

## Tips for incorporating peer-based strategies in Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) programs

A central goal of Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) programs is to promote positive youth development.<sup>2</sup> Incorporating peer-based strategies into SRAE programs hold significant promise in achieving this goal. Research has consistently demonstrated that peer-based strategies or interventions can be more relatable and credible for youth, as youth and their peers share many similarities.<sup>3</sup>

Peers become an important developmental influence in adolescence—in both positive and negative ways. For example, research has shown that peer relationships during adolescence help youth build resilience or positive adaptive behaviors that help protect them from negative outcomes, such as issues relating to mental health like depression and suicide.<sup>4</sup> Peers can also influence youth in the opposite way—leading them to negative outcomes, such as drug use or antisocial behavior.<sup>5</sup> Peer-based strategies seek to harness the constructive aspects of peer influence to promote positive youth development.

By leveraging the relatability and credibility of peers, peer-based strategies can help create a safe and nonjudgmental space for open discussions, provide accurate information, challenge risky beliefs, and empower youth to make informed decisions about their sexual health and non-martial sexual activity.<sup>6</sup> These interventions address immediate educational needs and have the potential to create long-lasting behavior change and promote positive youth development.<sup>7</sup>

### Box 1. Sexual Risk Avoidance Education program requirements

The Title V SRAE program is administered by the [Family and Youth Services Bureau](#) (FYSB) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its programs are guided by six program requirements that all grant recipients must address through their programming:<sup>1</sup>

1. The holistic, individual, and societal benefits associated with personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy decision making, and a focus on the future.
2. The advantage of refraining from non-marital sexual activity to improve the future prospects and physical and emotional health of youth.
3. The increased likelihood of avoiding poverty when youth attain self-sufficiency and emotional maturity before engaging in sexual activity.
4. The foundational components of healthy relationships and their effect on the formation of healthy marriages and safe and stable families.
5. How other youth risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol usage, increase the risk for teen sex.
6. How to resist and avoid, and receive help regarding, sexual coercion and dating violence, recognizing that—even with consent—teen sex remains a youth risk.

<sup>1</sup> Neelan et al. 2022a, 2022b.

<sup>2</sup> Blesson et al. 2022; FYSB, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ng et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2011; Smetana et al., 2006.

<sup>4</sup> example, Garipey et al., 2016; Ryan, 2001; Van Harmelen et al., 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Schuler et al., 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Barbee et al., 2022; Blesson et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Alegre et al. 2020; Burton et al., 2022; Cuijpers, 2002; Farmer et al., 2020; Mellandy et al., 2001.

The purpose of this tip sheet is to provide recommendations for designing and implementing peer-based strategies into SRAE and similar programs. We developed these tips as part of SRAENE (Box 2)—a national evaluation of SRAE programs that included a formative study on understanding how SRAE programs might use peers. We identified the tips in this sheet based on a technical working group (TWG) meeting—which included SRAE grant recipients and other experts—as well as a targeted review of the literature (Box 3).



### Box 2. What is the SRAE National Evaluation (SRAENE)?

SRAENE is a federal evaluation of SRAE programs funded by FYSB that includes three activities:

- **The National Descriptive Study**, a nationwide description of SRAE grant recipients' and sub-recipients' implementation of their programs and the outcomes for youth who participated in the programs.
- **The Program Components Impacts Study**, which uses systematic and rigorous methods to test and improve select SRAE program components.
- **Data and Evaluation Support**, which aims to build the capacity of SRAE grant recipients and sub-recipients to use data and supports local evaluations.

### Box 3. Methods

To generate the content for this tip sheet, we relied on two sources:

**1. A technical working group (TWG) meeting:**

Mathematica convened a full-day TWG meeting in November 2022. The meeting was attended by 18 FYSB-funded SRAE grant recipients. The recipients represented an array of contexts and locations (from American Samoa and Guam to suburban and rural areas of the U.S. mainland), and varied in their use of peers in terms of program implementation. The TWG also included several experts in the use of peers and positive youth development. The TWG attendees engaged in a small group exercise, followed by a large group discussion to create content that could be compiled into a guide for any SRAE program developing and implementing a peer-based component. A summary of this meeting with further details is available on the [OPRE website](#).<sup>8</sup>

- 2. A targeted literature review:** We conducted a targeted review of the literature to support and expand on the content generated by the TWG. We searched several databases for terms related to peer-based strategies or interventions and adolescents. Using a systematic process, we reviewed 34 articles and extracted tips related to program design, peer selection and recruitment, peer training, implementation activities, and peer supervision and support. We compared these tips to the content generated by the TWG to develop the content of this tip sheet. Appendix A provides further information on this review. sub-recipients to use data and supports local evaluations.

