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## A Summer Camp for Peer Counsellors

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Wade Anderson, *Victoria Peer Counselling Centre*

There are summer camps for soccer, basketball, swimming and other sports. There are summer camps for music, outdoor education and computer literacy. Why not a summer camp for young people who want to learn how to help each other? The success of the Victoria City-Wide Peer Counselling Program (Carr, 1988a, de Rosenroll and Dey, in press, and de Rosenroll, 1986) stimulated the directors of the University of Victoria's centralized training for peer counsellors. They wondered whether secondary schools in other cities in British Columbia with peer counselling programs would be interested in sending students to Victoria for summer training. Most cities in British Columbia do not have access to appropriate facilities or qualified trainers during the summer. Victoria has both. Since centralized training had run successfully for three summers in Victoria, the project leaders believed this model could act as a catalyst for other regions in British Columbia and Canada to create and maintain their own centralized training programs.

The first step taken by the project coordinators (Cal Dey and Wade Anderson) was to conduct a province-wide needs assessment. A needs survey letter was sent to each of 90 secondary schools in British Columbia who were members of the peer counselling network and had indicated they were running active programs. The letter outlined the idea for a summer camp, detailed the proposed costs (training, coordinating, providing accommodations at UVic residence facilities, etc.) and requested feedback. Within three weeks many of the network members returned the survey. They applauded the idea and had many interested students. They were unsure, however, if they could muster the funds to help cover the costs.

The responsiveness of the network members motivated the coordinators to search for alternatives to lower the costs without reducing the quality of the training program. The idea of billeting emerged. Since there were more than 300 young people living in Victoria who were peer counsellors in local schools, why not make arrangements to billet the visiting peer counsellor trainees with peers who lived in the Victoria area? Although this proved to be a good idea, it was late in the planning. There was concern about finding enough billets for the large number of trainees schools were proposing to send. A compromise was worked out where billets would be provided for one or two representatives from each school. The intention was that after the two week training, the students could take their learning home to share with their peers. This new plan interested fifteen students from ten different schools around the province.

The visiting peer counsellors arrived on July 11, 1988 and were introduced to their billet peer. Many of them had already written to each other and were excited to meet. The next day the visiting peer trainees, the trainers and co-trainers gathered together at the Peer Counselling Centre for orientation and ice breaker exercises. With the help of six secondary school students who had been hired through grants from Challenge '88 and Labatts of Canada, the visitors then received a tour of Victoria.

The training started on July 13, and continued until July 22. The visiting peer trainees were mixed in with about 60 to the 280 Greater Victoria region students who would be trained through the rest of the summer. The sessions lasted four hours each day, and consisted of two levels of training. Level I (basic training) essentially followed the curriculum developed by Carr and Saunders (1979). This material was supplemented by a group of exercises designed by David de Rosenroll to help the students develop a Code of Friendship (Carr, 1988b). The friendship code helped the peer counsellors to develop what professional counsellors might refer to as a code of ethics. These exercises were extremely well-received by the students.

Level II (extended training) was offered to peer counsellors who had already completed basic training, but wanted a chance to look at some issues in more depth. Some of the topics covered in this training included referrals, personal limits, the friendship code and a module developed by Rey Carr on adolescent development. The extended training was new to the Peer Counselling Centre training program, and received generally positive feedback.

In addition to grouping the students into basic and extended training, the students were also grouped by age. In developmental terms, junior and senior students are different enough that it seemed like a good idea to have them in their own groups. While these separate grouping worked well for the most part, they reduced the influence of positive social role models that senior students can have on junior students. Junior students may experience difficulty being learners in a group setting. They may be hesitant to talk about feelings and concerns or express reservations or opinions as group members. Many of the senior students, on the other hand, have developed skills in these areas. Consequently it would be valuable to arrange group activities for interaction between the age groups.

In addition to the intensive training, the visiting students were treated to various extracurricular activities. Some of these events included a video night, dancing at a popular teen-age night club, fireworks night at Butchart Gardens, sun-tanning and volleyball at nearby Sidney Island, a volleyball game, and a good-bye dinner. The feedback gathered from students both home and away proved that the mixture of deep introspective sessions and frivolous fun strengthened each other.

On Friday, with a few tears and hugs, the billets said their final farewells. The visiting peer counsellors were eager to take their new skills and insights back home to share with their school-based supervisors and other students.

Next summer the program will be strengthened in at least two ways. First, earlier billeting arrangements should allow more students to take training. Second, there will be a greater clarity about the differences between basic and extended training; that is, extended training is not "advanced" skill training, but an opportunity to examine peer counselling issues in greater depth.

Overall, it was exciting to see the original idea become a reality. Any original anxiety about extending centralized training to the provincial level has now abated, and our networking goal is now province-wide.

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