

**Evidence spotlight**

# **Peer support programs for families in vulnerable circumstances**



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# Introduction

*Welcome to our “Evidence spotlight on peer support programs for families in vulnerable circumstances”. This resource is an abridged version of a longer report and is designed to help practitioners and agencies.*

## Who is this resource for?

This evidence spotlight is for practitioners, agencies, and policy makers who are interested in using parent peers to provide additional support to families.

Here, we present what we know from a rapid evidence review of peer support interventions for families attending family services in Victoria, which identified 59 Australian and international studies.

To decide whether an intervention is right for your clients or practical for your service to implement, you will need to follow up with the specific intervention that interests you.

## How do we know what we know?

This evidence spotlight is based on work we carried out for the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. We used a review method, which is a way of systematically searching the published literature to map out areas of inquiry that are not well-researched or well-understood. They help us understand what is currently known about a topic, where our gaps in knowledge are, and what we need to do to find out more. By using a formal method, we make it possible for others to see:

- exactly where we looked for information
- what we included
- what we excluded and why
- how much we can rely on the information we found.



Please contact the Parenting Research Centre for access to the full Rapid Review.

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# About peer support

*Peer support interventions are a way to set up formal support arrangements between people who share lived experience or identities. They can be led by a peer or be a mutual exchange between two or more peers and can take place in a group or one-to-one format.*

## What is peer support?

Peer support is support provided by a person or people with shared lived experience or similar identities or experiences. It can take place online, in person, individually or in groups, or in any combination of these.

Peer support may be delivered with a professional facilitator, a peer facilitator or leader, or through mutual exchanges between peers. Peers may be volunteers or paid; professional facilitators may also have lived experience that makes them peers.

This evidence spotlight covers peer-led and peer-mutual support interventions for vulnerable families, where parent peers are involved. Vulnerability in this context refers to families experiencing challenges or risk factors such as mental health concerns, child protection concerns, homelessness, disability, drug misuse or abuse, family violence, unemployment, and family relationship issues.

## Who are the peers and how are they supported?

Although details about the peer supporters were not presented consistently in the studies included in this review, twelve papers indicated that the peers were specifically matched to the support recipients.

Parent peers often receive supervision or some form of support, and most papers described peer training.

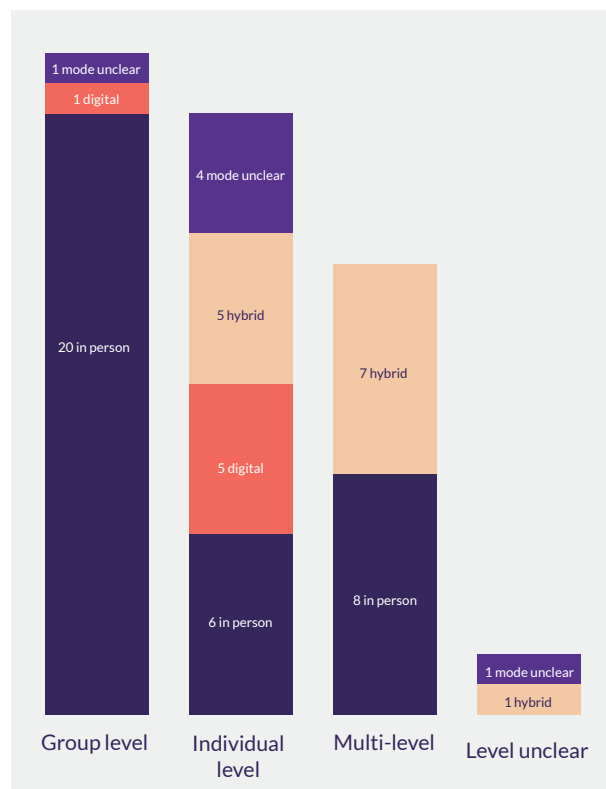
Parent peers often had a manual or other resource to guide their work, and some parent peers received some form of payment.

## Where does parent peer support take place?

Peer support is typically delivered in community settings. However, it can also be provided in schools, community houses, or public venues.

We found there are many different ways of delivering parent peer support, including combinations of delivery modes, but most interventions were in-person peer support groups.

The graph at right shows the spread of delivery methods in the interventions we found.



## Types of peer support interventions

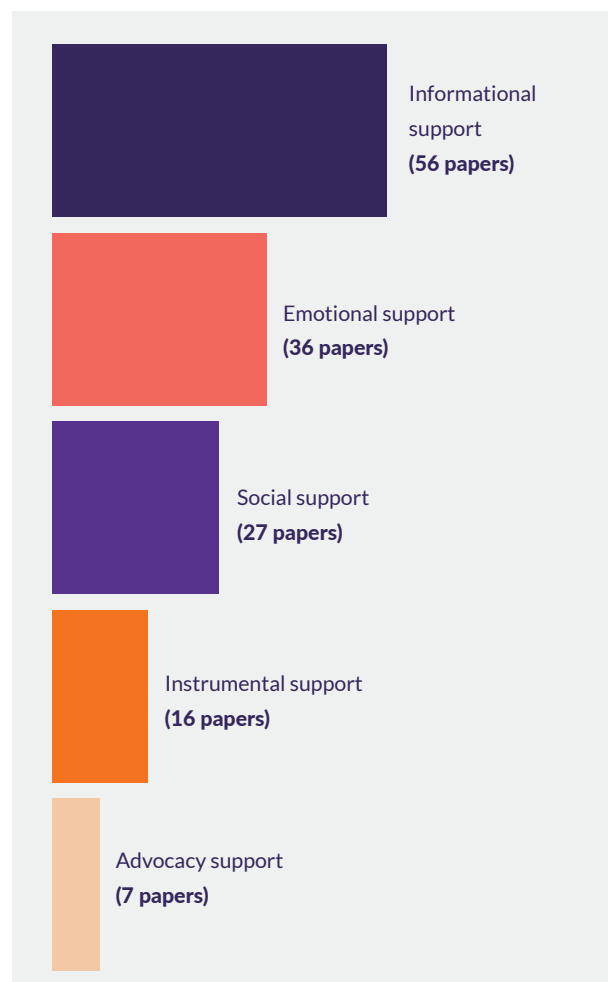
We found five types of support offered by peer support programs and interventions:

