

## Research Snapshot

# How to develop more effective peer-involved interventions to support the inclusion of newcomer students in schools



### What is this research about?

Canadian schools welcome many newcomer and refugee youth. These newcomer youth may experience social exclusion due to racism or discrimination. Newcomer youth also experience elevated challenges in social and emotional development. Exclusion by peers only exacerbates these challenges.

Interventions have been designed to aid newcomer youth during their adjustment to life in Canada, but these programs tend to focus solely on teaching resiliency and coping strategies. Newcomer social isolation cannot be reduced through skills training alone. Interventions that encourage non-newcomer peers to recognize and combat discrimination should be a focus of future programming and research.

Inclusive school communities cannot be achieved by developing newcomer competencies alone. The role of non-newcomer students must also change to foster inclusion and challenge discrimination.

### What did the researchers do?

In this review, researchers used past literature to explain that peers are an underutilized resource for combatting discrimination in schools. The researchers also used the literature to recommend programs that could improve newcomer and non-newcomer relationships in schools:

1. **Peer mentoring programs** are useful for improving newcomer well-being and social adjustment. Group mentoring programs and one-on-one mentoring can both be helpful.

### Highlights

- More effective peer-involved interventions should be developed to support the integration of newcomer students in primary and secondary schools.
- Peers can be a support, but are also an intervention target themselves.
- Existing peer-involved interventions may be adapted to address discrimination.
- New interventions will require evaluation to ensure they are helpful and not harmful.

2. Existing student alliance programs and bystander intervention programs could be adapted to promote inclusion of outgroup members:

### Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)

- Originally developed to bring gay and straight students together to create a safe space and advocacy opportunity.
- Newcomer students and sexual minority students both navigate complex social systems and face bullying or harassment.
- A club that celebrates newcomer experiences in school settings, similar to a GSA, is worth exploring.

### Bystander Intervention Approaches

- Originally developed to combat bullying
- Teaches youth who witness bullying how to intervene and provides role-play opportunities to practice skills.
- There are no peer interventions that teach children how to support newcomer youth.
- This model could be adapted to include bystander intervention for racism and micro/macro aggressions.

## What did researchers recommend?

Peers are a key part of a newcomer students' school life. Peers should be included to better support newcomer students throughout their integration to the school community.

Researchers identified **10 key considerations** for embedding equity into school mental health:

### 1. Provide Group-Based Peer Interventions

- Limited research exists on group mentoring programs that aid newcomers.
- Group mentorship may help reduce feelings of inadequacy and social isolation in newcomers.

### 2. Offer Interactive Peer Training Activities

- Having peers practice their intervention skills will increase their confidence for using those skills.
- Role-playing exercises help students apply intervention skills to the real world.

### 3. Align Interventions to Level of Service

- Classroom activities are more appropriate for whole school approaches.
- Shorter interventions are more appropriate to impact small student groups.

### 4. Carefully Select Peer Leaders

- Selecting socially competent peer leaders will make interventions more successful.
- Teachers are in a great position to identify student leaders with these traits.

### 5. Ensure Supporting Adults are Well-Trained

- Adults who deliver any program should have strong knowledge of anti-oppressive practices and self-awareness.
- Include practitioners and teachers.

### 6. Target Systemic Change

- Newcomers should not be expected to confront every racist act on their own.
- Policies and procedures should help newcomers report issues.
- Systems should adopt policies that foster inclusion and equity.

### 7. Evaluate Newcomer Youth and Peers

- Peer mentor programs typically assess outcomes for newcomers or mentors, but not both.
- It is important to evaluate effects for both groups.
- What if your program improves inclusion in newcomers, but also increases discriminatory attitudes in mentors?

### 8. Study the Broader School-Level Impacts

- Research is needed to evaluate the impact of peer mentor programs on the entire school social system.
- Evaluate program impact on the student body, not just the individuals involved.

### 9. Engage Youth Voices in Future Research

- Youth should be more involved in future research.
- Use youth-centered and visual techniques. E.g., art or photo-based research.

### 10. Address Implementation Issues from Outset

- Mentors need adequate training and support.
- Intervention research is tested in ideal and well-funded contexts, and does not transfer to real world.
- Important to consider implementation factors from the start

## How can you use this research?

This article suggests ten considerations for the future of school mental health. Specifically, it proposes guidelines for peer-based programs that promote the well-being and inclusion of newcomer students. It emphasizes that the research community should see peers as an untapped resource. Effective peer-involved interventions can reduce newcomer alienation, discrimination, and harassment.

Practitioners should follow the recommendations from this article if they wish to develop or evaluate effective peer-involved interventions that promote newcomer inclusion in schools.

## Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article: Crooks, Kubishyn, N., Noyes, A., & Kayssi, G. (2021). Engaging peers to promote well-being and inclusion of newcomer students: A call for equity-informed peer interventions. *Psychology in the Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22623>

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**Keywords:** peers; refugee; youth; intervention

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