

# Investigating peer-led learning approaches for girls and young people

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## Abbreviations

EDGE	English and Digital for Girls' Education
ESY	English Skills for Youth
GEC	Girls' Education Challenge
ICS	International Citizen Service
PGL	Peer group leader
PLL	Peer-led learning
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

# Background and objectives

In January 2025, the British Council commissioned an investigation into peer-led learning approaches for girls and young people. The objectives were to:

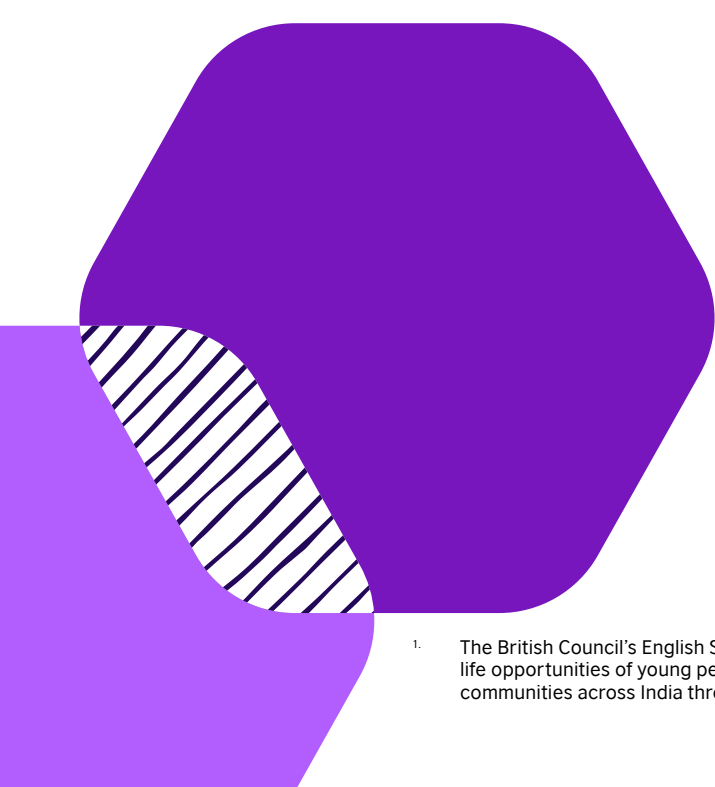
1. establish evidence about the effectiveness of a peer-led learning approach for girls and young people in and out of school and/or learning for employability contexts
2. identify and outline effective facilitation skills that young people could use, and pre-requisites for such facilitation skills to be effective.

This research report presents the findings of the first objective, providing evidence from literature on peer-led learning approaches and outcomes in diverse settings.

Peer-led approaches have been central to the British Council's English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE) programme, which has reached over 20,000 adolescent girls across South and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Building on the learnings from the EDGE programme, this approach is also

adopted in the English Skills for Youth programme in India.<sup>1</sup> An external impact evaluation of EDGE (Mir et al., 2025) found that participation of young people in EDGE peer-led learning activities has contributed to improved life skills (for example, nutrition and sexual health knowledge), confidence and aspirations for higher education, but that broader sociocultural and economic conditions, and opportunities to pursue learning and skills beyond the programme were challenges to sustained impact. Programme observations have further indicated the complex nature of facilitation and the role of peer educators in peer learning.

This rapid review aims to summarise and contextualise the design, activities and learning from EDGE – and other British Council peer education activities – within a broader set of literature and evidence on peer-led learning, to better understand and identify key features of the approach as well as to strengthen, and potentially expand, relevant programming.



<sup>1</sup>. The British Council's English Skills for Youth programme, in partnership with Microsoft India, aspires to enhance the life opportunities of young people aged 18–25, particularly women, in socio-economically marginalised communities across India through developing their English and communication skills for the workplace.

# Scope

This review examines evidence gathered from multisectoral global literature on peer-led learning in addition to British Council's country programmes. The **geographic scope** focuses on South Asia where EDGE programmes have operated, the rest of Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. **The sectoral scope** focuses on formal and non-formal primary and secondary education and learning contexts. Relevant evidence for this review is found in programmes spanning sexual and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, nutrition, equality and inclusion. These are included because (a) they are often located within educational settings, and (b) they provide significant learning insights. Finally, the review considers evidence from programmes engaging with a target population of young people aged 10–24 years, often known as 'adolescents' or 'youth'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The British Council's EDGE programme targets 'adolescent girls aged 13-19 years'.



# Methodology

Evidence for this review has been gathered and assessed from the following key sources:

- British Council EDGE and English Skills for Youth (ESY) country programmes and core team members
- multilateral and bilateral agencies: UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, the World Bank, World Health Organisation, FCDO
- international non-governmental organisations (INGOs): e.g. VSO, FHI360
- academia
- blogs, social media and web publications.

A set of parameters guided the literature review, defining key words, programme and publication dates, target population, study type and search engines for document gathering. An annotated bibliography was developed and evolved to record and analyse evidence from different sources and assess that evidence against three research questions.

These research questions, detailed in a set of sub-queries, guide the review and structure the findings presented here:

## 1. What is peer-led learning?

- What different terms are used to name this approach?
- How is peer-led learning conceptualised in education and other sector-based international development programmes?
- What are the common components – defining features – of a peer-led learning approach in education and development? What isn't peer-led learning?

