
Natural Helpers® is a peer-helping program sponsored by Michigan State University Extension 4-H Youth Development.

Natural Helpers® is based on the premise that when young people have problems, they often turn to their friends or other adults whom they trust for help and that within every school an informal "helping network" exists. The program seeks to identify this informal network and provide training and support to young people and adults who are already serving as helpers. The program was developed for use with middle, junior high and high school communities.

Goals

The program has three goals:

- To teach Natural Helpers effective ways to help their friends
- To teach Natural Helpers positive ways of taking good care of themselves
- To teach Natural Helpers ways to contribute to a safe and supportive school environment

Natural Helpers develop the following skills:

- Listening
- Communicating
- Recognizing when friends need help
- Utilizing the "Helping Skill"
- Understanding, empathizing with others, accepting others
- Having the ability to refer serious problems to professional helping resources
- Exploring alternatives
- Exercising self-care
- Expressing helping limits



Natural Helpers® in Michigan

The Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program has professionals trained in the Natural Helpers® program. 4-H is part of Michigan State University Extension, and has staff persons in each county who provide educational opportunities for Natural Helpers and other youth. By becoming part of the local 4-H program, Natural Helpers will have access to educational and recreational materials and programs that support their Initial Retreat Training and Ongoing Training.

Each year Michigan 4-H conducts a one-day Natural Helpers® Leader Training Workshop. This workshop is designed to prepare adults who plan to conduct their own Natural Helpers® retreats for their schools or communities.

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**Natural Helpers®
Peer Helping
Program**



**Sponsored by:
Michigan State University Extension
4-H Youth Development**

Natural Helpers®: A Peer Helping Program

What do Natural Helpers do?

Natural Helpers are people who help their friends. They are “natural” helpers because friends come to them for help and they reach out to friends who may need help. Natural Helpers assist with a range of issues, from everyday problems such as difficulties with a boyfriend or girlfriend, to more serious issues such as drug use or depression. Natural Helpers are not professionally trained counselors or therapists. The Natural Helpers® training emphasizes recognizing limits as helpers and making referrals to other adults or professionals when appropriate. Natural Helpers are people who students trust and who seem to have a natural affinity for helping. The program is designed to enhance the helping skills that they are already using.

Natural Helpers might be thought of as a link between young people and professional helpers. They are taught listening and problem-solving skills, as well as how and when to make referrals to professionals or other school adults.

Natural Helpers are identified by their peers.

- An anonymous school-wide survey identifies the young people that others go to for help, resulting in a team of students representing different subgroups within the school.
- Individuals are chosen based on the number of times they are mentioned in the schoolwide survey, their ability to represent a school subgroup, and their willingness to participate.

Natural Helpers are trained.

- Selected young people attend an Initial Training (requires about 25 hours to complete). Initial Training can be carried out as Retreat Training (often held away from the school in a camp setting) or as a Series Training, (three separate day sessions — no overnight stay involved). Both training methods are effective in introducing the Natural Helpers program to both adults and students and teaching skills to the participants.
- Natural Helpers learn listening skills.

- Natural Helpers learn the Helping Skill—a communication tool they can use to help people. The goals of the Helping Skill are to help prevent problems, to help friends work through problems, and to help them support their friends.
- Natural Helpers learn to express their limits and learn when to refer a problem or situation to an adult or community resource agency.
- Natural Helpers get to know themselves and others, forming a cohesive group from what was a collection of very diverse individuals.
- Natural Helpers explore serious issues (problems or situations that are beyond their ability to handle) and learn the importance of involving adults in these extreme situations.

Natural Helpers participate in training throughout the school year.

Ongoing Training:

- Consists of monitoring progress of the Natural Helpers and attending support meetings, sessions from the curriculum, customized sessions to meet the needs/issues identified by the Natural Helpers, and guest speakers from local community resource agencies
- Strengthens the “helping team”.
- Enables young people to understand how to take care of themselves.

Program benefits and results

In 2005, Michigan 4-H Youth Development completed a program evaluation in six Michigan schools. In the 2005 evaluation of the Natural Helpers® program, Over 90% of the student respondents reported that the Natural Helper they spoke to about a concern had good listening skills, understood their problem and was able to help them make their own decision about how to proceed with the situation.

68% of the Natural Helpers surveyed have referred a student at one time or another for assistance while 53% of the students who sought the help of a Natural Helper reported to being referred to someone else for assistance. The

findings revealed that Natural Helpers are knowledgeable of the different helping resources that are available to students within and without the school community. 90% of the students who sought the help of a Natural Helper reported that the Natural Helper they spoke to was knowledgeable about additional referral resources where the student could get additional assistance.

School staff members surveyed

- 70% report that Natural Helpers are able to effectively help students.
- 74% report that the Natural Helpers® program has made a positive difference in the school.
- 80% report that they would recommend the program continue at the school.
- 74% would recommend the program to other schools.

School staff members feedback

- “It develops positive self-esteem and leadership in those trained to be Natural Helpers; it provides help to those in need and consequently helps them to do well in school.”
- “They have helped new and existing students feel at ease in the building.”
- “Valuable life skills are taught through Natural Helpers®.”
- “Natural Helpers are often involved in making referrals to my office (counselor); also I have a reduction in the ‘minor’ issues often brought to my attention; the Natural Helpers are able to help young people deal with those issues.”

Peer Feedback

- “I think it is an excellent program because it changes a lot of people’s minds from doing something bad to not doing it at all.”

Natural Helpers feedback

- “I’ve learned a lot about looking objectively at issues in my and other’s lives and ways of dealing with them.”
- “It has helped me know how to help others and still keep myself healthy.”
- “It helps me in my relationships with others and how to deal with conflict.”