<sup>8</sup> Gates et al., 2023.

## Tip 1. Build a coalition to support a peer-based strategy



Similar to other interventions, peer-based interventions or strategies might require support from a wide range of people and organizations to be successful. For example, to operate a peer mentoring program, SRAE programs operating in schools will need support and buy-in from district officials, principals, and teachers.<sup>9</sup> A program such as this may need to recruit peer mentors from the school body, recruit youth to participate, identify space within the school for peer mentors to meet with youth mentees, or provide other resources (for example, transportation for peer mentors or youth, if they are from different schools). For programs in out-of-school settings, local community partnerships may be important for accessibility—that is, peers and youth will need to be recruited in community settings and may need supports, like transportation, to attend.<sup>10</sup> This approach likely involves support from partners—for example, in the form of referrals to the program or co-location of services.

Developing a coalition of partners and program champions also aligns with promising practices from participatory methods—that is, methods that focus on elevating community voice and input while striving for equity.<sup>11</sup> Forming authentic and engaging community partnerships using participatory methods can lead to better interventions that are easier to adopt because of increased buy-in and understanding of community needs.<sup>12</sup> A coalition may help to reduce resource or funding constraints, as members may be able to share resources or contribute to the search for funding.<sup>11</sup> TWG members

### A note on terminology

Throughout this tip sheet, we use the term **peer** to indicate a young person—close in age to the youth served by the program—employed by or volunteer for a program that delivers a service of something (for example, mentoring, tutoring, and so on). We use the term **youth** to indicate the clients served by the program.

discussed using a participatory approach to build their peer-based programs. To build a coalition, TWG members suggested that SRAE and similar programs first design a peer-based intervention that addresses a need or gap within the community. Attendees felt this approach would better build buy-in among potential coalition partners.

TWG members also noted the importance of creating a shared vision with coalition partners. This concept aligns with participatory methods, in which creating a shared vision may help to minimize power dynamics, support clear communication, ensure all voices are heard, foster collaboration, and support community empowerment.<sup>10</sup> To create a shared vision, a program or coalition can work together to clearly define expectations, goals, and objectives for a peer-based component.<sup>13</sup> To develop a strong identity and culture for the program, TWG members suggested that the coalition craft a compelling narrative of the peer-based program using data, evidence, and stories from participants and other interested parties to help contextualize and advertise the program to others.

<sup>9</sup> Komosa-Hawkins, 2009; Panjwani et al., 2022; Selvey, 1997; Simon & Harris, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Tomlin, 1994; Viallarruel et al., 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Minkler, 2015; Wallerstein & Minkler, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Minkler, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2013.

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## Tip 2. Understand what makes an effective peer



Selecting peers to implement a peer-based program is a critical step. Peers are the face of the program to the youth served and are largely responsible for implementing peer-based strategies. To define characteristics of effective peers within the context of the program and community, programs should engage coalition members—or trusted partner organizations or community members if a coalition does not exist. Programs can work with these groups to define the type of lived experience and motivation needed to serve as a peer, two factors the TWG and research indicate are important.

**Lived experience.** Assessing lived experience will vary by program—as what programs might look for will vary based on the youth and the community they serve as well as program goals and content. To accomplish this, programs might consider two strategies. First, programs might consider similarities between peers and the youth they serve. Several peer-based programs have found success in ensuring that peers match the youth’s race, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, programs might assess similarities in experiences and interests in potential peers—asking potential peers to discuss these in their application or interview. The second strategy is identifying peers from the community—who likely have similar lived experience. For example, several programs have shown the promise of selecting peers who are older, yet close in age—within two to four years (also called near-peers)—to serve as role models.<sup>15</sup> Finally, programs may combine these two strategies. For example, one study noted that youth who perceived greater similarities in interests and personality with their near-peer mentor were more satisfied with their experience.<sup>16</sup>