## 2. How has peer-led-learning been applied in education programmes and international development?

- What kinds of projects and programmes, located where, have applied this approach?
- How have these projects and programmes applied peer-led learning? Are there any notable differences in peer-led learning approaches among girls, boys and/or mixed groups? What about other marginalised groups?
- What support structures – such as community sensitisation or capacity development – contextualise these initiatives?
- What specific skills do peer facilitators need to effectively facilitate learning in peer groups? How can they be supported to develop these skills?

## 3. What are the main effects or outcomes of peer-led learning in education and international development?

- What are the major positive effects or outcomes of peer-led learning?
- What are its weaknesses or challenges? What applications have been less successful, and why?
- What are the key lessons learned in taking forward a peer-led learning approach?

The following sections respond to the research questions in turn. The report ends with recommendations for programming and research, and a brief conclusion.

# Findings

## 4.1 What is peer-led learning?

The British Council uses the term ‘peer-led learning’ (PLL) to describe interventions underpinned by their peer-led model, in which learning facilitators (e.g. peer group leaders (PGLs), English Practice Club leaders) facilitate groups of their age cohort to gain information and skills within pre-determined topics. The PGLs are selected from within the same cohort as the participants (peers) and are trained by professionals recruited by the British Council. The current English and Digital for Girls’ Education (EDGE) programme comprises peer learning groups of girls aged 13–19 years, while English Skills for Youth (ESY) groups are aged 18–25.

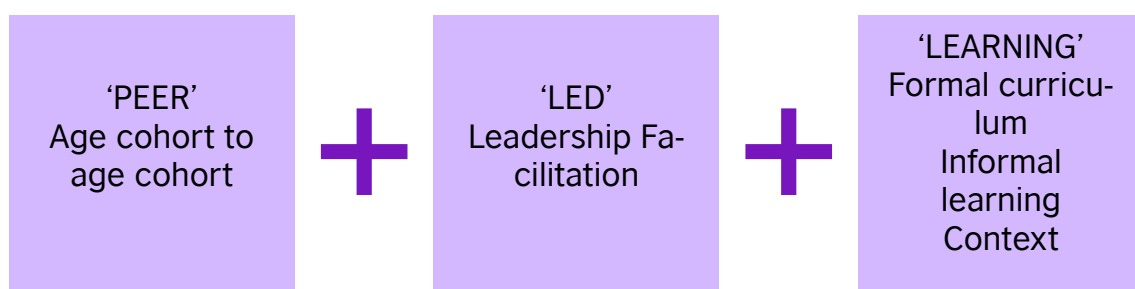
In wider evidence from programmes and research, peer-led approaches are named, explained (to a greater or lesser extent) and applied in many adapted forms that represent different activities. The bulk of literature and evidence on peer approaches to learning emerge from the health sector (VSO, 2013; Kereta et al., 2021), especially sexual and reproductive health (SRH). A trajectory over the last decades in SRH has led to peer-centred and peer-led approaches among adolescents, especially girls, which has in turn manifested in school-based girls’ clubs and out-of-school girls’ groups or networks (Marcus, 2017; GEC, 2023a). This trajectory has adopted different terms to describe

the process and practices of young people learning from each other, including peer learning, peer education, peer-to-peer/youth-to-youth and girls’ clubs.

**Peers** are members of a given group primarily identified by **age**, but who may be of any age cohort (adult–adult; youth–youth; child–child). The emphasis on age, especially a shared age, is important to peer learning approaches, including the EDGE model. Some approaches define ‘peers’ more broadly as individuals who share another characteristic or experience: for example, adolescent mothers or refugees (VSO, 2013). Others adopt ‘peer’ to define a model of older individuals educating younger ones (UNICEF, 2012; VSO, 2021a). However, **age cohort collaboration** is central to peer learning approaches.

**Led** refers to a peer-leadership model whereby a selected member of the group facilitates the content (curriculum); this facilitation may be more or less instructional depending on the model and the specific topic or learning outcome. The leadership of the facilitator is generally consistent, with the leader being pre-trained, but may also be shared among group members. Critically, the leader is not a subject expert – they are peers in the group (British Council, 2022; GEC, 2023a).

Figure 1: Defining peer-led learning



**Learning** refers to the formal, pre-set curriculum content and goals for the group; the informal, often unplanned, learning that emerges through groups; and the conditions and location of delivery – whether in a school or a community space (Figure 1).

Adolescents and youth have increasingly become the target population of peer learning approaches and interventions, especially in health and education (UNFPA, 2005; Pana & Lesto, 2012; Dodd et al., 2022; Evelia et al., 2023). Adolescence and youth are distinctive periods of development between the ages of 10 and 24, during which social and cognitive development increasingly relies on, and is influenced by, peers, friends and young role models who may exert positive or negative influences (VSO, 2013; WHO, 2021). Social constructivist theories of learning that posit the child as an active participant in constructing knowledge stress the importance of intersubjectivity and active engagement for learning. They emphasise children and young people's shared language, leaning towards the effectiveness of peer approaches to learning (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). In summary, this means that this age range has been identified as an important period to harness the powerful social influence of young people on each other for information and skill sharing and development, and behaviour change, with the intended impact of empowerment for life skills and well-being (Yip et al., 2016).

