

Background Research: Mentoring Programs

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Mentoring Programs

Overview: Rationale, Best Practices, Outcomes

Rationale

Mentoring, pertaining to an inter-generational model in contrast to a peer model, has been defined as “the relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger mentee—a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee” (Bellamy et al., 2004).

Responsible mentoring is a structured one-on-one relationship between an adult and youth that focuses on the needs of the mentored participant. The relationship should foster caring and support, and encourage individuals to develop to their fullest potential. Mentoring can provide youth the opportunity to develop relationships with experienced and sensitive adults. The voluntary nature of mentoring participation demonstrates to the youth a level of concern for their welfare that may not have been assumed with a caring “professional” (de Anda, 2001). These are all qualities that provide youth the opportunities and resources for personal development and rational life decision making. As a result, mentoring can be particularly effective for the youth during major developmental life transitions (Rhodes et al., 1999).

Mentoring programs may, on the one hand, operate within a **prevention** model, emphasizing the enhancement of protective factors and the mitigation of risk factors leading to self-destructive behavior; as in prevention programs, they may also serve a universal or a selective population (Britner et al., 2006). Alternatively, programs may also incorporate a **resilience** model, emphasizing Positive Youth Development, more typically directed at a universal rather than specifically at-risk population (Portwood et al., 2005). Nevertheless, in relation to mentoring this distinction is by definition blurred in practice: the social and developmental needs of the mentee should be privileged over prescribed life skills, and mentee-preferred activities should be privileged over strictly goal-oriented activities (Sale et al., 2008). Indeed, the strong relation between reports of a strong, supportive mentoring relationship and positive youth outcomes was the major finding for the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) multi-site and comprehensive evaluation of preventive mentoring interventions (Bellamy et al., 2004).

The **delivery** of mentoring programs may also be structured in a variety of ways. Programs may be funded and administered by government or non-profit coalitions, or by both. Organizational participants in coalitions that implement mentoring programs may include schools, health clinics, businesses, criminal justice agencies, community and faith-based institutions, and government agencies at various levels (Wandersman et al., 2006). Mentoring interactions may, of course, take place beyond organizational sites; most notably, for example, those sponsored by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Nevertheless, more than 70% of site-based mentoring programs, which comprise 45% of mentoring programs overall, are located in schools (Portwood et al., 2005).

Finally, while many individual studies have claimed benefits related to mentoring, the overall body of research is far from definitive. In a current review of the evaluation and meta-analytic literature, Rhodes (2008) cautions that while “evaluations of formal one-to-one mentoring programs have provided evidence of their success in promoting better social, academic, and behavioral outcomes...such evidence is in relatively short supply.” She concludes that given known strategies for improving mentoring programs, relationships, and outcomes, practitioners must also address the political reality that “the field of youth mentoring has taken on a public life of its own—a life that is, at times, removed

from the scientific evidence. Despite expansive goals, there has been no clear road map for how to scale up this intervention approach in ways that provides high-quality mentoring relationships to all participants.”

Best Practices

Research that leads to tentative conclusions regarding best practices for mentoring programs supports, at the most general level, the notion that mentoring should not be viewed as the complete answer to a youth’s needs. Mentoring should be viewed as a broad social strategy that recognizes the importance of adult relationships in the lives of young people (Rhodes et al., 2002). Mentoring should not stand alone; interventions in multiple domains are critical for success (Eby et al., 2008). Most of the research in this field has focused on mentoring programs that: (1) target at-risk youth, rather than the universal youth population, and (2) pair youth with an adult, rather than with a peer (Sipe, 2002).

Given these caveats, research-supported best practices in mentoring may be summarized as follows (National Mentoring Partnership, 2003; Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006):

Planning/Organization/Management/Operations:

- Define parameters: population, nature of mentoring, location, goals
- Select management team, establish policies and procedures, develop financial plan
- Design the evaluation tools, plan for data collection and dissemination
- Monitor program implementation, ongoing support
- Recruit and carefully screen mentors
- Match mentors and mentees on at least one criteria
- Establish expectations for frequency of contact and duration of mentoring relationships
- Pre-match and ongoing training for mentors
- Ongoing supervision, feedback
- Some structured activities, recognition
- Parent support and/or involvement

Process:

- Close and enduring ties appear to be fostered when mentors adopt a flexible, **youth-centered** style in which the young person’s interests and preferences are emphasized, rather than when they focus predominantly on their own agendas or expectations for the relationship (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).
- “**Developmental**” relationships, based on caring, respect, positive expectations, developing friendship, and trust, are understood to be more effective than “prescriptive” relationships in which the adult role is to guide youth toward values, attitudes, and behavior that the adult deems positive (Sale et al., 2008).
- Individual differences in **gender, ethnicity, and age** can shape the needs and characteristics of mentees, the processes through which mentoring may influence mentees’ developmental trajectories, and the social networks into which the mentors enter. A focus on individual differences will help facilitate the development of mentoring programs that create a close fit between the needs of mentees and the services offered by the programs, as well as greater insight into what are the key elements of program effectiveness (Darling et al., 2006).
- “**Relational**” theories identify processes thought to promote healthy psychological development, and are particularly useful in defining the elements of successful

mentoring relationships: authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship (Spencer, 2006).

