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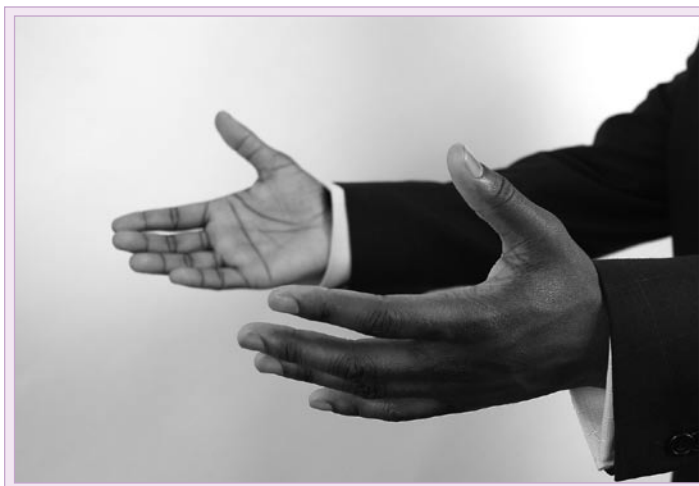
What Makes Mentoring Effective? How Research Can Guide You in Selecting a Program

Contemporary practitioners and policymakers widely accept that having a significant, positive relationship with an adult is instrumental in helping a vulnerable youth demonstrate resilience or even thrive. This conclusion, rooted in current resilience and mentoring literatures, has led policymakers to promote mentoring programs for children, especially those at risk for developmental difficulties due to the adversities they face. Reflecting widespread public support, mentoring programs have proliferated in recent years. In the U.S., over 4,500 programs existed for mentoring youth in 2002.[9]

Given mentoring programs' national popularity, it may come as a surprise when mentoring researchers advocate for a more critical and specific approach to designing and delivering services.[9] Emerging findings show that not all mentoring programs achieve similar outcomes. Thus, available options should be considered thoughtfully and with clear ideas as to what different programs may and may not provide.[8,11] The nature and quality of mentoring relationships, as well as their impact on the lives of vulnerable youth and families, can vary widely based on factors such as program quality, parent involve-

ment, frequency of shared time, and the stressors affecting the child. The current enthusiasm for mentoring programs may have outpaced what we know about making these programs effective and relevant for improving children's lives.[10] With poorly designed programs or mismatched mentor-protégé relationships, the promised benefits of mentoring may fail to materialize.

This article briefly summarizes some lessons learned about effective mentoring programs and the conditions that promote positive mentoring relationships. We then give examples of promising practices that have been developed to serve youth who have special needs. Finally, we provide recommendations designed to help parents and practitioners make choices regarding mentoring program involvement for their children.

Does Mentoring Work?

Widespread support for mentoring programs that assist at-risk youth is understandable. After all, there is something very attractive about programs that connect caring adult community members with youth who could benefit from extra support. However, this rationale risks being re-

duced to good intentions unless it is paired with an understanding of the current best evidence on which program features actually promote successful youth mentoring.

In their meta-analysis of mentoring outcomes, DuBois and his colleagues[2] provide both good and not-so-good news about mentoring programs. The good news is that overall, mentoring programs "work" in that they produce desired social/emotional/academic outcomes. On the other hand, the average size of beneficial effects is modest compared with more intensive family and mental health supports.[2] Moreover, stand-alone mentoring programs appear to have little or no positive impact for youth at highest risk—those already failing school, in the juvenile justice system, or receiving special education services. In some ways, this seems logical; a young person who already has difficulties in relating to others and trusting adults may have trouble forming a connection to a mentor. However, mentoring programs do seem to be particularly beneficial for youth who are at risk for environmental reasons (e.g., from lower-income families) and who have not had contact with other mental health services, special education services, or juvenile

justice programs.

These findings do not mean that all mentoring programs are inappropriate for young people with more serious individual challenges; it just means current data on mentoring outcomes does not support the assumption that mentoring programs alone will produce positive outcomes for youth in trouble. It may be that program innovations, such as using mentors who are trained in helping professions or integrating mentoring with comprehensive intervention plans (involving family therapy, tutoring, and other supports), will yield better results in the future.

