

FAIR FUTURES PROGRAM MANUAL

SECTION 25

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION 25. PEER GROUPS	131
A. BENEFITS	131
B. BEST PRACTICES IN FACILITATING PEER GROUPS	132

SECTION 25. PEER GROUPS

A. BENEFITS

Peer groups are an extremely important component of the Fair Futures model. To stick with the program over the course of years, **young people need to feel connected not only to their Coach, but to other adult and peer supports.**

Peer groups help young people develop positive, supportive relationships with their peers and serve as important motivational and skill-building forums. They are often a space that allows young people to start or continue the process of healing by learning about managing stress, healthy communication and self-expression, and mental/physical wellness. Coaches and staff can learn a lot about young people's thoughts, concerns, and challenges through these groups, which can help them in their coaching sessions.

Peers also serve as credible messengers. If a young person is disconnected or struggling and one of their peers talks about how they went through the same experience and were able to overcome it, hearing about that can be incredibly motivating. Agencies have often found that peer group forums can be the source of breakthroughs; one conversation can help a young person reframe their situation and start moving forward with their goals.

Peer groups can help young people improve their job readiness by helping them improve critical soft skills (listening, responding respectfully, etc.). They can also help them build career development experiences by incorporating community service and leadership activities.

To recap, peer groups help young people to:

- Form positive peer relationships and build their support network;
- Avoid involvement in negative peer groups;
- Be heard, feel that they are not alone, and that they are part of a larger community;
- Meet credible messengers that they can relate to and be inspired by;
- Learn about topics related to wellness and stress management;
- Build and reinforce critical soft skills;
- Gain leadership/community service experiences that they can include on their resumes;
- Stay connected to the Fair Futures program.

PEER GROUPS ARE DISTINCT FROM WORKSHOPS.

Workshops can also serve as important skill-building forums where young people can learn about financial management, healthy eating, and other important life skills, and are strongly encouraged.

What makes a peer group a peer group, however, is that it is youth-centered and youth-driven. There is not an Instructor (as there often is in a workshop) – there is a Facilitator. It is collaborative and everyone has a voice. The focus is not the topic per se as much as it is the discussion, the relationship building, the inspiration, the healing, the self-expression.

TIP! Whenever possible, staff should encourage young people to join a peer group. There should ideally be enough peer groups to meet the varying interests/needs that young people have.

B. BEST PRACTICES IN FACILITATING PEER GROUPS

Peer groups can focus on a variety of topics.

Peer groups that have been popular/heavily attended and produced meaningful results include:

The Bengals Positive Peer Group, which is based on the Positive Peer Culture model.

Each young person completes an eight-session training on skills such as healthy communication, dealing with peer pressure, and service learning. The Bengals plan and complete community service and recreational activities.

Network, where Coaches facilitate peer groups focused on helping young people support each other in managing stress and their behavior (sharing challenges, practicing self-affirmation, etc.).

Male Forum, where all youth who identify as male come together to participate in activities and/or discussions around topics that they identify and lead.

Ladies that Lunch, a group of youth who identify as female who come together for lunch to discuss topics that they identify and lead.

College Crew, a peer group that shares stresses and concerns related to college, effective practices and coping mechanisms, etc. It is a space for students to recognize that others are going through the same things they are and to learn from their peers.

BEST PRACTICES AROUND FACILITATING PEER GROUPS INCLUDE:

- Offer food to recruit more young people to the group;
- Set up the room so that everyone feels a part of it (e.g., a circle – tables should not be separated);
- Welcome youth into an inviting space that is already set up;
- If there are two Facilitators, be clear on who is leading what aspect;
- Set ground rules for the community; the young people should be a part of creating the community rules and adults abide by them, too;
- Be upfront that what may be disclosed could be heavy, but that they are in a safe space/circle of trust and that things will not be shared outside of the group;
- Be transparent on how the adults will follow up on any concerns and reiterate the importance of each person's well-being;
- Have a topic to introduce and a curriculum prepared, but allow for flexibility when you are having a conversation; the topic is a guide but if something is happening that is rich and the young people are interested and engaged, do not change the subject to stick to an agenda;
- Let the young people lead and drive the conversation;
- Make it fun; incorporate movement and interaction;
- Bring questions to the group for their input on topics, etc.;
- If there are clinical issues discussed that are beyond the capacity of the staff, bring in mental health clinicians to consult with staff and talk with the young people (e.g. if a young person shares suicidal thoughts in a previous session);
- Follow up individually after the session with any young person who may have unleashed a lot and/or could have been struggling to ensure they are receiving the support they need.