

Youth Mentoring in Perspective

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Supportive relationships with non-parent adults can powerfully influence the course and quality of adolescents' lives. Indeed, researchers at the Search Institute identified "adult role models," "supportive relationship with three or more other adults," and "adults in community valuing youth" as essential to youth's health and well-being (Benson, et al., 1998) and access to "ongoing relationships with caring adults" constitutes one of the Five Promises of the Alliance for Youth. Moreover, researchers working from within a risk and resilience framework have repeatedly called attention to the protective influence of supportive relationships with adults (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982). Rutter & Giller (1983) highlighted the importance of "one good relationship," and Garmezy (1985) discussed the critical importance of significant adults in promoting the healthy development of highly stressed youth.

Unfortunately, many adolescents never manage to form connections with caring adults. This is not surprising, given that traditional sources of intergenerational contact—extended families, schools, and neighborhoods—have changed in ways that have dramatically reduced the availability of caring adults (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Nearly a quarter of all American children are born into single-parent homes, and half of the current generation of children will live in a single-parent household during some part of

their childhood (Dryfoos, 1998). Cuts in school budgets have resulted in even fewer adults per child, and declining neighborhood safety has led to social isolation and restricted opportunities for intergenerational contact (Lerner, et al., 2000). At the same time, changing economic, social, and cultural conditions have sharply increased adolescents' vulnerability to negative life outcomes (Dryfoos, 1998).

Volunteer Mentoring

To address the problems associated with the diminished availability of natural mentors, volunteer mentoring programs have proliferated in recent years (Freedman, 1993; Rhodes, in press). As with natural mentoring, volunteer mentoring typically involves relationships between youth and adults, who offer assistance in meeting the youth's academic, social, career, and/or personal goals (DuBois, et al., in press). An estimated five million American youth are involved in school- and community-based volunteer mentoring programs, ranging from the prototypic Big Brothers/Big Sisters to other, less structured programs. Although mentoring programs date back to the early 1900s, interest in this intervention approach has intensified in the past fifteen years. In fact, nearly half of the current mentoring programs were established in past five years, and only 18% have been operating for more than fifteen years. More than 2,000 additional organizations have contributed to a significant growth in mentoring initiatives at the



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local, state, and national level. Although most local and state efforts are decentralized, national organizations, such as America's Promise, have brought visibility, coherence, and momentum to the movement.

Effectiveness of Volunteer Mentoring

A growing number of evaluations suggest that volunteer mentoring relationships can positively influence a range of outcomes, including improvements in peer and parental relationships, academic achievement, and self-concept, as well as lower recidivism rates among juvenile delinquents, and reductions in substance abuse (Davidson & Redner, 1998; LoSciuto, et al., 1996; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Reisner, et al., 1998).

The most influential evaluation of volunteer mentoring is the recent impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) which was conducted by researchers at Public/Private Ventures (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). The study included 959 10- to 16-year-olds who applied to a geo-

graphically diverse set of BBBS programs. Control participants were put on a BBBS waiting list for 18 months and experimental youth were matched with a BBBS for an average of 12 months. Although all youth showed gradual increases in problem behaviors over time, program participants increased at a slower rate than control group youth. At follow-up, youth who were matched with mentors reported lower levels of substance use and initiation, less physical aggression, more positive parent and peer relationships, and higher scholastic competence, attendance, and grades than control youth (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

Although these findings are encouraging, caution should be used in generalizing them to other mentoring programs. BBBS affiliates tend to carefully screen, train, and support their volunteers, and maintain a degree of quality control. In fact, most BBBS programs require a year's commitment of their volunteers, to whom they provide at least six hours of training and ongoing supervision. Unfortunately, this level

of training and support is not available in many of the mentoring programs that have emerged in recent years. In fact, a survey of more than 700 mentoring programs found that 36% of volunteers received less than two hours of training and 22% received none at all. Similarly, 20% of volunteers “almost never” talk to staff people in their programs and 9% have no contact with staff at all.

Since mentoring programs vary considerably, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding its overall effectiveness. What is clear, however, is that the high level of enthusiasm among policy makers and practitioners is not always commensurate with actual evaluation findings. For example, after reviewing the current literature, Freedman (1993) concluded that volunteer mentoring programs with disadvantaged youth are, for the most part, a “modest intervention.” Similarly, in a recent meta-analysis of evaluations of mentoring programs, the study by

DuBois, et al. (in press) found the effects of mentoring programs to be relatively small, particularly when compared to other interpersonal interventions designed to improve youth outcomes. They attributed the relatively small “effect size” (i.e., magnitude of program benefits) to wide variations in program quality. Their study revealed a range of program practices that were associated with stronger effects, including training for mentors, structured activities for mentors and youth, more frequent contact, the support and involvement of parents, and the monitoring of overall program implementation.

