
Evaluation Report

SWOVA'S "Pass It On" Program, 2012-13¹

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Program Background

1.2 Evaluation in 2012-13

2. FEEDBACK: MENTORS

3. FEEDBACK: BUDDIES

4. CONCLUSIONS and
RECOMMENDATIONS

*

¹ Prepared by Judi Stevenson, director and principal researcher, Minerva Research & Communications

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Program background

The “Pass It On” program was developed to assist pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in understanding and managing some of the challenges that confront them at their age and stage of development. Its mission statement says that it “*provide(s) experiences and relationships that foster reflection and resilience, leadership and mentoring capacities*” in the girls that it works with. The key goals for the program are “*to increase the capacity of rural young women and girls for leadership, self-esteem, staying safe and accessing community supports*”. Indirectly, therefore, it is a violence prevention program as well as a social development program.

“Pass It On” was designed by SWOVA (Salt Spring Women Opposed to Violence and Abuse), a non-governmental organization with a long history of working in partnership with schools and educators to support healthy relationship development among rural youth. It was delivered by their staff of specialists in adolescent development for the first time in BC School District #64 (Salt Spring and the Southern Gulf Islands) during the school year 2008-9.

In 2012-13, the program included the following major activities:

- Facilitation of a “Personal Identity and Body Image” workshop for 40 grade 8 girls.
- Facilitation of a “Boundaries and Internet Safety” workshop for 40 grade 8 girls.
- Facilitation of three mentor training sessions for 15 adolescent girls (grades 10 to 12).
- Identification and engagement of 15 younger girls (grade 8) to be paired as “buddies” in a mentoring relationship with the older girls.
- Facilitation of events and activities that allowed the mentors and buddies to come together as a group, sometimes involving older women from the community as role models.
- Provision of ongoing training and supervision of the mentors.

In its first year of delivery, “Pass It On” was found by independent evaluation to be a valuable program for the girls who were able to participate, and SWOVA was funded by the federal government to share the program model with four other communities in the spring of 2010. Following that successful undertaking, SWOVA secured the funding to deliver PIO to about 15 senior girls and 15 grade 8 girls in SD #64 In 2011-12, and for those numbers again in 2012-13.

For more details on the PIO program model and its application and achievements in 2012-13, see SWOVA’s final report on activities entitled “*Female Mentoring, Inspiring Change*”.

1.2 Evaluation in 2012-13

Evaluation in 2012-13 was limited by funding constraints. However, the girls who participated were given several opportunities to provide feedback on their experiences throughout the program delivery period: specifically in relation to (i) the two workshops, (ii) the training program for mentors, and also (iii) at the beginning and end of the mentorship program as a whole. Through these means PIO staff were able to gain insight into the girls’ engagement with and reactions to the major components of the program as it unfolded.

This evaluation report focuses on the mentorship experiences of the older and younger girls who participated in that part of the broader PIO program. It refers to assessment data from the training program and the surveys completed by the girls at the beginning of the mentorship

program but it relies primarily on the results of the “program completion surveys” that mentors and buddies were asked to answer at the end, and an interview with the mentors’ facilitator.

Twelve mentors completed a 12-question assessment of their experience, and nine buddies completed an 11-question assessment of theirs. These questions were addressed key aspects of the mentor-buddy relationship, allowing the girls to reflect back as part of their own closure process, and to provide staff with insights into program development for the coming year.²

1. MENTORS’ EXPERIENCE

Mentors were drawn from grades 10 through 12: eight of the girls were in grade 12 with two in grade 11 and two in grade 10.

The program for mentors consisted of (i) a 3-session course of training to increase the skills they needed be effective mentors, (ii) weekly meetings as a group with their supervisor (sometimes including guests), (iii) four “meet and greets” with prospective buddies before one to one matching took place, and (iv) subsequent group activities both with and without their buddies. Mentors committed to phoning their buddies once a week and arranging to get together and “hang out” (code for relationship development) roughly once a month, although some months were pre-programmed for whole-group activities.

After the training, 12 of the 13 girls who completed the feedback questionnaire said that they were “very ready” or “pretty ready”. Ten listed skills or capacities they felt they still “*need(ed) to learn more about*”, providing a valuable source of ideas for the weekly meetings with their supervisor or possibly for revisions to the training program in future, as follows:

- *Game plans for how to first meet the buddies.*
- *How to break the shy factor.*
- *Maybe to learn how to aid in awkward silences.*
- *I think I need to learn more about how to talk to the girl, but I think that once I meet the individual it will become easier.*
- *How to be stronger, and be wise in how to give advice. And how to be confidential when appropriate.*
- *The different types of problems we may face. Questions girls may have and how to answer and deal with them.*
- *How to deal with their problems. To be able to open up to them.*
- *Actually being with the buddy, and how to deal with things, but I think being a buddy will help that.*
- *I need to be confident and think about how to get my buddy to open up and have fun with them.*
- *I need to learn more about being the best I can be in order to be a good mentor.*

In the “program completion” survey, mentors were asked how often they met with their buddies, presumably referring to separate one-on-one meetings although this was not specified in the question. Responses ranged from six times to once, with one girl answering “*as much as possible*”. In summary, six of the girls met with their buddies between 1 and 3 times, and six met 4 to 6 times (or more). They were not asked about their telephone success rate.

