2 STARTING A YOUTH PEER NETWORK

Why start a youth peer network?

Peer networks are where people with a common interest meet up to make something good happen. They are not segregated day programs or special groups. They support and do not replace a person's roles and relationships in other parts of their life.

Peer networks come in all shapes and sizes. A peer network might be a group that meets regularly at a community centre. It may be a Facebook group – sharing information and providing online support. It might involve three people catching up regularly over coffee and cake to talk about things.

It does not matter what your peer network looks like. What is important is that the peer network is clear about how it is helping its members. This might be by assisting people to make new connections, and to learn from each other, so that each member is better able to deal with the issues or goals they have.

Evidence shows that people who are members of peer support networks gain friendships, information, increased confidence, social connections and leadership skills. Peers say one of the best things about peer support is that people with similar experiences help one another as they provide each other with support.

Peer networks can help people to have a shared voice about common concerns, influencing disability services and systems (such as the NDIS). Peer networks can also influence mainstream services, like health and education, and help local communities be more welcoming and accessible.

What is the purpose of your new peer network?

Peer networks work better when the network has a clear purpose, and this makes it easier to attract new members. People are more likely to come if they know the network is working on things they care about.

This does not mean you have to write up a big document. Just think through what you want the peer network to do.

Here are some examples of reasons why different peer networks might start:

- To talk about how to make something better, like making schools more inclusive, or buses more accessible, etc.
- To learn about new things, like learning about rights, decision-making, self-advocacy, or the NDIS, etc.
- To make new connections, like meeting people with similar experiences and learning from each other.

Where can you get help with resources and save money?

Most peer networks will need help with things like a meeting venue, transport, refreshments, sending out reminders, and so on.

Some of these resources might come from your peer network's own members. You could even share the jobs so everyone is involved, including ride-sharing, a "tea-and-biscuits" roster and a host roster where members use each other's houses to meet.

But sometimes the peer network may need other help. Most Australian communities have resources available to local people, like council-run community centres, meeting rooms at local clubs, or free Wi-Fi at local cafés.

Take a moment to think about what types of resources your new peer network might need, and how you can find those resources.

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Understanding what resources will be needed for the group to operate*** here:

https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/why-would-you-set-one/

Also, here's a link to something called ***The Art of Asking***, which could help you think about how to approach people for help.

https://www.family-advocacy.com/resources/the-art-of-asking/

How do you invite people to your first peer network meeting?

First, think about the ways you can tell people about the meeting, such as:

- a notice on your local shopping mall notice board
- a social media post
- word-of-mouth: telling your friends to tell their friends, who tell their friends, and so on
- a community advert in the local free paper
- posting information, and talking with staff, at venues and services where there are likely to be young people.

There are other ways, too. Think about which strategies best fit your network. For example, if your new network is about inclusive education, you might ask your local schools to put the invitation in their newsletters.

You could try making an invitation that just talks about what will happen at the first meeting. Remember that people might not have heard a great deal about peer networks and may not have met you before. They might be unsure about committing to meeting regularly, and with someone they don't know.

Think about the difference between these two sample invitations:

INVITATION TO JOIN A PEER NETWORK

We are setting up a peer network to talk about the problems for people living with disability finding proper work. We are going to meet on the first Monday night every month. The first meeting is 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

We hope you can be a regular; we can all help each other.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITY FORCED TO LIVE IN NURSING HOMES

We think young people living with disability should have a home to call their own and live with people they choose. If this is something you agree with, we'd love to talk with you. We are having a meeting at 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