Content: Programs for high-risk youth evaluated by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (Bellamy et al., 2004) focused on six areas:

- **Relationship building**
- **Life skills development**
- **Academic support**
- **Cultural enhancement**
- **Recreation and enrichment**
- **ATOD information**

One mentoring program, Across Ages, has achieved the status of “model program” on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Even as Across Ages has expanded to over 75 sites nationwide, it has continued to demonstrate adherence to its core set of practices, relatively low volunteer attrition, match durations that greatly exceed national averages, and evidence of encouraging behavioral, academic, and psychosocial outcomes. In this program, 10- to 13-year-olds are matched with volunteers aged 50 or older. Volunteers undergo a rigorous screening followed by 10 hours of pre-service training. Additional features of Across Ages include:

- **Pre-match training of youth**
- **1-year commitment (mentors and youth)**
- **Weekly face-to-face contact for a minimum of 2 hours**
- **Monthly in-service meetings for mentors for supervision, training and support**
- **Weekly phone calls to mentors/weekly meetings with youth**
- **Community service projects**
- **Structured activities and goal setting**

Outcomes

At a developmental level, mentoring relationships:

- may promote the **social and emotional well-being** and development of youth in several ways. The relationships may provide youth with (1) opportunities for fun and escape from daily stresses, (2) corrective emotional experiences that may generalize to and improve youths’ other social relationships, and (3) assistance with emotion regulation.
- may contribute to the **cognitive** development of youth through several mechanisms, including exposure to new opportunities for learning, provision of intellectual challenge and guidance, and promotion of academic success.
- may contribute to youths’ **positive identity development**. That is, mentors may help shift youth’s conceptions of both their current and their future identity (Rhodes et al., 2006).

Pertaining to gender effects on the mentoring relationship:

- At baseline, girls reported significantly lower levels of parental trust and higher levels of alienation from their parents than boys. Nonetheless, girls’ mentoring relationships lasted significantly longer than those of boys.
- Moreover, girls were less satisfied than boys in short- and medium-term mentoring relationships, but were more satisfied than boys in long-term relationships.

- Similarly, girls in long-term relationships rated mentoring as more helpful than either the boys or the girls in the shorter-term relationship groups.
- Particularly in light of the heightened mistrust and alienation from parents at baseline, and the role of improved parent relationships in mediating the effects of mentoring, the protective aspect of longer lasting mentoring relationships may be particularly salient for girls (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

A review of the literature (Eby et al., 2008) on a broad variety of mentoring relationships contrasts **attitudinal** outcomes to more **concrete** behavioral and social outcomes, concluding that mentoring is more strongly related to mentee attitudes than to behavior, health, and career outcomes. The authors speculate that attitudes are more amenable to change than are outcomes more contextually dependent or more influenced by “stable person” variables.

Nevertheless, individual studies have shown that effective mentoring programs directed at high-risk youth can result in the following positive outcomes pertaining to **both** attitudes and behavior, in relation to risk and protective factors:

- More positive attitudes toward school (Eby et al., 2008; Jekielek et al., 2002).
- Perceived by school staff as being more highly involved in school and in their own personal lives (Eby et al., 2008).
- Increased participation in school activities and attendance (Eby et al., 2008; Jekielek et al., 2002)
- Better chance of going on to higher education (Jekielek et al., 2002).
- Increase in school performance, self concept, pro-social behavior and interpersonal skills, while also showing reductions in anti-social behavior (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- More positive attitudes about their future, older people, and participation in community service (Eby et al., 2008).
- Positive improvements in peer relationships (Rhodes et al., 1999).
- Positive social attitudes and relationships (Jekielek et al., 2002).
- Mentoring may be effective in increasing students’ reported sense of self-worth, promoting feelings of well-being, and reducing feelings of sadness and loneliness, as well as discouraging use of various substances (Eby et al., 2008).

Mentoring Research Highlights

Recruitment and Screening of Mentors

- The process of recruitment, screening, training, and ongoing education and supervision of mentors is critical to the success of the program (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006).
- Mentoring programs should establish standards and procedures for screening both volunteers and youth (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001).
- For mentor recruitment, it helps to adequately staff your recruitment efforts, identify your target groups and volunteer-rich environments, develop your recruitment strategies, and customize your recruiting messages (Garringer et al., 2003).
- The mentor screening procedure should include:
 - A written description of the mentor’s role and responsibilities (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006).