² The time 1 and time 2 surveys were not designed by the current evaluator and included additional measures not analyzed for this report.

Minerva Research & Communications

Finding an adequate amount of time to develop a strong and rich mentoring relationship was a challenge for both mentors and buddies. When asked about this, ten of the mentors said that it was hard for them to find the time they expected or wanted to spend with their buddies because of their own “*busy schedules*”, or their buddies’ busy schedules, or both. Two referred to the difficulty of coordinating schedules due to their schools having different end times and, in one case, the fact that the buddy commuted to school from one of the nearby islands.

Overall, 7 of the mentors rated their mentoring experience as “*excellent*”, 4 rated it as “*good*” and 1 rated it as “*okay*”. None indicated that it was “*not good*”.

To elaborate, they were asked what “*the best parts*” were of being a mentor, which a few interpreted to mean the best parts of their experience of the PIO program as a whole (a question which was asked later). Several listed more than one element. Five responded in terms of the weekly team meetings with the other mentors and their supervisor, e.g.:

- *Getting together with the whole group and being able to talk openly about anything.*
- *Hanging out with the other mentor girls and getting to know them.*
- *Meeting everyone on Tuesday.*

Nine of the mentors did identify aspects of their relationship with their buddies as being “*the best parts*” of being a mentor. They often described these in quite broad terms, suggesting that they had been able to develop a multi-faceted connection that involved both confirmation of the self (for the mentor) and benefits for the buddy, e.g.:

- *Being able to share my experiences with my buddy and helping her feel more ready for high school.*
- *Being able to support a young girl in the community.*
- *Sharing my knowledge and being a role model.*
- *Sharing opinions/perspectives. Giving advice. Having a great relationship.*

When asked about the most challenging parts of being a mentor, the majority referred again to the problem of finding enough time. A smaller number identified skill-related issues that may suggest a need for more training or perhaps one-on-one time with the supervisor, e.g.:

- *Connecting with my buddy on a personal level.*
- *Listening to their hardships.*
- *Giving advice that is hard to hear.*
- *Helping my buddy with some problems.*
- *Getting her to spend time with me, and to seem to want to.*

A subsequent question about “*what pressures*” they felt in their relationship with their buddies cast further light on challenges that could be addressed. Some examples:

- *I felt the pressure to be a “good example”.*
- *Finding the right words to say about [my buddy’s] actions and hardships.*
- *Pressure for [my buddy] to like me and enjoy our time together.*
- *[Pressure] to get together with my buddy as much as others did.*

Even so, all but one of the older girls thought they had been well supported in their role as mentors, and five volunteered enthusiastic praise for their supervisor.

Minerva Research & Communications

When asked for suggestions about what could help with the challenges and pressures they had named, many of the mentors again identified the need for more time. It was clear in many of their responses that this issue cut both ways. In this response set, for example, they identified both 'making more time' (themselves) and 'wanting more responsiveness' and engagement from their buddies as parts of the solution to the problem.

From their vantage point at the end of the PIO program, they were asked about additional skills they needed or thought should have been a focus of more time in training. The majority identified aspects of establishing the relationship and making it work well at a general level, but two of the mentors wished they had had more training on how to respond to their buddies' problems, a possible flag for further evaluation research as well as skills training.**

Collectively, their responses to the question about 'more skills' were as follows:

- *Basically building a relationship, getting comfortable.*
- *Communication, opening up about the "right" things, finding relatable conversations.*
- *Knowing (...) how to make your buddy like spending time with you.*
- *How to hold a conversation with a younger girl.*
- *How to keep a conversation going with your buddy.*
- *How to keep a conversation [going], how to pick the activities that you do together.*
- ***How to calmly give advice, more on listening.*
- ***Learning how to deal with the issues they might be having.*

They were asked four questions about the details of program design in relation to time.

- All but one thought the PIO program should begin in the fall.
- There was less of a consensus about how many times the mentor-buddy pairs should meet, ranging from once a week to once a month, with an average response of twice a month.
- The amount of meeting time they recommended averaged out to 1.5 hours per meeting.
- They were divided down the middle about how long the relationship should last, with six saying "all year" and six saying "one semester".

