



# Voices and Choices Peer Education Project

*Lifeline Project Inc  
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**Queensland  
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# Executive Summary

The aim of the project was to use a peer education approach to encourage young people to make informed decisions about their health and sexual activity, ultimately reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancy.

Peer education is known to be an effective educational approach as young people feel that they can talk to their peers in an open and honest way. Peer educators endorse healthy norms, beliefs and behaviours within their own peer group. Their messages are often more accepted by young people because the hierarchy and sociocultural gap between educators and young people are absent.

Lifehouse Project recruited a young mother to coordinate and facilitate the program and train other young mothers from the Gold Coast as peer educators. Six completed a ten-week training program, which included the young mothers designing a presentation that they called "Voices & Choices". The peer educators also designed a logo, T-shirts and a "You Matter" teen support card to distribute to students.

Voices and Choices was presented to over 1000 young people between June – Dec 2005. The response from students, schools and community organisations was encouraging and positive. The results of 259 student evaluation forms are contained within this report. The feedback demonstrates that the students gained new knowledge, they enjoyed the presentation and they could identify with the peer educators and their stories.

Students have stated:

*"Their stories were touching. Shellies story really got to me because I felt I too was going down the same path, but now I feel better about everything and more safe. Thankyou!"*

*"I now know that my parents are only restricting me to protect me from the kind of thing you went through not because they want to spoil my fun"*

*"I enjoyed the fact that you shared your stories and related to us without talking down to us"*

*"It answered my questions"*

A Youth Support Coordinator has stated:

*"Voices & Choices Peer Education Program is enjoyed and embraced by young people. The program reinforces to young people the importance of self-respect and good decision making. Voices and Choices has had a positive affect on many young women I work with in regards to understanding what a healthy relationship is and taking responsibility for their sexual health. For this reason I will continue to utilise this valued program."*

The program has also had a huge impact on the peer educators. The program coordinator has gained a Certificate in Workplace Training and Assessment and developed her youth work skills. The peer educators have all increased their confidence, presentation skills and ability to work with young people and some now have goals of working in education or youth work.

Lifehouse Project hopes to continue developing the program in 2006 and using action research to implement further ways of increasing the long-term outcomes of Voices and Choices.

# Voices & Choices

The Voices and Choices Peer Education Program was funded by the Queensland State Government Office for Women in early 2005. The program had a community capacity and community development focus, increasing the skills and confidence of young parents to discuss real issues with their peers.

Due to the high incidence of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections amongst teenagers today, the program used a peer education approach to educate young women to make positive informed choices about their health and wellbeing, particularly in regards to sexual health and teenage pregnancy.

During 2005 a group of young mothers were trained as peer educators to develop a presentation and deliver it to teenagers in Years 9-12 in Gold Coast High Schools. The presentation they offer shows how their lifestyle is different to their peers. They emphasise that they love their children dearly, but they are also very clear with the message that being a parent means that your life changes dramatically. The Peer Educators use their own true stories to depict the variety of issues and challenges that young people face. They get the students actively involved in the presentation and invite the students to ask questions at every stage. The presentation provides the young mothers with an opportunity to talk very honestly about issues such as teenage pregnancy and parenting, STI's and healthy relationships. The peer educators named the program Voices and Choices as they wanted to express that their voices were ones of experience. The peer educators felt that they wanted to use their experiences to help other young people make positive choices.

Voices and Choices is a program that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of teenagers, supports positive decision-making, increases respect for women and young parents and reduces sexual violence against women. Voices and Choices also empowers young parents to become leaders and educators, sharing their experiences and using their experiences to educate other young people.

The peer educators are all volunteers, providing their time generously to undertake the training and deliver the presentations. Although this has achieved community capacity building outcomes, it was obvious that young mothers have many demands on their time and limited finances, therefore the amount of presentations that were requested exceeded the amount of time the peer educators could offer to the program. The program is fast gaining creditability and in 2006 Lifehouse Project is going to plan how to respond to the demand for presentations and also keep the peer educators motivation to participate high.

