respect your body, it's so much easier to respect it yourself. You can stand alone and say, "I like my body." But if you know deep down that other people don't, it's so much harder. - Kristen

If a person wants to change, they need a conscious and forceful thing in their mind. You need to motivate yourself to notice when you make these comments about yourself, or when you make judgments about other people, to consciously think about it, stop, and say, Okay, why did I make that judgment, and why should I not have? - Kelly

A lot of my body image problems were peer oriented, and psychologically oriented in terms of depression and stuff. My poetry used to be what I call Teenage Girl Poetry, which is about your dissatisfaction with yourself and your dissatisfaction with life. Now my poetry has grown to be about issues that matter to me. Even though it may be personal, it's not just about me. I feel the same way about my body image—that I've really grown and seen I'm a woman, and I'm different, and that's okay. I don't look like everybody else and I don't want to look like everybody else and it doesn't matter if I'm a size 8 instead of a size 2. So I like to use my poetry as an example: as my poetry has grown, my body image has grown. That's how it makes sense to me. - Devin