Matching mentors to buddies is something that SWOVA's staff approaches carefully, interviewing both mentors and buddies, getting information from the middle school counsellor about the personalities and needs of the buddies, creating several "meet and greet" events so that mentors and buddies can begin to get a sense of who they would like to pair up with, and so on. Even so, all human pairings include "chemistry"—dimensions that resist planning or logic—and some of these pairings worked better than others too.

The mentors were asked what they thought was the best way for mentors and buddies to be matched. There was no consensus in their answers but several themes were apparent. The most common was to suggest that pairing would be more effective if it were done after everyone got to know one another in the group setting. Three of the mentors thought the buddies should make their own selections, although others thought that the mentors should do the choosing, and still others indicated that the adults should do the matching. Several girls mentioned that having "common interests" was crucial, and suggested that more stress be put on that factor in the matching process.

Minerva Research & Communications

The final question asked what the best part of the whole experience of the “Pass It On” project was for the mentors. Several listed more than one “best part”. The most common reference was to the mentors group itself, e.g.:

- *Being with the other mentors.*
- *The lovely group I got to meet with every week!*
- *Sharing the experience with the other girls [in the group], getting close to each other, gaining friends I can talk to and trust.*

Aspects of the buddy relationship, taken together, came in as a close second. Individual references were made to “building confidence in me”, “the guest speakers” and “the closing celebration” (Spark Fest).

2. BUDDIES’ EXPERIENCE

Nine of the buddies completed the post-program surveys at the end. Their responses to the question about the number of meetings they had with their mentors confirmed the range from 1 to 6 for most of them, although two said they had no one-to-one meetings with their mentors. It was not clear from the questions and answers in the survey either how many meetings were planned or what factors were at issue when meetings were few, although in the view of the mentors’ facilitator, limited commitment by some of the buddies was a factor.

The buddies were also asked about the activities they had enjoyed with their mentors, which included a variety of contexts for relationship-building such as going for walks, making cookies, having lunch or tea, and “girl stuff” like painting nails. In future, it would be useful for the survey to ask specific questions about such things as time spent on different kinds of topics, satisfaction with shared problem-solving, how well supported they felt (scaled) and in what areas, and so on.

When answering a subsequent question about “the best parts” of having a mentor, 6 of the 9 girls referred to the general theme of “having someone to talk to,” and in 4 cases, the theme was “having someone *older* to talk to”. This provides strong evidence that the buddies did feel supported by their mentors, though more detail would be useful.

They were asked how much they liked having a mentor, using a different scale than the mentors were given. Four of the girls said “a lot”, two said “quite a bit”, one said “somewhat”, one said “a little bit” and one said “not at all”.

When asked if there was “anything hard” about having a mentor or “things you wish had been different”, three raised the problem of time, three mentioned awkwardness of different kinds (including one who said she has difficulty talking on the phone), one mentioned scheduling problems, two said that everything was good, and one referred to having no mentor which apparently she did not report to the supervisor.

The qualities that the buddies liked best in their mentors were: being nice (6 mentions), being fun or out-going (5 mentions), and being easy to talk to (2 mentions). One mention each went to being helpful, caring, and having a lot in common with the buddy. All of these qualities (and others) could be put into a list for the buddies to score in importance in a future program completion survey for greater comparability and insight into what works best for them. Their list might also help to inform the interview process.

On the specific issue of whether having a mentor helped the buddies feel ready for high school, using a word-based 5-point scale, three of the buddies said “a lot” or “quite a bit”, three chose the midpoint response (“some”), and three said “a little” or “not at all”. This range of scores suggests that the PIO program staff might want to consider adding or bolstering activities aimed toward this goal. Despite the wide range of scores however, in responding to a follow up question, almost all the buddies were able to say something concrete about how they were helped to feel ready, including the following:

- *She [my mentor] explained that it is really not as terrifying as it seems.*
- *I'll just know somebody there.*
- *Realizing that I can get along with older people.*
- *She told me a little of what to expect, and it eased my nerves a little.*

When asked for suggestions to make the PIO program better, most of the buddies wanted the time issues to be solved both so that they could have more group meetings and more one-on-one time with their mentors. Two wanted the mentors to take responsibility for making more time; one wanted the buddies to take more responsibility; one suggested having meetings on weekends or later in the evenings; one proposed having “an actual closing” to the program—perhaps suggesting the need to process the end of some important relationships.

Finally, the buddies were asked if they thought they would want to be mentors themselves after they became high school students. Four said “yes”, five said “maybe” and none said “no”. It would be useful to ask them for an explanation of their choices in a future evaluation.

3. CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

SWOVA’s “Pass It On” program is an innovative undertaking designed to support adolescent girls’ development in a variety of ways. The mentorship component of the program, which is the subject of this evaluation report, aims to:

- increase girls’ capacity for empathic connections across age boundaries,
- strengthen older girls’ leadership abilities and all the girls’ self-confidence,
- help all participants develop greater communication and social skills,
- provide a context for discussing how to manage some of the risks of adolescence,
- support younger girls’ transition from middle to secondary school.