**Motivation.** Programs can begin assessing motivation of potential peers in the application and interview process. For example, programs can ask peers to speak to their desire or process for building friendships with youth. Research has noted that those motivated to build relationships and friendships with youth or who feel greater community responsibility tend to be more successful as peers.<sup>17</sup> Programs can also assess a potential peer’s commitment to the program and the youth served. Effective peers should demonstrate an ability to meet required commitments, such as regularly attending program sessions and trainings.<sup>18</sup> In addition to being essential to program operations, honoring commitments is foundational to building trusting relationships between peers and youth.<sup>19</sup>

## Tip 3. Design a recruitment process to attract and select ideal candidates



Programs should develop a recruitment and selection process that attracts diverse peers committed to and motivated by the program’s goals and vision. The selection should be designed to ensure the program chooses that have characteristics described in Tip #2. To do so, program operators might consider the following:

- **Include program benefits attractive to youth.** In addition to the internal motivation noted above, external motivators help to ensure a diverse pool of potential peers. To entice youth to be interested in becoming part of a program as peer staff, the benefits need to be apparent and appeal to them. TWG members and the literature suggested providing peers with compensation, which can take different forms, including monetary or educational or social incentives, such as receiving college credit.<sup>20</sup> Providing peers with compensation also aligns with participatory and equity-focused methods.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Karcher & Berger, 2017; James et al., 2022; Mapes, 2023; Simon & Harris, 1993; Sipe, 2002; Tomlin, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Burton et al., 2022; Caron et al., 2004; Cody et al., 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Sipe, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Karcher & Berger, 2017; Panjwani et al., 2022; Sipe, 2002; Smith et al., 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Panjwani et al., 2022; Sipe 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Sipe, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Karcher & Berger, 2017.

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- **Seek nominations from a broad range of people.**

In addition to general advertising efforts (for example, flyers or presentations in schools),<sup>21</sup> many have suggested seeking nominations for peers from a variety of people,<sup>22</sup> including school staff (from teachers to principals to coaches) and youth. For example, one program solicited anonymous peer and self-nominations for its peer educator program.<sup>23</sup> Other programs rely on school counselors or community members to nominate potential peers.<sup>24</sup> Both TWG members and the literature suggested considering program graduates as candidates for peers.<sup>25</sup> These former participants will likely have bought into the goals and content of the program and have relevant lived experience (for example, demographics characteristics or experiences living in the same community) and could be nominated by current peers or program staff.

- **Create a multimodal selection process.** Programs should consider using multiple formats and sources of information to select candidates, which can help to secure a larger and more diverse applicant pool. For example, if a program seeks peers who have similar lived experience to youth in the program, the selection process should highlight that factor and gather information to assess lived experience. This could include:

1. **Infusing additional elements into a traditional process.** TWG members and the literature suggested that programs might start with an application process (for example, a personal essay, transcripts, and letter of recommendation) but not screen candidates out based on the application alone. Instead, programs can go deeper when selecting peers by considering attendance or teacher recommendations to assess a student's ability to meet commitments.<sup>26</sup>
2. **Using multiple formats to understand potential peers.** To learn about their motivation, potential peers can share their interests, experiences, and hopes through a written or video-based essay.<sup>27</sup> Staff could also ask candidates to respond to scenarios or roleplays as part of an interview.<sup>28</sup> One program conducted a group interview, in which candidates participated in activities to assess how they would act in a group setting with other youth (for example, showing respect, openness to sharing, and so on).<sup>29</sup> Youth, school staff, and community members can be involved in selecting peers, ensuring that a variety of voices and perspectives are considered.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; James et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2014; Komosa-Hawkins, 2009; Panjwani et al., 2022; Simon & Harris 1993; Sipe, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Kernsmith & Hernandez-Jozefowicz 2011; Layzer et al., 2014; Selvey, 1997; Sipe, 2002; Smith & DiClemente, 2000; Smith et al., 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Smith & DiClemente, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Selvey, 1997; Smith et al., 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Panjwani et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Komosa-Hawkins, 2009; Panjwani et al., 2022; Selvey, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Jennings et al., 2014; Komosa-Hawkins, 2009; Panjwani et al., 2022; Sipe, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Cody et al., 2022; Simon & Harris, 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Layzer et al., 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Panjwani et al., 2022; Selvey, 1997; Smith et al., 2018; Tomlin, 1994.