# Training

Lifehouse Project began the Peer Educators training in March 2005 with ten young mothers. The training was held every Monday morning between 10am – 1pm at the Salvation Army Citadel in Ashmore. A childcare worker was employed to look after the children so the peer educators could concentrate on their training. Not all ten young mothers completed the program due to personal issues and the need to earn an income.

The topics that were covered in the training were peer education, sexual health, abortion, sexual violence, abuse, event planning and presentation skills. One training session involved a guest speaker talking with the peer educators about Duty of Care and the steps to take when dealing with disclosure. The young mothers put together the presentation, designed their own T-shirts and “You Matter” teen support cards.

Six young mothers, who had already completed three presentations by the conclusion of the training, successfully completed the training in July and Lifehouse Project held a well deserved graduation for them acknowledging their achievements. Friends and family were all in attendance. One young mother said it was the first certificate she had ever received.

## Presentations

The presentation runs between 60-90 minutes. It consists of 5 segments:

1. Our Stories
2. Comparing Lifestyles
3. Baby Budget
4. Itchy & Scratchy Show
5. Value Card Panel

### *Our Stories.*

This segment is the most powerful part of the presentation. It introduces the students to the peer educator’s stories, what choices they made and how teenage pregnancy and unhealthy relationships changed their life. The young mothers are very honest and discuss how their choices made them think and feel about themselves and their relationships.

### *Comparing Lifestyles*

This segment encourages students to think about how a young persons life changes once they become a teenage parents. It is a reality check for young people who may not have considered the implications of the lifestyle and bodily changes in store for any young parent.

### *Baby Budget*

There is a myth that young mothers receive free housing and have lots of income support once they have a child. During this segment the peer educators discuss with students the realities of living on a tight budget, the amount of resources and items needed to look after a baby and how little is left over at the end of the week!

### *Itchy & Scratchy Show*

The segment is a role-play about sexually transmitted infections. The peer educators role play asking a doctor questions about all sorts of common infections and the doctor gives her reply, at

the same time educating students and raising questions about what STI's are, how they are caught, symptoms and consequences of STI's.

### *Value Card Panel*

This segment presents a range of topics to students and invites them to discuss their thoughts and ideas about pregnancy, sexual violence, abuse, relationships, virginity, contraception etc. The value cards give students the opportunity to ask more questions and learn about the views of the peer educators who are teaching the students about respect, making good choices and safety.

During the whole presentation the peer educators encourage questions and comments from the students to ensure they are provided with the opportunity to ask questions raised by the presentation.

The peer educators have delivered their presentation in many schools throughout the Gold Coast and have even been to Ipswich and Springwood schools on a number of occasions. The group has spoken at youth groups and community organisations with the number of students at a presentation being between 10 to 200.

The "You Matter" card has been designed by the peer educators. These will be distributed in schools in 2006.

## Action Research

This program was an opportunity to implement some action research. The Voices and Choices Program has provided Lifehouse Project with many valuable lessons. The learning's include;

1. There is definitely a great need for this type of program within the community, as the students seemed like thirsty sponges soaking up the peer educators knowledge and information.
2. The students commonly seemed deprived of honest, down to earth, frank talks from people that genuinely care about their wellbeing.
3. The program demonstrated how powerful it can be for young people to communicate with other young people on a personal level as well as in a large group setting. Some students would stay behind after the presentation to chat with the peer educators for up to an hour afterwards.
4. Some students knew less than what was expected and other knew more, so the peer educators adjusted their presentations according to the students needs. The peer educators learnt how to improvise and troubleshoot on a number of occasions and did so quite successfully!
5. It was evident that a 60-minute presentation was not enough time to answer all the students' questions. The presentation did raise their awareness of issues but much more in-depth and long-term work is needed with at risk students who are engaging in risky behaviours.
6. It was evident that sex education is still a contentious issue; with many schools feeling hesitant about the content of the program until they saw it. Some schools avoid talking about sexual health because of the many viewpoints about what should be said to students. It appears that some schools would prefer to avoid the issue rather than provide students with positive education about the subject.