The leadership and learning components of peer-led learning distinguish this approach from other peer approaches. Many terms are used to describe different peer activities including:

- peer support networks/groups/collaboration
- peer mentoring/peer counselling
- peer tutoring
- peer monitoring/peer research.

While there are no hard boundaries between different peer approaches (with different programmes adopting and developing different interventions), **peer-led learning, peer learning and peer education have shared characteristics**

and can be set apart from broader peer approaches because they:

**operationalise a curriculum with specified topics for knowledge and/or skills acquisition with a defined set of intended learning outcomes for delivery and facilitation by a peer with their cohort.**

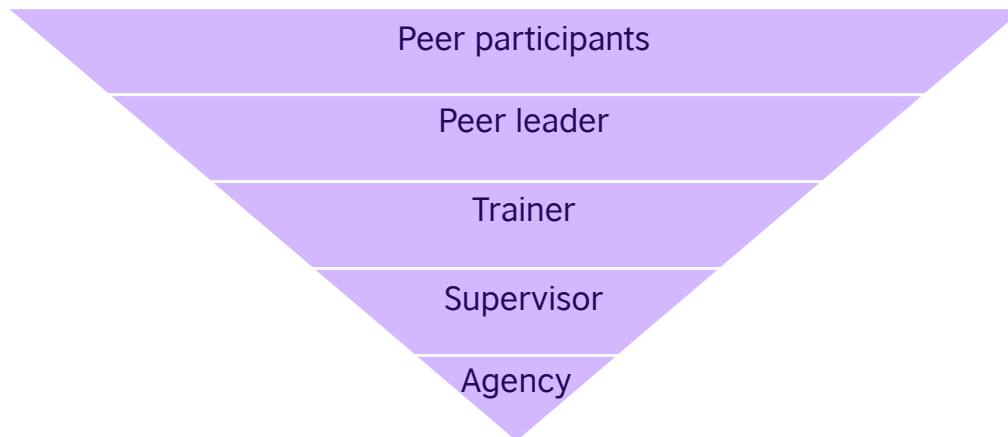
In other words, peer-led learning, peer learning and peer education are formalised structures within programming, whereas other approaches tend to be informal, looser activities (networks, clubs) and/or individual to individual (mentoring, tutoring) that provide need-led socioemotional support or targeted advice.

**Peer learning models follow a curriculum and have structure.** This includes:

- a named leader/facilitator
- training and support to the group leader
- planned location and time for meetings
- group expectations and standards, including meeting agendas
- predefined and time-bound intended learning outcomes.

However, this structure varies between interventions depending on context, resources and intended outcomes. Peer-led models are structured similarly: peer group participants are the focus, alongside the group leader. The leader is trained by a professional adult trainer and both the peer group leader and the trainer are supported by a supervisor or mentor, with the programme organisation and its staff as the backstop (Figure 2). Sometimes, the trainer/supervisor/agency can be the same professional adult and or team within the programme organisation.

Figure 2: Peer-led learning model structure



### Summary: what is peer-led learning?

- **Social constructivist and child development theories** form the conceptual basis of peer-based approaches to learning across sectors and contexts.
- **Adolescents and youth** are the predominant target population of peer learning approaches due to the distinct nature of this period of child-adulthood.
- **Peer-led learning, peer learning and peer education have shared characteristics** and are distinct from other less formal peer approaches.
- **Peer-learning models are structured:** they have a set organisation, curriculum and predefined intended learning outcomes for peer participants.

## 4.2 How has peer-led learning been applied in international development and education programmes?

Peer learning approaches are frequently employed in the health sector and especially SRH programmes globally, with the aim of promoting healthier and safer decision making, and embedding positive health behaviours in young people. The approach has proven effective in this sector due to the sensitivity of topics and increased likelihood of youth to trust and open up to their peers, rather than to adults, without fear of judgement.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, UNICEF-funded projects have trained peer educators to provide safe spaces and platforms for vulnerable adolescents to get together and discuss topics related to puberty, family planning, life skills, healthy eating, GBV and HIV. The

significance of these spaces is that they are safe, confidential, and there is an environment of trust among peers. The peer educators are frequently supported by community health workers for technical support, mentorship and linkages to health facilities, and their roles include dispensing information, creating demand for services and nurturing positive group norms.

Peer learning approaches are less common in the **education sector**. However, the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) portfolio of 41 projects across 17 countries<sup>3</sup> provides a significant body of evidence. Many GEC projects included girls' clubs facilitated by a peer leader and had specific learning goals and a wide-ranging curriculum structured around interactive discussion as opposed to teacher-centred delivery of content (GEC, 2023a). Peer education has been used in much of VSO's work in education; of note are the International Citizen

<sup>3</sup> The GEC countries that overlap with EDGE are Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Nepal and Pakistan.

Service (ICS) programme<sup>4</sup> that incorporates youth-led peer education interventions and VSO's Sisters for Sisters programme in Nepal, in which 'big sisters' mentor 'little sisters' throughout their education journey (VSO, 2021a; see also Appendix).

Within the British Council's EDGE programme (eight countries) and the English Skills for Youth (ESY) project (17 states in India), peer groups are facilitated by leaders selected from their age cohort and trained to manage and facilitate groups in their communities, building the confidence, leadership, English language and life skills of all participants. EDGE and ESY have a shared purpose to develop participants' language skills. A key difference, however, is that EDGE focuses on a younger cohort of girls (13–19 years), whereas ESY targets older participants (18–25 years) with employability and 'readiness for work' as a core part of the curriculum.