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## Tip 4. Form partnerships between adult and peer staff



Collaboration between peers and adult staff is essential for creating a supportive and empowering environment. Several studies have found that peer-based programs operate best when supported and supervised by adult program operators.<sup>31</sup> Forming authentic adult-peer partnerships has been shown to promote positive youth development of peer staff and have positive impacts on adult staff, the organization operating the program, and the community.<sup>32</sup>

Literature noted several principles to building this partnership:<sup>33</sup>

- **Establish clear roles and expectations:** Clearly defining roles and expectations helps establish boundaries and mutual responsibility between adult and peer staff, and may create a better adult-youth partnerships. Establishing roles and expectations also allows peer staff to feel they have a meaningful job that contributes to the success of the program and are involved in the betterment of their community. Additionally, because adult staff are the supervisors for peer staff, a more equitable adult-youth partnership may encourage relationship-building.
- **Encourage collective mentoring:** A culture of mutual learning—where peers learn from adults, and adults learn from peers—helps build capacity for everyone involved in operating a peer-based program. This type of learning environment may also help encourage relationship- and trust-building between adults and youth. It may also promote equality—where peers see themselves as equals to adult staff.

- **Establish and sustain trust and respect:** In successful adult-peer partnerships, peers feel valued and safe. Providing peers with this environment involves intentionality on the part of program operators to cultivate a sense of belonging, safety, and respect for peers in their program. This aim might be accomplished through elevating youth voice and input, involving youth in key programmatic decisions, devoting time for adult staff to form a one-on-one relationship with peer staff, and modeling respectful behaviors in day-to-day interactions.

TWG members shared learnings that aligned with these principles and underscored that programs can begin establishing this partnership by training adult and peer staff together. TWG members expressed the notion that when adults train alongside young people, the latter then view themselves as on an equal footing with adults. They also noted that for adult staff, hands-on training with youth can help build trust and confidence between peers and adults. Finally, TWG members perceived that training adults and peers together also supports the idea of collective mentoring—growing alongside each other.

### Adult-youth partnerships and co-regulation

The concept of adult-youth partnerships aligns closely with a co-regulation mindset. In co-regulation, adult staff establish positive, nurturing relationships with youth as well as a safe and supportive environment to coach youth on self-regulation skills. More information on co-regulation in human service organizations can be found [here](#).

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<sup>31</sup> Burton et al., 2022; Cody et al., 2022; Caron et al., 2004; Komosa-Hawkins, 2009; Layzer et al., 2014; Rosenblum et al., 2005; Sipe, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Mitra, 2009; Ungar, 2013; Zeldin & Collura, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Mitra, 2009; Ungar, 2013; Zeldin & Collura, 2010.

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## Tip 5. Implement dynamic youth-led activities



Programs can choose from a variety of curricula and activities when implementing their peer-based strategy. Although funders and curriculum developers may place restrictions on modifying a curriculum, programs should consider selecting curricula or activities that call for the following:

- **Build trusting relationships.**<sup>34</sup> The literature suggests that consistent interactions between peers and youth foster positive connections that help build relationships based on trust and friendship. Interactions and activities may benefit from some degree of informality to allow for more open, honest, and friendly relationships. Depending on the group size, consistency helps build trust, whether it be continuous meetings of pairs or keeping the same small groups together over time.
- **Encourage active youth involvement.**<sup>35</sup> Peer-based program activities can embrace the idea of youth-led decision-making, allowing participants to design and select activities that resonate with their interests and needs. Through this process, youth take ownership of their

experiences, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency. Peers play a crucial role in facilitating these youth-led activities, providing guidance and support while honoring the voices and perspectives of their peers. For example, youth-led presentations afford youth a platform to display their talents, ideas, accomplishments, and share their unique perspectives with others in a meaningful way.

- **Ensure activities are interactive and fun.**<sup>36</sup> Research emphasizes the importance of incorporating humor and fun into activities to help their message, content, and skills resonate with youth. A program can incorporate games, group exercises, hands-on projects, and creative challenges to actively involve youth in the learning process. For example, this includes the use of storytelling, arts and crafts, poetry writing, or creating videos to help youth learn about and discuss strategies for coping with peer pressure. Infusing interactive and fun elements into these activities encourages youth to actively participate, explore their creativity, and develop critical thinking skills. The combination of interactivity and enjoyment enhances the learning experience and strengthens the sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm among participants.