# What Was Achieved

1. One young mother was recruited to coordinate the program.
2. One young mother gained a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment.
3. Six young mothers trained as peer educators.
4. 26 Voices and Choices presentations delivered during 2005.
5. 1184 young people saw the Voices and Choices presentation.
6. The program has increased the health and wellbeing of young people, improved women's safety and developed young parent's leadership skills.

## Key Impact Indicators/Outcomes Achieved

- Increased community capacity of young mothers to share their experiences and educate young people about the realities of teenage parenting.
- Empowered young parents who develop presentation, communication and event management skills.
- Increased community capacity of young mothers to influence school, government and community policies by discussing the issues that affect young parents.
- Increased awareness of young people about the realities of teenage pregnancy leading to improved decision-making, sexual health and a decline in unplanned teenage pregnancy.

The objective that still needs to be developed is improving collaborative partnerships between the government, young parents, schools, community organisations in supporting pregnant and parenting mothers. Many schools unintentionally do not support teenage parents well enough to enable them to stay at school.

## Benefits for Young People

The program has positively impacted over 1000 young people and potentially altered many of the negative paths the young people were on by teaching them that there are always consequences to actions whether they be positive or negative. The program has taught them that they need to make positive choices to achieve positive outcomes in life. The program also encouraged them to look to their future and to have respect for themselves and their relationships. Many of them were impacted by this message within the short time the peer educators had with them.

## Benefits for the Peer Educators

The peer educators have done an amazing job. They have learnt many new skills such as public speaking & communication skills, presentation, organisational skills, as well as gaining a wealth of knowledge about STI's and teenage pregnancy. They have formed many new friendships and gained self worth by doing something to help their peers. A comment from one peer educator was that she has gained a lot of respect from family and friends when she tells them what she is doing and they are very proud. Overall the girls have benefited from this program just as much as the students hearing the presentation have. Two of the peer educators received a Gold Coast City Council Youth Award.

## Partners and Stakeholders

The lead organisation Lifehouse Project employed the Voices and Choices Coordinator, a young mother. Lifehouse Project worked in collaboration with YHES House to recruit the peer educators. The peer educators' training was supported by a number of individuals and organisations, Reconnect, Sexual Assault Support Service, School Based Youth Health Nurses, Kate Duryea (presentation skills) and Queensland Right to Life.

The Youth Support Coordinators and School Based Youth Health Nurses were the programs key contacts in schools and organised the presentations to go ahead in state high schools. The Youth Support Coordinators also freely lent their van to the program when the peer educators had to travel to Ipswich all day.

We also had support from the local media and local businesses that assisted the group to design and print the You Matter card.

*“Voices and Choices provided opportunities for young women and young men to discuss, explore and learn in a safe environment, important key issues relating to youth sexual activity, the program empowered our students to make conscious decisions and raised their self-awareness to their own responsibilities when being sexually active. The facilitators were engaging and youth friendly allowing an environment conducive to open, honest communication. We found Voices and Choices to be highly appropriate and extremely useful in assisting us to respond to the needs of the student body”*

YSC - Pacific Pines State High School

## Budget

After twelve months there are surplus funds. This is due to a shorter training program being delivered reducing both the salary and venue costs. The peer educators completed their training in ten weeks and it was felt that they were ready to begin presentations. Also, the peer educators did not ask for as many reimbursements as was anticipated; consequently not as much funding was spent on volunteer costs. The peer educators chose instead to invest in T-shirts and the 'You Matter' teen support card, which they designed and printed to distribute to students.

With agreement from the Office for Women it is hoped that the surplus funds can be spent on delivering further programs in 2006.