- A written statement of mentor commitment to the mentoring relationship (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001), including acknowledgement that the mentor must take primary responsibility for keeping the relationship alive (Sipe, 2002).
 - Background/reference checks as well as face-to-face interviews should be performed with all mentors (National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).
- The mentor must commit to being consistent and dependable, maintaining a steady presence in the youth's life (Sipe, 2002).
- In one study, matches with higher income volunteers lasted longer than those involving lower income volunteers (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). This may have been related to the availability of resources to support a variety of fun activities for the mentor and youth.
- It appears that mentors with backgrounds in educational and other helping professions may have a relative advantage in promoting certain outcomes, specifically increasing the likelihood of college attendance and decreasing risk for drug use (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006).
- Programs must provide potential mentors with honest expectations and risks versus benefits of working with specific special populations of youth. As with all programs, mentors must be screened for safety and appropriateness; concerns are heightened, however, with already vulnerable youth populations. It may also be difficult to recruit mentors for special populations of youth. Attention to potential natural mentors in the youth's social network, and among staff of youth development organizations may prove fruitful. This may be especially appropriate for staff who have worked with youth from a given special population, have been screened and trained, and are somewhat prepared for the difficult early phases of the relationship (Britner et al., 2006).

Recruitment and screening of youth

- A clearly defined and organized youth recruitment/referral/screening process should be in place (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006).
- Mentoring programs offer greater benefits to at-risk youth, compared to universal population youth (DuBois et al., 2002; Jekielek et al., 2002).
- Matching youth and adult gender and race/ethnicity does not appear to have significant measurable effects on the success of the relationship. The risks that they can impose can be overcome with greater matching precision (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- Differences in values that are based on given characteristics can have profound effects on the fit between mentees and the mentors/programs; among the factors that should be considered are gender, ethnicity, and age. A focus on individual differences will help facilitate the development of mentoring programs that create a close fit between the needs of protégés and the services offered by the programs, as well as greater insight into what are the key elements of program effectiveness. Darling et al. (2006) suggests these examples:
 - Because of the high value that adolescent girls place on intimacy and connection, a close, warm mentoring relationship may be better received and more helpful; for boys, who tend not to engage in direct forms of help seeking, mentoring interventions that are more verbally based may not be as useful or helpful. When understood in this way, the issue of fit in relation to gender may be addressed in ways other than by simply matching males with males and females with females.
 - Some cultures may value collectivism, or in-group values, more than individualism, or individual achievement; it is possible that youth and families who value collectivism are better served by mentoring programs that foster relationships of the child and

numerous adults, the mentor and the child within the family, or between the mentor and the family as a whole. Again, specific cultural understandings such as this may promote solutions to the problem of “fit” in ways other than intra-cultural/ethnic matches.

- Most of what mentors learn from younger protégés is gleaned from snatches of conversation or inferred from behavioral patterns. In contrast, adolescents tend to discuss a wide range of topics with their mentors, allowing mentors to enter their lives more easily. The implication of these cognitive changes is that, in childhood, the verbal give-and-take that characterizes adolescent–adult interactions will have to be supplanted by activities such as sports, games, and arts and crafts.
- The mentoring process may be susceptible to obstacles and difficulties when youth targeted for intervention are already demonstrating significant personal problems (DuBois et al., 2002).
- Matches with adolescents who were referred for psychological or educational programs, or had sustained emotional, sexual, or physical abuse, were more likely to break up (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- Program screening procedures should refer out youth who require more intensive services than mentoring can provide. Mentoring programs should not replace other mental health services, and the mentor should not be serving in a counselor role.

Mentor Training and Supervision

The mentoring program should provide adequate training, supervision, monitoring, and support of mentors (Sipe, 2002; DuBois & Neville, 1997; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006):

- A formal orientation session should be held in which the program is overviewed, roles and responsibilities are clearly explained, and a discussion of how to handle difficult situations is held (National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).
- Training and ongoing technical assistance is vital to strengthen the relationship between the mentor and youth (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).
- Training should caution the mentors that too much focus on what is wrong with the youth is more likely to turn the youth away (Sipe, 2002).
- Mentors should be trained to respect the youth’s point of view and involve the youth in decisions regarding how the time is spend together (Sipe, 2002, 1996).
- A monitoring procedure is necessary to provide adequate support and structure for mentoring relationships during the formative stages of their development. The program manager should monitor the frequency and duration of contact between the mentor and youth (Garringer et al., 2003; National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).
- If a program is not maintaining high retention rates, it may be experiencing a decrease in staff motivation (Garringer et al., 2003).