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<sup>34</sup> Cody et al., 2022; Karcher & Berger, 2017; Layzer et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2018; Sipe, 2002; Strange et al., 2002; Tomlin, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; James et al., 2022; Layzer et al., 2014; Mapes, 2023; Panjwani et al., 2022, Tomlin, 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Garringer & MacRae, 2008; James et al., 2022; Layzer et al., 2014; O'Malley et al., 2017; Rosenblum et al., 2005; Smith & DiClemente, 2000; Strange et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2022.

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## Summary

This tip sheet presented five tips to help SRAE and similar programs develop and implement peer-based strategies. These tips weave together input from SRAE programs implementing a peer-based strategy, experts in the field, and literature on peer-based strategies for adolescents. Although these tips are promising, they are not proven. Programs should carefully tailor them to their operating context and test them as appropriate. Below, we provide a quick recap of the tips:

- **Build a coalition to support a peer-based strategy.** Programs should consider forming a coalition of community organizations, schools, interested community leaders, and youth. This coalition can help program providers develop and implement a peer-based intervention or strategy—for example, by helping to create buy-in among interested parties or resource sharing. Program can choose from a variety of resources to help them establish partnerships within the coalition.
- **Understand what makes an effective peer.** Programs should work with their coalition and other trusted community members to determine what characteristics likely make a peer effective. Characteristics to consider include lived experience and motivations for becoming a peer.
- **Design a recruitment process to attract and vet ideal candidates.** Programs should consider creating a dynamic process for recruiting and selecting potential peers that (1) includes attractive program benefits for youth, (2) seeks nominations from a broad range of people, and (3) uses a multimodal selection process.
- **Form partnerships between adult and peer staff.** Programs should strive to build authentic relationships between adult and peer staff. This may be accomplished by co-training adults and peers together.
- **Implement dynamic youth-led activities.** Programs should consider selecting curriculum or activities that call for building trust and relationships; are youth led; and are fun and interactive.



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### About this series

This video series, and the accompanying tip sheets on understanding and collecting high-quality data, were created as part of the [Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation \(SRAENE\)](#). The series covers a range of data-related topics to help grantees understand the importance of high-quality data and provide guidance on how they can collect them in their program. Although some of the resources are drawn from topic areas that are not related to SRAE, the content on data is still relevant.

*FYSB does not recommend any particular survey platform or data system that may be referenced in tip sheets.*

For more information or questions, contact the SRAENE team at [SRAETA@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:SRAETA@mathematica-mpr.com).

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## Appendix A: Targeted literature review methods

### Search terms and inclusion criteria for literature review

Our search identified 1,184 potential articles to review. We screened articles by reviewing their titles and abstracts. From this review, we identified 70 potential articles for further review. We then screened the full text of the 70 articles and identified 24 articles to include in the review. Key inclusion criteria focused on whether the article described a peer-based strategy or component and focused on adolescents. Two members of the SRAENE study team screened each article, with conflicts resolved by a senior member of the team. In addition, we identified 10 more articles through reviewing the text and reference lists of the 24 initially identified articles. In total, we extracted information from 34 articles.

### Databases searched

Academic search Premier, EconLit, Family Studies Abstracts, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, PubMed, SocINDEX

### Search terms used

TI ( peer\*, “peer mentoring” OR “peer mentoring strategies” OR “peer tutoring” OR “peer tutoring strategies” OR “peer influence” OR friendship OR “peer group” OR “peer support” OR “peer education” OR “peer-to-peer” OR “mentoring” OR “cross-age peer mentoring OR “youth mentoring”)

#### AND

TI ( “high school” OR “secondary school” OR student\* OR class\* OR “middle school” OR “junior high school”) OR AB ( “high school” OR “secondary school” OR student\* OR class\* OR “middle school” OR “junior high”)

#### OR

TI ( teen OR teenager\* OR youth\* OR adolescen\* OR young ) OR AB ( teen OR teenager\* OR youth\* OR adolescen\* OR young )

### Inclusion criteria used

1. Research conducted in the U.S.
2. Included grey literature, dissertations, meeting abstracts, and pre-prints
3. Focused on an adolescent population—approximately 11–18 years old
4. Described a peer-based intervention, component, or strategy

## Screening results diagram