Best Practices

Even when programs are well-targeted to specific youth populations, not all are as effective as they could be. DuBois et al.[2] found that effectiveness increases in direct proportion to the number of specific program practices that are employed. Effective programs incorporate standard recommended procedures in their operations, such as screening the mentor and youth, providing an orientation, making the match, and monitoring the relationship through ongoing supervision of the match.[7] Beyond this, Dubois and colleagues found that effectiveness is enhanced further when a mentoring program also includes the following "best practices":

1. Provides ongoing training for mentors (beyond initial training).

2. Provides structured activities for mentors and protégés.

3. Expects mentors to have regular and frequent contacts with their protégés.

4. Uses mentors with backgrounds in helping professions.

5. Encourages parents to know the mentors and to be involved in supporting the relationship.

6. Monitors program implementation and adjusts the program accordingly.

Evidence indicates that mentor-ing is more beneficial when relationships are long-lasting and feature frequent and consistent contact between mentor and protégé.[6] More enduring and positive relationships tend to occur when the mentor takes a youth-centered approach that focuses on understanding the individual child's needs, interests, and circumstances. A mentor who is sensitive and responsive can identify ways to offer appropriate support and guidance.

Although fun and friendship are important elements in building and sustaining the relationship, the mentor should try to create opportunities to develop the character and competence of the protégé. Goal-directed activities and projects with purpose can facilitate youth development as well as strengthen the relationship; however, the mentor may need to be creative and flexible to keep the child interested and engaged. Not surprisingly, a mentor who takes a longer view of his or her role in the protégé's life is more likely to persist through the sometimes awkward initial stages of the mentoring relationship.[4]

Improving the Fit

In recent years, the field of mentoring has begun to see practices adapted to the needs and circumstances of special populations of young people. For example, recent attention has been devoted to the role of gender in mentoring relationships, acknowledging the possibility that male and female youth bring different strengths to relationship involvement. DuBois and colleagues[3] have focused on the development and implementation of a mentoring program for urban adolescent girls that targets public health concerns faced by this population (e.g., sexual health, violence prevention, healthy eating and exercise). This program develops strong one-to-one mentoring relationships within a group format that includes psycho-educational sessions. Through this model, girls are able to grow in their relationships with their mentors as well as broaden their networks through connection with other program participants.

Another example of mentoring tailored to the specific needs of young people involves work with youth who have been abused and neglected.[1] Such programs emphasize the recruitment, screening, and training of high-quality mentors who can address the difficulties likely to be encountered in developing a relationship with a youth who has been maltreated. In addition to providing ongoing mentor training and informational support, these programs work to integrate mentoring services within the larger child welfare service network.

These types of program innovations reflect the growing literature on mentoring practices for special populations of youth. In exploring program involvement, should your young person face these or other unique concerns, be sure to inquire about how the program model accommodates your child's particular needs.

The following are some recommendations for parents and practitioners considering mentoring programs:

1. *Make a good program match before you start the relationship.* Learn as much as you can about the mentoring program to determine whether it is a good fit for your young person. Programs come in many varieties, so it is worthwhile to consider the following: Does the program create one-to-one relationships? Where will activities take place? What are the goals of the program? Does the program serve youth of certain ages or with special needs? In addition, find out whether the program offers appropriate support through

all phases of the relationship. Consult the best practices outlined earlier in this article and inquire as to how many are implemented by the programs you are considering. Should your young person present with particular needs, make sure to examine ways that the program intends to acknowledge these in the context of the mentoring relationship.

2. *Get involved.* Mentoring is increasingly considered a 'systemic' intervention,[5] meaning that parents, mentors, and agency staff all need to communicate and cooperate to make the mentoring relationship successful. Make sure that the program you select has policies regarding parent involvement, and consider yourself a teammate of your youth's mentor. Support the mentor's efforts by sharing information, keeping appointments, and showing appreciation. Research continues to reinforce the critical role that parents play in providing input and support to the mentoring relationship.

3. *Give it time.* Research shows that mentors and protégés both need time together to establish a strong connection. Barring any significant concerns, support your young person in building the relationship. Suggest routines and schedules that promote a predictable pattern in the relationship. Help the mentor and child work through disagreements in a direct way that makes the relationship stronger. Patience, perspective, and persistence will pay off in a positive relationship.

4. *Expect progress, not promises.* One common issue facing mentoring programs nationwide is the promotion of unduly high expectations. Popular campaigns suggest mentoring can address chronic social and educational problems like academic underachievement, gang violence, and poverty. An inspirational mentoring relationship may promote positive development, but a number of risks and hardships still may contribute to youth diffi-

culties. Be realistic in your expectations about how much a mentoring relationship can accomplish in a few hours a week. Look for and celebrate the little improvements along the way.

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