Program Implementation

- Rather than focusing solely on the participants and contexts (site-based, field-based) of mentoring programs, such as peer- or school-based mentoring, as the key elements that differentiate programs, more fruitful program development and research will result from a closer examination of:
 - Infrastructure, including program practices related to the screening, matching, training, and ongoing support of mentors. Generally, the degree of infrastructure reflects the

number and nature of mentoring practices provided to support the match, particularly those that would be expected to enhance program effectiveness on the basis of available theory and research.

- Dosage, intensity, and duration of mentoring relationships; all of these factors likely contribute to the quality of the relationship that is formed between mentor and mentee across different types of programs (Karcher et al., 2006).
- Analysis of data from the Big Brothers Big Sisters study found that the effects of mentor relationships varied with their duration. Youth who were in matches that terminated within the first 3 months experienced significantly larger drops in feelings of self-worth and lower perceived scholastic competence than youth who did not receive any mentoring at all. On the other hand, youth who were in matches that lasted more than 12 months reported significantly higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance, and scholastic competence than the control subjects (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006).
- Matches with 13-16 year olds were more likely to break up earlier than matches with 10-12 year olds (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Additional support may need to be provided to mentors paired with older adolescents to maintain strong relationships.
- It takes approximately 6-12 months to begin to see desired outcomes from mentoring. The longer the relationship lasts, the greater the positive outcome potential for the youth (Garringer et al., 2003). Mentoring relationships that last one year or longer have shown the biggest improvements in academic psychosocial and behavior outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- Mentor pairs should spend at least 1-2 hours together per week for at least 1 school year (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Novotney et al., 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2000; Garringer et al., 2003; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- Successful mentoring requires consistent contact between the youth and the adult (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002); mentors with the closest and most supportive relationships reported more than 10 hours of contact per month, shared interests between mentor and mentee, and shared decision-making about activities (Eccles & Templeton, 2000).
- Positive youth development literature suggests that a key characteristic of successful programs designed to build “protective factors” in youth is their provision of a sense of safety and security, both in relationships and location. Mentees must feel safe (safe person/safe place) for the mentor-mentee relationship to grow (Catalano et al., 2004).
- It is important to keep the parents/guardians a part of the mentoring relationship that is building. Non-supportive parents can sabotage the relationship between mentor and mentee (Sipe, 2002).
- It is important to recognize the contribution of all program participants. Solicit feedback from mentors, mentees, staff, and parents. Use feedback to refine the mentoring program (National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).

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Standards for Mentoring Programs

Providers implementing Mentoring Programs must

Planning Phase

1. Demonstrate that each CGP staff member assigned to the program activity completes the SAPP approved Mentoring professional development activity(ies).
2. Develop a youth referral/recruitment, and screening plan that includes a commitment from the referral source to identify youth who demonstrate one or more of the following characteristics:
 - Single parent family status.
 - Low socio-economic status.
 - Lack of positive adult role models.
3. Identify and secure commitment of mentors.
 - Mentor programs will maintain a ratio of one adult mentor to one youth.
 - Set formal expectations for mentors to commit to at least one hour or class period per week for at least nine months or one school year.
4. Develop a formal orientation session for mentors which includes:
 - Overview of roles and responsibilities.
 - Key issues for building strong mentor/mentee relationships.
 - Handling difficult situations.
5. Develop a formal screening process which includes:
 - A written description of the mentor's roles and responsibilities.
 - A written statement of the mentor's commitment to the mentoring relationship.
 - Background/reference checks.
6. Develop a process to gain parental consent for youth participation.
7. Develop a plan for communication, supervision and support for mentor/mentees.

Implementation Phase

The following standards are for Providers that have already demonstrated the planning standards listed above and are implementing a mentoring program.

8. Deliver a formal orientation session to all mentors which includes:
 - Overview of roles and responsibilities.
 - Key issues for building strong mentor/mentee relationships.
 - Handling difficult situations.

9. Conduct a formal screening process with all mentors which includes:
 - A written description of the mentor's roles and responsibilities.
 - A written statement of the mentor's commitment to the mentoring relationship.
 - Background/reference checks.
10. Gain parental consent for youth participation.
11. Contact mentors/mentee pairs a minimum of once every six weeks.
12. Mentor pairs must meet at least one hour or class period per week for at least nine months or one school year.
 - Maintain a ratio of one adult mentor to one youth.
13. Serve youth who demonstrate one or more of the following characteristics:
 - Single parent family status.
 - Low socio-economic status.
 - Lack of positive adult role models.
14. Will NOT use mentor program as a substitute for intensive intervention services, such as mental health counseling, when needed.