**The table in the Appendix summarises all the peer learning programmes that have provided evidence for this review including their target populations, periods of operation, activities and outcomes.**

Accumulated evidence from health/SRH programmes has contributed to the *Youth Peer Education Toolkit* (UNFPA, 2005)<sup>5</sup> – comprehensive global guidance providing standards and resources for peer education programming. *Evidence-Based Guidelines for Youth Peer Education* (FHI360, 2010) consolidates learning from this guidance and provides concise recommendations and a useful 'checklist and planning tool' for programmes intending to implement peer education initiatives.<sup>6</sup> While the evidence is drawn from peers working with young people to improve SRH outcomes, many of the core principles and recommendations can be applied to any type of peer learning and education programmes.

**Peer education initiatives rarely stand alone.**

Within education, peer learning is usually established to provide extra support to at-risk/marginalised

learners and/or address inequalities in formal learning outcomes, e.g. GEC's 'Leave No Girl Behind' (GEC, 2023a). In health/SRH, peer education is more often the community-based outreach component of an organisation's larger youth programme. In all cases, peer learning/education is designed as part of a wider programme, contributing towards broader outcomes. There is, however, considerable variation between how peer-based interventions are implemented depending on context, population, resources and programme outcomes. This poses a challenge when determining what factors contribute to best practice in peer learning/education because what works best is usually localised to these factors. There are, however, key learnings from the evidence that contribute towards signposting the design and delivery of effective peer learning initiatives (see section 4.4).

**Peer education has proven useful for reaching hard-to-reach youth**, where the peer leaders are from the same marginalised groups and therefore understand the difficulties youth face. Selecting peer educators from the same marginalisation layer (e.g. young mothers; refugees) increases the relatability of the leaders and participants and recognises the importance of lived experience (FHI360, 2010; VSO, 2013; Ayisi, 2022). For example, in Uganda a peer educator who was a teenage mother and HIV positive shared her life experiences with her peers, challenging prejudice and empowering them to seek support and make positive changes (Ayisi, 2022).

**There is significantly more evidence on peer education initiatives for girls** compared with boys or other groups. In low-income countries, girls are often more likely than boys to have limited physical space and free time to socialise and connect with friends due to gender norms surrounding behaviour, mobility and the burden of household chores. Girls' learning therefore tends to be confined to the classroom or domestic sphere (GEC, 2023a). Girl-only peer learning spaces become a significant opportunity for girls to acquire other learning.

Engaging boys and young men in discussions around positive masculinities and gender is acknowledged: in SRH programming separate

4. International Citizen Service (ICS) is a UK Government funded programme providing volunteer placements to 18–25-year-olds. ICS is a development programme led by VSO and delivered by a consortium of youth development and volunteering organisations, which brings together young people from the UK and developing countries to volunteer in some of the poorest communities in Africa and Asia.

5. The Peer Education Toolkit [www.unfpa.org/resources/peer-education-toolkit](http://www.unfpa.org/resources/peer-education-toolkit) is a group of resources designed to help programme managers and master trainers of peer educators. The five parts of the toolkit are based on research and evidence from the field as well as local examples and experiences. The toolkit resulted from a collaboration between the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Family Health International. It was produced in 2005 for the Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER), a project coordinated by UNFPA.

6. This checklist and planning tool covers six key areas: 1. Program planning 2. Recruitment and retention of peer educators 3. Training youth to be peer educators 4. Leading peer education sessions 5. Supervision and program management 6. Monitoring and evaluation.

boys-only groups are frequently established. In GEC projects, while over 90 per cent of clubs met in a girl-only space, some schools offered boys' clubs in parallel. For example, Child Hope's 'Excelling against the odds good brothers' clubs' in Ethiopia included discussions around inequalities in girls' and boys' experiences and how to address them, leading to boys taking actions, such as sharing chores with their sisters (GEC, 2023a).

**Whether there are girl-only groups, separate but complementary boys' and girls' groups or mixed groups depends on context, resources and outcomes.** If group aims are to address behaviour and attitude change in gender violence or SRH, then separate but complementary groups appear to be most effective. However, if the intention is to address gender disparities in specific learning outcomes, such as digital literacy skills and knowledge (GEC, 2023a; Mir et al., 2025), then there tend to be only girls' groups. No evidence was found for only boys' groups operating in an education programme although these are likely to exist to address specific needs and issues. In a previous British Council scoping study, several countries recommended that a peer-led methodology could be used to design interventions for both boys and girls (British Council, 2022). Age and gender are not the only characteristics of marginalisation that can be considered in peer learning interventions: life experience and the intersection of multiple characteristics are rarely evidenced in the literature but may well comprise part of the group dynamics (for example, religion; ethnicity; disability).