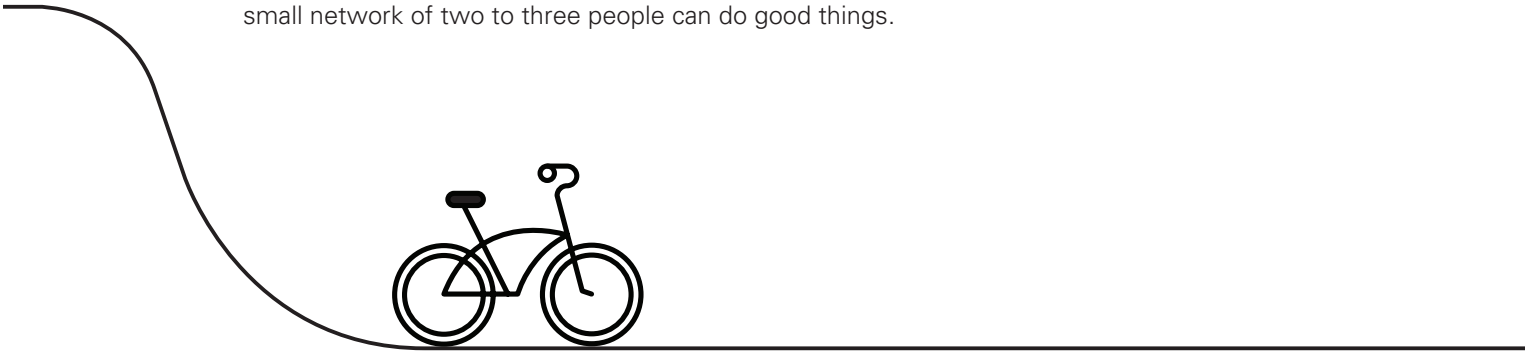
Let's talk about what could be better; we'll all learn something and we might be able to make something happen.

In the first invitation, people are asked to make a regular commitment. In the second invitation, people are invited to have their say about an issue. They are not being asked to commit beyond one meeting.

The first invitation may get fewer people, but those who are there will be your peer network because they are ready to meet regularly.

The second invitation might get more people to your first meeting, but many may not be ready to commit to a regular meeting.

You are in the best position to decide which type of invitation is best suited to your situation. Whichever way you go, don't be discouraged if you don't get many young people turning up to the peer network. Sometimes, this can take time, so stay with it. Also, even a small network of two to three people can do good things.



How do you make the first meeting a success?

However you invite people to your new peer network, it is important the first meeting is a success. You might think about success in these ways:

- Everyone in the room was welcomed
- Everyone in the room had the chance to have their say and to be respected
- Everyone in the room felt like they learnt something
- Everyone in the room got the chance to meet someone new
- The conversation finished in a way that led to people want to come back for more.

A great meeting happens when people join a conversation about something really important to them. It may be to listen to a guest speaker, to hear from others about their views and experiences, or to voice their concerns about an issue that impacts them.

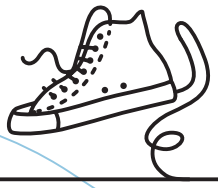
As the network builds momentum, the group can encourage its members to take turns at performing different tasks, such as sending out the reminders, lining up the guest speaker, making sure the venue is available, bringing the pizza, and so on. This helps all members share the ownership of the peer network. This makes it become stronger and longer lasting.

Case study – Julia Farr Youth peer network

A South Australian peer network called Julia Farr Youth (JFY) started like this.

There was a word-of-mouth invitation that there was going to be a meeting about issues for young people living with disability. A small number of young people living with disability showed up at the meeting. There was a good conversation, and by the end of the meeting there were still some things people wanted to talk about. They agreed to meet again to finish the conversation. At the second meeting, the young people there started to talk about how it would be good to hear from other young people living with disability, so they put the word out for people to come to a third meeting. And so on.

The JFY network has now been running for more than ten years, and has created a lot of benefits for its members and for young people living with disability generally. And it started with an invitation to one meeting. JFY's voice and ideas are reflected throughout this workbook.



For more information

For more tips and ideas, have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: What is the purpose of your peer network?:***

https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/why-would-you-set-one/

Centre of Excellence In Peer Support – Mental Health has great resources about peer support. There is a document about setting up a peer support group, which you can find in the resources section here:

http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/

See the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: How to make sure the first meeting is a success:***

https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/how-make-sure-first-meeting-success/

The ***Our Youth IMPACT Project*** is a powerful example of our commitment to supporting young people by helping them to find their voice and to identify and apply their influence. This is key to young people developing their personal wellbeing:

https://www.syc.net.au/wellbeing/young-people/impact-project/

Hopefully, this section has given you some useful ideas about setting up a youth peer network. We have used the second bead to represent the initial stage of a peer network. It is seen as the first connecting thread; the bringing of people together.

The next thing to consider is how to keep young people engaged; what will keep them interested and coming back to the network? We look at this next.

Reflection

Take a moment to think about setting up a peer network. Why are you starting it up? What do you think your local youth community would want from it? What resources will you need? How will you invite people to come along to the first meeting?