

Briefing Report

Youth Health Champion: Bringing Health into the Lives of Children

Topic

The Government's White Paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People*, emphasised a new approach to health, which would empower local communities, enable professional freedoms and introduce a system that would be based on the evidence of what works best, in order to tackle health inequalities and improve the nations health and wellbeing.

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) supports the principles outlined in the White Paper, that every single one of us has a critical role to play in helping to tackle current health issues. By encouraging and empowering people to take responsibility for their health, we positively promote healthy behaviours and lifestyles and educate people to make healthier choices.

The Youth Health Champion (YHC) is one such initiative, implemented by NHS North East Essex (NHS NEE) and commissioned under their Health Trainer Service, which enables young children to act as "health advisors" to their peers. The aim of the scheme, to reach out and educate children about health in order to reduce health inequalities in the most deprived areas, has been highly commended by the RSPH. In recognition of their success, RSPH awarded NHS NEE the national RSPH Health Promotion Award 2010 and were very pleased, therefore, to host a dissemination seminar in June with NHS North East Essex PCT to explain the rationale and practice underpinning the success of YHC.

Background

The Youth Health Champion scheme was introduced in 2006 by NHS North East Essex following the success of the Health Trainer Service, whereby Health Trainers/Champions sought to improve the communities' health by reaching out to those in the most deprived areas, with the worst health.

The purpose of the Youth Health Champion scheme is to recruit and train students from local secondary schools to raise awareness amongst their peers about lifestyle related risks to health and be able to provide safe signposting information about local services for health and wellbeing. The Youth Health Champions, who are recruited from Years 10, 11 and 12, undertake four days intensive training in health promotion and safe signposting, focusing on emotional health, wellbeing and sexual health.

The Benefits

There are numerous positive results from implementing the Youth Health Champion scheme in schools. Firstly, not only is the scheme free to introduce and maintain, but it has a strong dual purpose. The children who become youth champions become educated and interested in health and health promotion, thereby increasing their own knowledge and awareness. The scheme also contributes to their personal development, by improving their communication and planning skills, as well as giving them responsibility and a greater sense of empowerment. The young adults have also noted an increase in their confidence and believe the scheme gives them a purpose and a focus. The students take the RSPH Level 1 Award in Health Awareness course, which can then lead on to the RSPH Level 2 Award in Understanding Health Improvement course, once again helping to build skills and understanding in health.

Evidence demonstrates that we are more likely to seek advice from our peers. For this reason, Youth Health Champions are more effective at getting health messages across to other students and making a notable difference to health. By targeting their peers, Youth Health Champions are able to form relationships and appeal to other students, enabling them to educate, to advise and signpost services to young adults who would be unaware of services or too embarrassed to seek information

on the support available to them. Consequently, the scheme reaches out to people in the community, who would otherwise “fall through the net” and helps tackle health inequalities. By helping to diminish social isolation and promoting health, we encourage and empower people to make healthier lifestyle choices from a young age.

Jake Camp, 17, a Youth Health Champion from Clacton County High School says that through the YHC scheme:

“I have built a great sense of community between me and the rest of the school, increasing relationships and being able to know I am making a difference with the campaigns... I have learnt great amounts about my own health and making sure I maintain being positive and un-hypocritical role model, by sticking to Youth Health Champions own ideology”

Five students from Manningtree School presented their experiences at the seminar and described them as “invaluable”. They also described the skills that they have developed and the great sense of satisfaction and achievement they felt from being involved in a scheme that helped others.

The seminar provided an opportunity for the Service Lead of the Health Trainer scheme to discuss how schools benefit by adopting the scheme. There were examples of how to approach and appeal to the schools, as well as how to implement the YHC programme and what processes needed to be in place to ensure the maximum effectiveness within the school.

Some of these points included:

- Gaining the support of a senior member of staff in the school who will be committed to run and support the scheme
- Highlighting to the school that the scheme is free and does not interfere with the curriculum.
- Incorporating an interview process to select and appoint YHC to give the scheme greater validity and status.
- Demonstrating to the schools that all students can benefit.
- Ensuring that preparation and planning takes place in advance for scheduled activities.

Karen Stimpson, Health Trainer Coordinator at Anglia Community Enterprise:

“Our programme utilises young peoples’ energy and enthusiasm, gives education and knowledge and exposes the myths in all areas of health”

Martin Page, Assistant Head Teacher, Manningtree High School:

“I have found that the YHC programme has been one of the most effective vehicles I have come across in delivering the Health aspects of our PSHE programme. Peer led sessions on health have been a huge success, students feel that they can connect with the YHT students and that the message is much clearer and engaging. The profile of the YHTs around school has meant that many students who in the past may not have known where to source help have gone directly to a YHT who have been able to signpost them to the right Health Professional.”

Below is a diagram of the planning process to ensure a successful delivery of the scheme:



Current Status

Since the Youth Health Champion programme began three hundred children have been trained as Health Champions and there are currently nine schools who are involved in the scheme. The Youth Health Champions scheme has also been highly commended in the NHS Alliance awards for excellence as well as presented at the 20th IUHPE World Conference for Health Promotion and Education (11-15th July 2010?, Geneva).

Conclusion

It became evident, that those who attended the seminar were clearly enthused by the developments taking place in North East Essex and were considering how they could use the YHC approach in their work.

The RSPH has, for some time been leading on the development of the national education and training pathways for health trainers and health champions and sees YHC as the next stage in moving the concept into more and varied settings.

The young people involved in YHC in North East Essex have taken a truly positive leadership role and the RSPH is convinced that there is potential to develop this type of approach even further as a national programme.

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