Both mentors and buddies reported positive responses to the PIO program, most strongly in the case of the mentors. Based on responses to the surveys from both groups, including differences in their levels of engagement, it seems that mentors may have had a better experience than buddies. Mentors appear to have built strong peer bonds, greatly valued their weekly group sessions with their supervisor, and gained skills and confidence from the program as a whole.

Although it is not clear from the data how much time was spent on the component activities of the program by either mentors or buddies, it seems that mentors spent more time in group meetings and activities than buddies did, which was to the mentors’ advantage in terms of program satisfaction. Staffing levels, as determined by funding, may be a factor in this result.

The following recommendations are aimed at SWOVA’s core objective of continuing program development and improvement based on evaluated results. It is recognized that this objective is

hampered by the current climate of “fiscal restraint” in government support for community-based programs. Recommendations range over a number of program elements. They would be strengthened by modifications to the evaluation process.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: clarification of expectations about time. Both mentors and buddies agreed that more time was needed for one-to-one meetings between them. “Busyness” seems to have been the obstacle, although mismatching school timetables was also a problem. It is recommended that finding workable solutions to this challenge be given priority in the next program year. Components of the solution should include shared commitment by mentors and buddies to a specific number (or range) of phone calls and face to face meetings between them, as well as a requirement that some kind of records be kept by both mentors and buddies and reported periodically to SWOVA staff to ensure that any problems can be flagged early on.

It is also recommended that the challenges of competing time commitments be a topic for discussion in the interview and selection process, and that time management be considered as a possible topic for group discussion and problem-solving once the program is underway.

Recommendation #2: a mid-term check in with buddies. Because of their weekly meetings, the mentors’ supervisor gets a very good sense of what is going on with the older girls in relation to program objectives, but has more limited ability to assess the buddies’ experience or the part they are playing in the intended relationship. It is recommended that someone on the SWOVA staff team (or in the partnering schools) be responsible for following up regularly with the buddies, making sure that they have a chance to talk about what’s going on for them, and for identifying any problems or any failures to connect that may need addressing.

Recommendation #3: the objective of supporting the younger girls in their transition to high school should be reviewed and strengthened. The buddies put considerable stress in their pre-program surveys on preparation for high school as the reason they wanted a mentor, yet few of them referred to any activities they did with their mentors that involved gaining familiarity with or confidence about the high school environment, or mentioned it at the end as one of the “best parts” of having a mentor. Brainstorming with the mentors and with all the girls together might be useful in identifying activities that would serve this purpose, such as attending events held at the high school, maybe having lunch there, and so on. The mentors’ supervisor reported that there was a very productive group discussion for mentors and buddies centred on the question, “what’s your greatest fear...?”, which sounds like a good foundation to build on.

Recommendation #4: mentors’ training. The girls gave high marks to the three training sessions they received, but the ‘lived realities’ of deliberately building a relationship with a younger girl—one that includes specific objectives—are bound to be challenging. It is not clear to the evaluator how much of the time in the weekly supervision meetings is spent on continuing skill development, but the post-program surveys identified a need for more of it, particularly in relation to high level communication skills and responding to the ‘problems’ raised by the buddies. Mentors referred, for example, to skills such as “*finding relatable conversations*”, “*how to calmly give advice*”, “*learning how to deal with the issues they might be having*”. It is therefore recommended that SWOVA staff review questionnaire responses from the mentors about additional training or supervised practice they might need to add to their skills as mentors, and consider them in planning next year’s program.

Recommendation #5: matching mentors and buddies. The process of creating the dyadic relationships between mentors and buddies is necessarily imprecise: there is no formula. That said, the girls made two suggestions for improvement that conform to other research on successful relationship building: spending more time altogether in a group before pairing (already increased over previous years), and looking for ‘common interests’ or situational similarities as factors which can help people make connections. It is recommended that both these suggestions be considered for implementation.

Recommendation #6: reviewing the evaluation process. The girls who participate in the PIO program are given opportunities to provide feedback on the training, each of the workshops, and the program as a whole, including both open-ended “opinion” questions and Likert-type scaled questions that are used to measure aspects of personal development. This process is intended to be both an opportunity for reflection for the girls and a way of collecting useful information for program staff. The information generated in this way could be considerably more useful to program staff if the open-ended questions instead asked about defined sets of components of each question—for example, asking about the importance of a defined list of mentor qualities instead of asking “what qualities did you like...” with no specification.

Similarly, it is recommended that the current set of established scales that are being used to measure aspects of personal and social development such as self-concept and relationships with friends be replaced with measures that are more closely related to the immediately achievable objectives of the “Pass It On” program.³

³ The evaluator can provide more details about this final recommendation to program staff if they so wish.