- Informational support
- Emotional support
- Social support
- Instrumental support (practical, material, tangible)
- Advocacy support.

Usually, more than one type of support is offered.

Interventions included in this review were typically peer-led rather than offering the mutual sharing of support.

While there was sometimes inconsistent information about the peers or the type of support they provided, in general peer support participants value the chance to share common experiences and identities.



# Benefits of peer support

*We found a mixture of evidence for the benefits of peer support interventions for parents in vulnerable families, with some studies suggesting there is good evidence for particular families, and other studies showing unclear or no benefits.*

## Benefits

- Many participants in peer support interventions describe feeling validated by sharing their lived experiences and feel less isolated and stigmatised.
- Peer support increases available resources and information and increases participants' sense of self-efficacy.
- Peer parents tend to be seen as credible and sources of relevant information.



# Tested peer support programs

## Common peer support interventions

We found twelve peer support interventions that were tested using a rigorous evaluation design (such as a randomised controlled trial) that provides the strongest evidence of their impact.

Note that we are not endorsing any of these or claiming that they are effective for all clients or purposes; we advise you to check this before deciding if any are likely to be useful for your clients.

### List of peer support interventions and methods of delivery

| Intervention                                                     | Methods and clients                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Circle of Parents</b>                                         | Peer support to prevent child maltreatment and strengthen family relationships by improving parent self-esteem, reducing isolation, and supporting positive parenting. Professional facilitator with a parent leader. |
| <b>Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities</b>                | Peer support parenting program for socially disadvantaged parents. Facilitators are parents from the local community.                                                                                                 |
| <b>HIPPY Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters</b> | Combined early childhood centre and home learning to empower parents to actively facilitate their child's early learning and education. One-to-one peer support from tutors who have previously used the program.     |

| Intervention                                                                  | Methods and clients                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Home-based peer support (unnamed)</b>                                      | Peer volunteers with history of postpartum depression provide support to mothers with postpartum depression. Program designed to improve the mental health of mothers by teaching maternal-infant interactions and responsiveness.                       |
| <b>Maudsley model</b>                                                         | Family-based treatment for families where an adolescent child has anorexia. Addition to the model was using peer parents (who had completed the treatment recently) as parent consultants.                                                               |
| <b>NAMI Basics</b>                                                            | Peer-led family support for caregivers of children with mental health concerns. Trained peer parent volunteers deliver program.                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Parent Connectors</b>                                                      | Peer-to-peer telephone support for parents of young people with an emotional disturbance.                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Parent Partners</b>                                                        | Peer parents with lived experience provide support to caregivers of children with acute behavioural healthcare needs who are admitted as inpatients in a psychiatric unit.                                                                               |
| <b>Peer-parent counselling (unnamed)</b>                                      | Trained peer parent counsellors with lived experience of overcoming parenting difficulties provide group peer support to improved social support and reduce stress in families with poor parent-child relationships or with inadequate parenting skills. |
| <b>Peer support intervention for low-income mothers (unnamed)</b>             | Parent mentor-led support groups and social workers aim to enhance parenting confidence, reduce stress, and build social support networks for low-income mothers. Peer mentors also provide support via home visits and phone calls.                     |
| <b>Postpartum depression peer support (unnamed)</b>                           | Peer volunteers with lived experience of postpartum depression are matched with mothers at high risk of postpartum depression and provide one-to-one support via telephone.                                                                              |
| <b>The Thinking Healthy Program, Peer-Delivered Plus (THPP+) intervention</b> | Peer volunteers support women at risk of perinatal depression with limited access to mental health care via individual and group sessions from pregnancy to six months postnatal.                                                                        |



# Considerations

*Peer support may be a feasible way of helping families with needs that are currently unmet by traditional service system supports.*

## What are the practice implications of this review?

Peer support interventions are often well-received, but we found so much diversity in content and modes of implementation that it was hard to untangle the effects of peer support on targeted outcomes.

This presents a challenge to practitioners when deciding whether a peer support intervention might be useful—participants value it, but this may not translate to meaningful change in the outcomes of interest.

When thinking about possible peer support interventions, consider the intended goals and purpose of the program, how the impacts are measured, the population for whom the peer support was designed, the scope of the peer support, and the availability of resources.

Peer support programs can fast-track parents to obtaining early support for worries or challenges they may be experiencing. Peer support is therefore a feasible option to support families who may not have access to more traditional service system support or where parents may value the unique support offered by someone with shared lived experience or identity.



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***The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.***



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