



PEERS LAB, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# PEERS Lab: PEERS Program Project

DECEMBER 2012

## The PEERS Program

With support from the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research (ACCFRC) and in collaboration with educators from the Edmonton Public School Board, the PEERS team at the University of Alberta developed and implemented a one-year pilot evaluation of the **PEERS Program: Promoting Children's Early Empathic Relationships**.

PEERS is a multi-component, classroom-based program that aims to promote children's healthy peer relationships as well as their mental health and academic success. PEERS targets children in kindergarten to grade 3 in elementary schools with a high proportion of low-income and ethnically diverse children.

### Focus of the PEERS Program

The PEERS Program directly targets four dimensions of the classroom climate:

- **norms and beliefs** (such as acceptance of aggression, respect),
- **behaviours** (such as peer relationships, social responsibility),
- **interpersonal understanding** (such as emotion awareness), and

- **instructional practices** (such as organization, emotional support).

These dimensions of the classroom climate are hypothesized to directly affect children's social-emotional and academic adjustment:

- **peer relationships** (such as friendship quality, peer victimization, rejection),
- **mental health problems** (such as aggression, anxiety), and
- **academic skills** (such as school engagement, achievement).

### PEERS Lesson Plans

The PEERS classroom-based lesson plans are implemented by teachers with on-going support from a PEERS Program Consultant.

These lesson plans are embedded within Alberta Education's Health and Life Skills and Language Arts curricula and address educational requirements for fostering children's healthy relationships, emotional awareness, and their reading, interpretation and writing skills, for example.



### Instructional Practices

When classrooms are emotionally supportive and well managed, children share a closer relationship with teachers, are more engaged in class, and they do better academically (Hoglund, Klinge, & Hosan, 2012).



### Peer Relationships

Children who share higher quality relationships with their peers are more engaged in learning and they do better academically (Hosan & Hoglund, 202).

# PEERS Program

## PEERS Program Units

The PEERS Program includes six program units that are implemented over the school year. The primary focus and theme of each program unit address one or more of the targeted classroom dimensions: norms and beliefs, behaviors, or interpersonal understanding.

The six program units include:

- **Moral Code** (focuses on classroom regulations and respect for others),
- **Emotional Awareness** (focuses on understanding of emotions),
- **Managing Emotions** (focuses on regulating emotions),
- **Perspective Taking** (focuses on understanding others),
- **Problem Solving** (focuses on conflict resolution),
- **Friendships** (focuses on building and maintaining friendships).

Approximately four to six weeks are spent on each unit. Each unit contains three to four lesson plans that apply group-level activities, with each lesson implemented over one to three class periods.



There are four sets of lesson plans that target the developmental level of children in kindergarten to grade 3.

## PEERS Storybooks

Age appropriate, high quality storybooks are used as a springboard to support children's learning of the lesson themes. Each program unit uses one to three storybooks for each grade. Some of the storybooks used include:

- *How Kind!* by Mary Murphy
- *When I Feel Sad* by Cornelia Maude Spelman
- *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes

- *Courage* by Bernard Waber
- *My Secret Bully* by Trudy Ludwig
- *The English Roses* by Madonna
- *We Are Best Friends* by Alike
- *Say Something* by Peggy Moss



## PEERS ROUNDTABLE TOPICS

The roundtable session topics include:

- Bullying
- Aggression
- ADHD
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Separation Anxiety
- Managing Stress

## PEERS Mental Health Consultants

The PEERS Program also includes a mental health component that aims to

# PEERS Mental Health Component

enhance teachers' ability to recognize and support young children's mental health and peer relationship problems.

Teachers are provided with on-going support from a PEERS Mental Health Consultant (Ph.D. Counselling students). The Mental Health Consultants visit each classroom about every two weeks to observe children's various behaviours and interactions with peers. The consultants and the teachers are then able to discuss various strategies that may enhance teachers' work with the diverse children in their classrooms.

Through both the classroom-based lesson plans and the mental health component, PEERS aims to enhance teachers' classroom management strategies and the level of emotional and instructional support in their classrooms.

## PEERS Roundtables

To further support teachers' professional development, the mental health consultants also led monthly roundtable sessions. These sessions focused primarily on how to support children's mental health and healthy relationships.

## ACADEMIC SKILLS



## Reading and Writing Skills

Children in classrooms implementing the PEERS Program showed significantly higher reading and writing skills at the end of the school year relative to children in comparable classrooms not using the PEERS Program.

## PEERS FAST FACTS

# 19 of 21

Average number of PEERS lessons completed by teachers.

# 88.9%

Percentage of teachers who reported that the PEERS storybooks facilitated children's learning.

# 72.2%

Percentage of teachers who reported that the PEERS Program was of above average quality.

# 87.5%

Percentage of teachers who reported that the mental health consultant visits were useful.



# PEERS Pilot Evaluation

## Program Development

During the first year of the PEERS Project, the PEERS team compiled the storybook list and developed the classroom-based lesson plans and materials. With feedback from Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) educators, the storybook list and lesson plans were modified prior to the one-year program implementation.