## 4.3 Enablers for the successful application of peer education

**Programme evidence points towards five important support structures or enablers that underpin the successful application of peer education initiatives, as outlined below.**

### 4.3.1 Involving parents, caregivers and the wider community

The concept of peer-led learning, particularly in contexts where a strong teacher-led school environment exists, is not easily understood; many parents are sceptical of girls' ability to run groups

(British Council, 2022). Involving parents, caregivers and other community members in peer education programmes from the beginning is critical, as their acceptance and support can increase participants' motivation, attendance and aspirations. Some programmes invite parents – mothers in particular – to visit clubs, which reinforces the status of the club within the community, and leads to further parental involvement and better child attendance and learning in formal education (GEC, 2023a). Where and when groups take place (e.g. community-based for out-of-school girls or extracurricular clubs in school) determines who is involved and how. Parents, teachers, health workers, community and religious leaders all play important roles in young people's lives, and a careful analysis of influential adults with broad community support seems critical to projects' productivity and sustainability (FHI360, 2010).

### 4.3.2 Designing and delivering flexible and relevant content

The provision of a structured curriculum is usually a defining feature of the peer-led learning model. However, some peer leaders follow a looser 'how-to' facilitators' guide, and a less structured curriculum in which facilitator and participants can self-direct sessions and decide on content (GEC, 2023a). This encourages autonomous learning. The curricular content that appears most successful is that which is context-specific and includes knowledge and skills relating to decision making, communication, negotiation and active participation in the classroom. Whether approaches are more structured or more flexible, they all aim to ensure that the curriculum and its delivery reflect the learning needs, priorities and aspirations of the group. Integrating new skills acquisition in response to participants' priorities – flexing the original design – is empowering for young people and tends to be effective. For example, in consultation with participants and stakeholders, the EDGE programme in Pakistan integrated a short social enterprise training into peer-led clubs, leading to girls successfully starting their own initiatives and startups. In addition, the ESY programme introduced a more flexible mode of delivery by combining the clubs with an online self-access course.

### 4.3.3 Developing effective group facilitation

Participatory approaches are an important shared characteristic of programmes that seek to improve outcomes relating to attitudinal and behavioural change in young people (FHI360, 2010). Peer facilitators are supported to become familiar with a mix of participatory teaching and learning methods such as role plays, games and small-group discussions, as well as creating safe, inclusive environments. Facilitators are trained to apply practical skills such as managing club resources, preparing a schedule for their sessions, facilitating discussions and supporting decision making (FHI360, 2010). Evidence shows, however, that some of the most important attributes of effective peer leaders/facilitators are those that are not easily taught, such as attitude, self-awareness, communication skills and ‘relatability’, reflexivity and willingness to learn (UNICEF 2021; GEC, 2023a).

### 4.3.4 Providing sustained mentoring and supervision for peer leaders

Poor quality training and inconsistent supervision of peer leaders adversely affect programme impact (FHI360, 2010). Yet, most peer leaders are only provided with a short initial training or orientation on the running of peer groups or clubs. In cases where there is more consistent support, programmes seem more likely to be effective. For example, in the ESY programme in India, there is a scheduled time each month when peer leaders can drop in to speak to British Council staff online, share their challenges

and gain solutions. There is also a WhatsApp Community of Practice where peer leaders can post problems and share solutions among themselves.

Support for peer leaders could be offered in the form of observation, and positive and enabling feedback by the supervisor or mentor – a process by which peer leaders are encouraged to actively engage so they can develop reflective practice.<sup>7</sup> Guidance could also be offered through informal training or drop-in sessions that respond to specific needs identified by peer leaders and/or the supervisor.

### 4.3.5 Ensuring safeguarding and psychosocial support for peer leaders

The VSO ICS programme reported safeguarding issues arising from young people being put in situations they were not sufficiently prepared for, such as delivering information related to SRH without adequate support or guidance (VSO, 2021b). This evidence points towards the importance of supervisors being perceptive to psychosocial and well-being issues faced by peer leaders. Peer leaders may be in a position of responsibility for the first time, having to navigate group dynamics and, sometimes, handling sensitive topics. Exploring social norms around gender, women’s roles and empowerment will likely have a deep effect on the values of the peer leaders themselves, challenging their own unconscious bias and could result in encountering resistance within their communities (VSO, 2013).

## Summary: How has peer-led learning been applied?

- **Peer learning approaches are more common in SRH than education** programmes due to topic sensitivity and trust between peers.
- **There is considerable variation in application of peer education approaches** depending on context, resources and programme outcomes.
- **The value of girls-only peer learning is most frequently evidenced** but boys can and do benefit depending on intended outcomes.
- **Parental and community support, supervision and safeguarding** are critical to effective application of peer education.
- **When peer leaders have a combination** of learned skills – participatory methods and club management – and innate traits, e.g. self-awareness and reflexivity, this seems to provide the strongest basis for successful initiatives.

<sup>7</sup> This emerged strongly during the British Council group discussion, where staff shared that they had observed an increase in more complex reflective practice skills in peer leaders.

## 4.4 What are the main effects or outcomes of peer-led learning in education and development?

### 4.4.1 What are the major positive effects or outcomes of peer-led learning?

The impact evaluation conducted in the four main countries of EDGE programme delivery (Mir et al., 2025) identifies four key positive outcomes of engagement in peer-led learning (PLL) for participants:

- improved life skills, specifically **knowledge** of nutrition, sexual health and rights
- **aspirations** to pursue higher education
- positive **attitudinal** shifts in social norms, e.g. marriage
- participant perceptions of improvement in their **employability**.

Information-sharing and increases in **knowledge**; raised **aspirations**; and **positive attitudinal shifts** are positive outcomes that resonate and are repeatedly evidenced across peer learning approaches globally (UNFPA, 2005; Leach et al., 2013; Dodd et al., 2022; Mir et al., 2025).