# Recommendations

Due to the success of this program over the past year Lifehouse Project would like to continue presenting Voices and Choices in 2006. Other recommendations include -

1. There would be great benefit in developing a comprehensive 6-week program; 2hrs/wk run during school hours with a small group of young women. The participants would be girls at risk who are nominated by the school. This program would allow the peer educators to get to know students more personally and respond to their questions more in-depth. This approach might have a more lasting impact on their long-term choices, attitudes and behaviour.
2. To ensure more consistency within the group and guarantee the peer educators availability, it would be useful to employ two peer educators to run the longer program.
3. The Voices and Choices model needs to be documented to ensure its sustainability and to allow Lifehouse Project to share the action learning. Funding needs to be found to develop and print a Manual for other organisations or schools thinking of developing a peer education project.
4. Lifehouse Project is keen to source funding to undertake an in-depth evaluation of the program, using focus groups and interviews to compare young people's attitudes and choices before and after the program. This would ascertain if the program was able to reduce teenage pregnancy.
5. A Queensland or national conference on the benefits of using peer education to deliver sex education would create debate about the need to increase the sexual health of young women today. Communities need to share good practice and a conference would be one way of sharing ideas and views on the issue.

## Conclusion

Voices and Choices has been well received by young people, schools and community organisations. Schools are already trying to book presentations in 2006. Although no extensive evaluation has been completed yet, it appears that this program is having a positive effect on young people's attitudes, choices and behaviours.

It is hoped that this peer education program will create debate amongst government policy makers particularly education providers, as well as academics and community sectors that work with young people. If positive long-term outcomes can be established through further evaluation, funding might be made available to develop the approach in other communities around Australia.

# Feedback from students

These are the results of school presentations during July/August 2005. 79 evaluations were completed.

	A lot	Some of it	A little	No
Did you enjoy today's workshop?	54%	34%	11%	1%

<p>What did you enjoy most about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ All of it, every bit of it</li> <li>➤ That you can get many diseases</li> <li>➤ The doctor show</li> <li>➤ The way that you explained stuff</li> <li>➤ Things that they had to do for being a mum</li> <li>➤ The stories</li> <li>➤ Hearing stories about other peoples experiences</li> <li>➤ Discussions and questions</li> <li>➤ The costs of having a child</li> <li>➤ The honesty and the truth about everything</li> <li>➤ The real life stories</li> </ul>
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<p>What will you remember about teenage pregnancy after today?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ To be more careful</li> <li>➤ To wear a condom</li> <li>➤ I don't want genital warts</li> <li>➤ Have sex with the right person</li> <li>➤ Not to have sex when you're young</li> <li>➤ That it really changes life</li> <li>➤ That it's hard to take care of a child at this age</li> <li>➤ Always have safe sex</li> <li>➤ Make good choices</li> <li>➤ Commitment you need, be safe</li> <li>➤ Use protection</li> <li>➤ It ruins your social life</li> <li>➤ Have safer sex and don't have sex till your ready or committed</li> <li>➤ It will make me think twice before I have sex</li> </ul>
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	I've learnt a lot	I've learnt a little	No, I didn't learnt anything
Have you learnt what it's like to be a young parent?	47%	52%	1%

	Very useful	Useful	Fairly useful	Not useful
How useful was it to discuss the topics we talked about today with the young mums?	51%	35%	10%	4%

<p>Do you want to say anything else about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I've learnt to be a lot more responsible and think about what could happen</li> <li>➤ Thanks for the advice</li> <li>➤ Its really good to know this staff at our age</li> <li>➤ Thank you for taking up your time to talk to us, it was useful</li> <li>➤ It made sense</li> <li>➤ U girls rock!</li> <li>➤ Congrats on being mums</li> <li>➤ Thanks heaps aye, you turned me off having sex for a while. I still want a kid but I'm going to wait a while</li> <li>➤ Their stories were touching. Shellies story really got to me because I felt I too was going down the same path, but now I feel better about everything and more safe. Thankyou!</li> </ul>
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**Presentation given to Year 9's at Pacific Pines State High School. 150 evaluations completed.**