## Pilot Evaluation

Three high needs elementary schools from the EPSB agreed to participate in a one-year pilot evaluation of the PEERS Program. Each school had a high proportion of low-income and ethnically diverse children. One educator in each school helped coordinate the program and research activities in her or his school and gather feedback from the teachers on the program.

Twenty kindergarten to grade 3 teachers implemented the program from early September 2011 to May 2012. These 20 teachers and 227 children in their classrooms participated in a one-year pilot evaluation of the PEERS Program. Most teachers were female (85%), had a Bachelor's degree (80%; 20% had an after degree or Master's degree), and had been teaching an average of 16.6 years. Children were equally represented by gender (53.7% boys) and grade (28.2% kindergarten, 32.6% grade 1, 18.5% grade 2, 20.7% grade 3).

Baseline data were collected in September 2011 and follow-up data were collected in May 2012. These data were compared to data collected from a comparable sample of classrooms and children in six Edmonton Public schools (this project was funded by SSHRC).

## Data Collection

Data were collected from the children and teachers on children's:

- peer relationships (e.g., friendship quality, victimization),

- mental health problems (e.g., aggression, anxiety), and
- academic skills (e.g., reading and writing skills).

Observations of instructional practices were also conducted in September, January and May to assess levels of:

- classroom organization,
- emotional support, and
- instructional support.

Teachers also completed logs rating the implementation of the program.

## Preliminary Findings

### Program Implementation

#### PEERS Lessons and Materials

- On average, teachers completed 19 of the 21 PEERS lessons.
- 88.9% of teachers reported that the PEERS storybooks enhanced children's learning.
- 87.8% of teachers reported that the PEERS materials were useful to their implementation of the lessons.
- 72.2% of teachers reported that the PEERS lessons were of above average quality.

#### Mental Health Component

- On average, teachers attended 5 of the 8 roundtable sessions and a mental health consultant visited their classrooms 2.5 times per month.



- 70.6% of teachers reported that the mental health roundtables were of above average quality.
- 87.5% of teachers reported that the mental health consultant visits were “somewhat” to “very” useful.

### Overall Program

- 72.2% of teachers reported that the PEERS Program was of above average quality.

### Instructional Practices

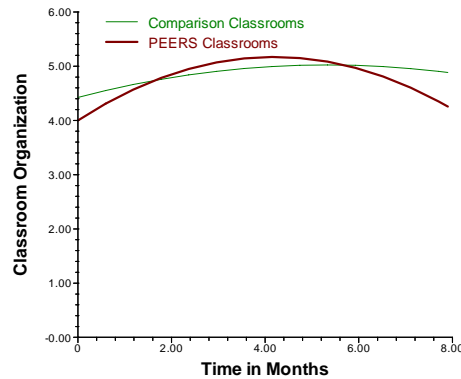
#### Classroom Organization

- On average, classrooms using the PEERS Program showed faster increases in how well organized and managed the classrooms were from September through to February but greater decreases in classroom organization by the end of the school

year relative to the comparison classrooms. See the figure below.

### Emotional Support

- On average, PEERS classrooms showed faster increases in levels of respectful, supportive interactions



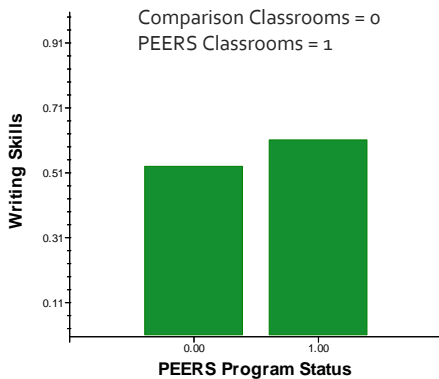
among children and teachers from September through February but greater decreases in support by the end of the school year relative to the comparison classrooms.

### Instructional Support

- On average, PEERS classrooms showed faster increases in how supportive the instruction was for children’s learning from September through to February but greater decreases in this support by the end of the school year relative to the comparison classrooms.

## Children’s Social-Emotional and Academic Adjustment

- On average, children in the PEERS classrooms showed better reading and writing skills on standardized assessments by the end of the school year relative to children in the comparison classrooms. See the figure.



- There were few differences across the school year in children’s peer relationships and mental health problems between children in the PEERS classrooms and children in the comparison classrooms.

### Conclusion

Overall, the PEERS classrooms and children showed few differences in the constructs assessed across the school year relative to the comparison classrooms and children. Given that this was a pilot evaluation these findings are not unexpected. School-based programs typically do not demonstrate significant impacts until the program has been implemented for at least two cohorts of children and is implemented consistently and as intended. There was variability in the degree to which the PEERS Program was implemented across classrooms. For instance, some teachers adhered to each lesson whereas other teachers significantly modified the lessons. How each teacher implemented the lessons and the degree to which they adhered to the overall program provided rich information on the ways that the PEERS Program can be improved to better support children.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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