PLL encourages collaboration, shared learning and active participation, and there tend to be high levels of engagement among all participants and leaders. Being 'led' by a peer **decreases fear of punishment or judgement** from making mistakes or asking questions. The safe spaces offered by PLL approaches – where girls and young people are allowed and encouraged to express themselves freely without judgement or harm – has also contributed to improvements in participants' **self-confidence and agency** – speaking out and taking action (GEC, 2023a; UNICEF, 2021):



**I gained confidence to speak in the public and am being recognised by the community**

— Peer leader, Rwanda (Hayoung, 2022)

Learning from peer groups can also **permeate through the community**: participants may share the information and skills they acquire with family members or other friends. EDGE programme staff reported that girls teach their mothers how to use a phone and make a budget, sharing learning with the wider community.

Although less well documented, evidence indicates **positive effects on peer leaders** who may proactively take on more community or school leadership roles, such as on student councils, as a direct result of their training and engagement as peer group leaders. Peer leaders also gain knowledge and skills, including communication, problem solving and decision making.

### 4.4.2 What are the weaknesses or challenges of peer-led learning? What applications have been less successful and why?

The review identifies five main weaknesses, challenges or applications of PLL that have worked less well:

- **Unrealistically high expectations of peer leaders**

Peer leaders are often young, from marginalised communities themselves and not necessarily academically ahead of their peers. Frequently, they are learning alongside their peers as the curriculum content is also new to them, and it is a case of working things out as they go along. Sometimes, training and guidance materials are in English and not their mother tongue, adding an extra layer of complexity; this is the case with British Council programmes where English skills are a core part of the curriculum, and where PGLs from marginalised communities may lack a sufficiently high level of English themselves to follow a curriculum in English (British Council group discussion). The responsibility they feel to lead is significant, and organisations may assume that because they are all peers, the role of peer leader will come naturally. Age is a critical factor: the younger the peer leaders, the less organisations can expect from them in terms of their organisational skills, academic level and capacity for reflective practice. Peer leaders are not trained teachers; therefore, the emphasis should perhaps be less on the achievement of formal learning outcomes and more on empowerment, social and life skills – outcomes

which evidence shows are more achievable through peer-led learning.

- **Reverting to traditional teaching roles and power dynamics**

Facilitating peer groups is very different from formal teaching, but identifying adult trainers who are confident and experienced in facilitation techniques and participatory methodologies can be challenging (Mir et al., 2025; FHI360, 2010). In Pakistan, faculty members from a university are tasked with supporting PGLs, but they often have little idea of what good facilitation looks like and revert to traditional teaching/lecturing style.

Even the peer leaders themselves tend to take on the role of the teacher instead of facilitator because that is more familiar (VSO, 2021b; British Council group discussion). Curriculum design is a significant steer to the type and form of facilitation – more formal designs and content are likely to result in more traditional, ‘teacher-like’ delivery, while content that is youth-centred and accessible is more likely to lend itself to collaborative, active, flexible engagements. Youth volunteers in Kenya confused peer education and mentoring sessions with formal teaching, needing support to understand that there are different forms of learning (VSO, 2021b). It was assumed that because they are youth themselves, they would be more participatory in their approach but that was not the case.

- **Parental concerns about curriculum and safety**

Families may be suspicious of what takes place during a peer learning session with no adults present. In projects where digital literacy is part of the curriculum (e.g. EDGE), they may have concerns about internet safety and be apprehensive about girls going online independently. Other peer learning initiatives have had to exercise sensitivity when dealing with topics such as early marriage and SRH. Content relating to girls’ rights can be viewed as challenging to adult (male) authority (GEC, 2023a). Backlash from adults and community members when peer learning groups are not sufficiently well explained can permanently damage the groups’ ability to function.

- **Recruiting and retaining peer leaders**

Training young people to become peer leaders and providing them with the necessary supervision can be expensive and time intensive, therefore it is important to recruit the right individuals and retain them for as long as possible. Turnover of peer leaders can be high, and this may be due to changes in their lives, for example leaving for studies or work, but it can also be linked to a lack of parental and community engagement. When community engagement happens, it has a multiplier positive effect on peer groups.

For example, the recruitment and retention of female youth peer educators posed a challenge for the Geração Biz (Busy Generation) Program in Mozambique, a project that took place in a largely rural area. When the programme began involving parents in recruitment and training efforts, parents’ perceptions of the programme improved and retention of female peer educators increased (Badiani et al., 2006).

Sustaining motivation and commitment for both the peer leaders and the group is also key to supporting retention and regular attendance. Ongoing mentoring and supervision, including the provision of material and emotional support, and opportunities for further training and professional development all make a difference for the peer leaders. Timely incentives, such as award or graduation ceremonies to celebrate progress can also be highly motivating for all participants (FHI360, 2010; British Council group discussion).

- **Building successful youth–adult partnerships**

All initiatives involving young people require effective youth–adult partnerships: professional relationships between youth and adults (as trainers, supervisors, organisation staff, community members), where both have an equal willingness to learn from one another, make decisions, apply their skills and contribute to change. However, building successful youth–adult partnerships can be challenging and adults must adjust to sharing decision making and other responsibilities with young people (FHI360, 2010).