	A lot	Some of it	A little	No
Did you enjoy today's workshop?	27%	61%	7%	5%

<p>What did you enjoy most about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ When they were telling us their stories</li> <li>➤ Learning what it's like to be a pregnant teenager</li> <li>➤ Asking them questions</li> <li>➤ Talking about sex</li> <li>➤ Meeting the teenage mums</li> <li>➤ Hearing the stories</li> <li>➤ Learning about the help I need</li> <li>➤ The advice</li> <li>➤ The friendliness</li> <li>➤ When she showed us what we would be carrying around</li> <li>➤ Everything</li> </ul>
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<p>What will you remember about teenage pregnancy after today?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Use a condom or not at all</li> <li>➤ Wait until you're after 18 to have kids</li> <li>➤ Not get drunk</li> <li>➤ Use protection</li> <li>➤ It costs a lot of money</li> <li>➤ That you should think before you act</li> <li>➤ Don't have underage sex</li> <li>➤ Safe sex</li> <li>➤ I will remember all of it!</li> <li>➤ That there is help</li> <li>➤ Don't have sex...at all!</li> <li>➤ Try not to get drunk and into drugs</li> <li>➤ Never have sex without protection</li> <li>➤ Wise decisions and responsibility is needed</li> <li>➤ Think long and hard</li> <li>➤ I found the whole thing equally useful</li> </ul>
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	I've learnt a lot	I've learnt a little	No, I didn't learnt anything
Have you learnt what it's like to be a young parent?	59%	36%	5%

	Very useful	Fairly useful	Not useful	<i>Not stated</i>
How useful was it to discuss the topics we talked about today with the young mums?	43%	39%	15%	3%

<p>Do you want to say anything else about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Thanks for coming</li> <li>➤ Too late for me</li> <li>➤ Thank U</li> <li>➤ It was very informative</li> <li>➤ It was great!</li> <li>➤ Thank you to the young mums</li> <li>➤ Make good decisions in life</li> <li>➤ Talking to the mums made me think a lot about being pregnant, like emotional and that, and things I didn't even know about.</li> <li>➤ I understood what they were saying</li> <li>➤ It was cool to see the reality of having a baby</li> <li>➤ This lesson was totally wicked!</li> </ul>
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**Presentation given to Year 9's at Robina State High School. 30 evaluations completed.**

	A lot	Some of it	A little	No
Did you enjoy today's workshop?	43%	54%	3%	0%

<p>What did you enjoy most about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ All of it</li> <li>➤ The reality of being a parent</li> <li>➤ That they involved the audience</li> <li>➤ Listening to what you had to say</li> <li>➤ The stories at the start</li> <li>➤ What can happen with sex</li> <li>➤ How it tells people about real issues</li> <li>➤ STD talk</li> </ul>
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<p>What will you remember about teenage pregnancy after today?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Not to fall pregnant at young age</li> <li>➤ How hard it is to deal with pregnancy</li> <li>➤ Don't fall pregnant with the wrong person</li> <li>➤ What can happen with sex</li> <li>➤ Be really careful</li> <li>➤ Only do it if you're in a stable relationship</li> <li>➤ The diseases you can get</li> <li>➤ Not to have unsafe sex</li> </ul>
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	I've learnt a lot	I've learnt a little	No, I didn't learnt anything
Have you learnt what it's like to be a young parent?	60%	40%	0%

	Very useful	Fairly useful	Not useful	<i>Not stated</i>
How useful was it to discuss the topics we talked about today with the young mums?	67%	30%	3%	

<p>Do you want to say anything else about today's workshop?</p> <p>(Examples of answers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Thanks for your time</li> <li>➤ It was good</li> <li>➤ Thanks for coming</li> <li>➤ It was interesting</li> <li>➤ Thanks you for taking the time!!!</li> </ul>
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# Photos



# Acknowledgments

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