Summary of the PEERS Program:  
Promoting Children’s Early Empathic Relationships in School

PEERS is a multi-component and classroom-based social-emotional and academic learning program. The PEERS Program aims to promote children’s healthy peer relationships, mental health, and academic skills by directly targeting the classroom climate. By enhancing the classroom climate and children’s caring peer relationships, PEERS also aims to prevent peer bullying and victimization. PEERS specifically targets children in kindergarten to grade three in high needs, ethnically diverse elementary schools.

The PEERS Program directly targets four dimensions of the classroom climate:

- norms and beliefs (such as respect for others, acceptance of aggression),
- behaviours (such as interactions among children and teachers, social responsibility),
- interpersonal understanding (such as emotion awareness, perspective taking), and
- instructional practices (such as emotional support, class management strategies).

These dimensions of classroom climate are hypothesized to directly affect the quality of children’s peer relationships (such as friendship quality, experiences of peer victimization), mental health (such as symptoms of depression and anxiety), and academic skills (such as school engagement, literacy skills).

The PEERS Program includes six program units that are implemented over the course of the school year. The primary focus and theme of each program unit address one or more of the three primary classroom dimensions: norms and beliefs, behaviours, or interpersonal understanding. Approximately four to six weeks are spent on each unit. Each unit contains three or four lesson plans. Each lesson plan is implemented over one to three class periods. There are four sets of lesson plans that specifically target the developmental level of children in kindergarten to grade 3. Age appropriate, high quality storybooks are used to support children’s learning of the lesson themes. The lessons also use group-level activities to foster children’s positive peer interactions and to help children apply the lesson themes to their own experiences.

The PEERS lesson plans are implemented by classroom teachers with on-going support from a PEERS program consultant. The PEERS lesson plans are embedded within Alberta Education’s Health and Life Skills and Language Arts curricula and address educational requirements for fostering children’s healthy relationships, emotional awareness, and their reading, interpretation and writing skills.

PEERS also includes a mental health component that provides teachers with on-going support from a PEERS mental health consultant. The mental health component targets teachers’ ability to recognize and support young children’s mental health needs. To further support teachers’ professional development, the mental health component also provides monthly roundtable sessions with topics that focus on both teachers’ experiences and on children’s mental health. Through both the classroom-based lesson plans and the mental health component, PEERS aims to enhance teachers’ ability to provide an emotionally supportive and well managed learning environment for all children.