## 4.5 What are the key lessons learned in taking forward a peer-led learning approach?

- **Age to age cohorts are more effective** than age differential cohorts of peer learners.
- **Emphasis on facilitation and collaborative enquiry** over traditional teacher-led pedagogy is more effective. A combination of relevant content, participatory methodology and the informal set-up of PLL supports learner agency and autonomy, and learners gain critical problem-solving and leadership skills, almost coincidentally, even when they are not an explicit part of the curriculum.
- **Programme staff – especially supervisors – need to be familiar with and alert to gender dynamics in the communities** where groups are established, and able to recognise and respond to any exacerbating inequalities – or perceptions of these – due to group activities. Programmes must be gender-sensitive and responsive. Single sex PLL groups may be perceived to widen the gap between girls' and boys' opportunities and social capital when only girls have access to specific skills and/or training. In contrast, if boys' clubs are established, at its most extreme, the combination of effective boys' clubs with ineffective girls' clubs can exacerbate gender inequality, since boys can become more confident, informed and connected than before the intervention (GEC, 2023a). This could also apply to other dynamics of inequality.
- **Select peer leaders who share key characteristics with peer participants.** Research has shown that the more traits peer educators share with the target group, the more effectively they can change knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- **Peer leaders need to develop broad soft skills** in creating a safe environment that encourages active participation and learning. This includes being inclusive, a good listener and able to build a rapport with others as well as having good knowledge transfer and communication skills.
- **Parents and caregivers need to be fully and regularly engaged** in the rationale and establishment of PLL groups to mitigate against confusion or backlash.
- **Adult support to PLL is critical.** This includes technical, practical and mentoring support.
- **Local service providers and relevant local professionals should be aware of PLL activities and goals** so as to prepare for any down-line effects, such as increased demand for healthcare, schooling, internet access, etc.
- **Theories of Change (ToC)** associated with PLL need to consider intended formal and informal/hard and soft outcomes, as well as consider possible unintended outcomes. The EDGE ToC contains behaviour change outcomes but not formal learning outcomes.
- **Monitoring the quality and outcomes of PLL:** This requires an understanding of what is effective peer-led learning and facilitation so recommendations can be made, and good practice shared. Using a clear framework on empowerment, including defined concepts and indicators, is key to measuring results and understanding impact.

# Recommendations

## 5.1 Recommendations for peer learning programmes

### 5.1.1 Develop a toolkit to support the implementation of PLL initiatives

The toolkit would include guidance and templates for each stage of the PLL programme:

- **Scoping stage:** for potential new countries, with key questions to explore, and examples of adapting the model in different contexts
- **Recruitment and selection stage:** with clear criteria for selection of peer leaders, and guidance on initial parental and community involvement
- **Curriculum content adaptation/development stage:** in consultation with end recipients, peer leaders, parents and community, adapt and develop curriculum content to ensure it reflects the needs and priorities of the PLL participants. Ensure methodology, content and presentation are youth-centred and accessible, and materials are translated into local languages where necessary.
- **Training and orientation stage:** with a user-friendly, accessible facilitator guide (for peer leaders and adult supervisors) including key practical and soft skills for potential facilitators, guidance on club management and delivering the curriculum, facilitating discussions and decision making, building rapport, etc. Such a guide should be tailored to its audience, translated into the language as needed, with visuals and clear signposting.
- **Leading and supervising PLL sessions stage:** with examples of good practice, criteria for selection and training of adult mentors/supervisors, and recommendations for ongoing mentoring and supervision.

- **Monitoring and learning stage:** with standardised monitoring and evaluation tools, and examples of what data is required and what good data looks like.

Such a toolkit does not need to reinvent the wheel: drawing on and adapting existing global guidance and resources on peer education such as *Evidence-Based Guidelines for Youth Peer Education* (FHI360, 2010) is strongly recommended. Toolkits, and/or relevant stages, should be available in local languages where possible to enhance accessibility and contextualisation.

### 5.1.2 Develop clear frameworks for each PLL programme

The challenges in measuring the outcomes and effectiveness of PLL approaches have contributed to ongoing questions and different evidence about whether PLL works and how. This is partially linked to PLL usually being part of larger programmes, and partly due to the range of formal and informal, expected and unexpected outcomes that can emerge. Each PLL programme needs to define contextually relevant concepts, ToC narratives and logframes with indicators for monitoring. This will enable improved monitoring and learning about groups' effectiveness and more efficient responses to issues arising.

### 5.1.3 Provide young people with opportunities to participate in all aspects of programmes

Peer learning outcomes often target young people's empowerment, but empowerment is not simply a result of inputs, it is gained through the whole process of PLL engagement. This implies that young people should be fully involved in programme planning, design, implementation and review.

### 5.1.4 Recognise and address peer leader bias, prejudice and capacity gaps

When selecting peers, it is important to recognise that each person comes with their own experiences and values, and/or are operating within environments where some subjects may be considered taboo. Identifying these constraints, and finding ways to address them that prioritise the needs of girls but keep leaders and participants safe is critical. Give them the skills and support networks to deal with challenges.

PGLs could be supported through initial learning needs analyses (LNAs) that identify capacity gaps and are then used to provide targeted ongoing support and mentoring. These efforts are likely to help to address challenges in leader retention.

### 5.1.5 Develop training for leaders in negotiation and conflict resolution to bolster safeguarding measures

In addition to ensuring broader programmatic safeguarding measures are in place, peer group leaders should be supported and trained in negotiation skills and conflict resolution. More broadly, peer leaders need ongoing mentoring and guidance to grow as facilitators and lead clubs effectively.

### 5.1.6 Engage community members and families well and often

To avoid negative responses and address concerns, community members, especially parents and caregivers, must be informed about and involved in peer learning groups from the outset. This may include allowing visits to the groups, and/or young people providing regular updates or feedback on their learning to the wider community, or other context-specific activities to support community engagement and buy-in.

### 5.1.7 Careful selection of and support to trainers and supervisors

Adult trainers and supervisors are a critical part of the structure of peer learning models and the effectiveness of peer leaders and groups. Recruitment should therefore be careful and contextualised to the communities/groups being established, and resources allocated to train and support those trainers/supervisors to understand the programme approach and what is expected of them.

## 5.2 Recommendations for further research

- **The effects of peer learning on group leaders:** digging deeper into the process, positive and negative effects, impact and challenges of/for peer leaders
- **Effectiveness and efficiency of mixed, complementary, or single-sex clubs for certain learning goals:** this research could specifically consider boys/young men-only peer learning as this is an area where existing evidence is weak.
- **Evidence and opportunities for inclusivity in PLL approaches:** interventions that target the most marginalised by other characteristics – especially peers living with disabilities or affected by conflict or displacement
- **Significance of the trainer in the structure of peer learning:** How do they matter? When do they work best? What are the issues? What happens if they cannot relate to the adolescents/peers?
- **What is the evidence for effectiveness of PLL on sustained behaviour change?** How can this change be improved? There is currently more and better evidence for the positive effects of peer learning on knowledge and attitudes, but more mixed/less robust evidence in terms of behaviour change and/or the longer-term application of learning and skills. This is partly due to systemic constraints beyond individual control (no further access to digital, etc.) and partly due to a gap in sustainably transferring and using what is learned as a behaviour change.

# Conclusion

This rapid review has investigated peer-led learning approaches through an analysis of British Council programmes and those situated and evidenced in wider global programming across the education and health sectors. In presenting the most relevant accessible evidence on peer learning, the review has shown its significant potential for effecting positive change in young people's, especially girls', lives. PLL can contribute to accelerating girls' knowledge, positive attitudes and skills in multiple topics from nutrition to SRH, literacy and digital skills, as well as soft skills including confidence, aspirations and agency. However, multiple challenges are evidenced that highlight the importance of well-designed, contextualised and carefully considered delivery of PLL. Finally, the review has pointed towards the effects and challenges of PLL that is predominantly based on experiences of girl-only groups: expanding understanding and application of PLL for other groups or, indeed, inclusive girl groups which explicitly engage girls from a range of marginalisation backgrounds, is an important next step.



# Appendix

## Peer learning programmes

### Examples of peer-learning/peer education projects and programmes<sup>8</sup>

Agency/ organisation	Project/ programme	Country/ countries	Dates of intervention	Target population	Inputs	Outcomes
British Council	English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE)	Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar, Ethiopia, India, Afghanistan	2016–ongoing	Adolescent girls (13–19 years)	Trained PGLs English, digital and life skills Safe spaces Community support	Increased self-efficacy and personal agency (life choices) Improved perception/value of girls in the community
British Council	English Skills for Youth	India (17 states)	2023–ongoing	Young women (18–25 years)	Engineering colleges; student-led after-college English Practice Clubs (EPCs); English and communication skills	Measurement of outcomes underway
Child-to-child	Getting Ready for School	Bangladesh, China, DRC, Ethiopia, Tajikistan, Yemen	2008–12	Pre-school children	Older children mentoring younger children	On-time enrolment to Grade 1 Academic preparation and adjustment Caregivers' engagement
Girls' Education Challenge	Multiple projects	17 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia	2012–24	Adolescent girls (and in some cases boys)	Girls' clubs facilitated by a peer leader with specific learning goals	Self-confidence and self-efficacy; aspirations and awareness of rights; attitudes towards gender equality; school retention and attendance; transition into successive grades or paid employment

<sup>8</sup>. This table includes some key global examples of peer learning or peer education initiatives in international development, however this list is not exhaustive.

Agency/ organisation	Project/ programme	Country/ countries	Dates of intervention	Target population	Inputs	Outcomes
UNICEF/UNFPA	Multiple SRH projects	Sub-Saharan Africa (including Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia)	Ongoing	Adolescent girls and boys	Trained peer educators Safe spaces for vulnerable adolescents to discuss topics related to SRH	Sharing of knowledge and SRH-related information; increased demand for services; positive group norms; increased self-worth
VSO	International Citizenship Service (ICS)	Kenya, Nigeria, Nepal, Cambodia, Bangladesh	2011–ongoing	Adolescent girls and boys	Peer educators coached by ICS volunteers; extracurricular sessions in schools on issues affecting young people	Self-confidence; career, aspirations and awareness of rights; attitudes towards gender equality and issues relating to inclusion
VSO	Sisters for Sisters	Nepal, Nigeria,	2013–20: Nepal; Nigeria: ongoing	Girls 11–18 years	Young women mentoring adolescent girls	Self-confidence and self-efficacy; aspirations and awareness of rights; attitudes towards gender equality; school retention and attendance; transition into successive grades

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