Relationship Longevity

Taken together, these practices converge with those identified by other researchers, and are associated with more sustained relationships (Sipe & Roder, 1999). Relationship longevity is a particularly important consideration, especially since youth who are referred to mentoring programs often come from single-parent homes, and many have experienced multiple failed or disappointing relationships with adults in the past. For these youth, the failure of yet another bond with an adult can undermine their sense of well-being. Grossman & Rhodes (in press) recently explored the predictors and effects of relationship duration, testing the hypothesis that the effects of mentoring would grow stronger over time, and that relatively short matches would lead to negative outcomes. Youth who were in relationships that lasted a year or longer reported improvements in academic, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes; and progressively fewer effects emerged among youth who were in relationships that terminated between six months and a year or between three and six months. Additionally, adolescents who were in relationships that terminated within a very short period of time reported decrements in several indicators of functioning.

Relationship longevity is important in mentoring, since many of the youth have had disappointing relationships with adults in the past.



Premature terminations can occur for a variety of reasons. Many volunteers don't have time to meet the demands of the relationship (Freedman, 1993). Problems also arise from mentors' expectations and goals. Some are overly critical and not sufficiently flexible, patient, or sensitive with their protégés. Mentors' attempts to address problems can backfire if a trusting relationship has not first been established (Styles & Morrow, 1995). Logistical problems, stemming from interference from family members, unpredictable schedules, and a lack of telephones, permanent residences, or transportation frequently present formidable barriers to relationship formation. These and other obstacles are often compounded by a considerable lack of program infrastructure. As mentioned above, many programs are struggling with relatively few resources and insufficient personnel to provide mentors with ongoing support and supervision (Rhodes, in press).

These observations underscore the need for careful screening and training of mentors and for the provision of ample resources to support the development and management of mentoring programs. Fortunately, there is far more infrastructure to sustain mentoring programs than there was in the past. National mentoring organizations, such as America's Promise, have flourished into a rich network of support, infusing programs with important training materials, resources, and organizational ties. Related to these efforts is the abundance of funding to support and sustain mentoring programs, available through a widening array of federal, state, and foundation sources. Evaluation efforts are also improving. Recent evaluations of mentoring programs have included strong designs, whereas earlier efforts rarely included comparison groups, statistical controls for initial differences, or follow-up evaluations. The growing attention among researchers to positive youth develop-

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ment and the increased number of university-community alliances bode well for future mentoring program evaluations.

Supportive Contexts

Beyond developing and strengthening mentoring programs, additional strategies for strengthening relationships between caring adolescents and adults deserve consideration. Meaningful relationships between adults and adolescents can occur in many contexts, ranging from highly structured, arranged relationships to the more spontaneous, yet influential, ties that sometimes arise with aunts, teachers, clergy, coaches, and other adults. Such relationships have certain advantages over those arranged through programs. Mentors from within youth's extended reach may be more familiar with the cultural norms, circumstances, and constraints of the setting, and better positioned to offer credible advice. Moreover, even if such relationships fail to thrive, they are less likely to disappear entirely, potentially offsetting the negative feelings associated with assigned mentor terminations. As such, volunteer mentoring programs should be considered one of many ways to bring caring adults and adolescents together. Within this context, mentoring programs serve a broader goal of creating "mentor-rich" settings, in which adult-adolescent relationships can thrive.

School Contexts

Beyond the immediate and extended family, school systems are an obvious place for



adolescents to develop meaningful ties with adults. Relationships with teachers can take on great importance during adolescence. At the same time, middle and junior high schools often present formidable barriers to the development of close student-teacher relationships. A growing emphasis on high-stakes, standardized testing has given rise to curricular demands that have constrained teachers, leaving little room for the conversations and activities that typically draw them closer to their students. Moreover, larger student-to-teacher ratios have left each student with a smaller share of their teacher's attention. Supportive bonds become particularly difficult during middle school when students no longer have a primary teacher with whom they spend most of the day. Rather than presenting barriers, schools should increase the likelihood of such occurrences through such practices as home-room assignments, advising, multiyear teacher assignments, and smaller groups of students (Pianta, 2000).

Beyond the Classroom

In addition to school reform efforts, policy makers and researchers are increasingly turning their attention to adolescents' needs for supervision beyond the confines of the school day. School-

and community-based after-school programs can promote learning, protect youth from negative peer pressure, and create opportunities for them to form relationships with caring, non-parent adults. In addition to the many school-based programs, community-based youth organizations are increasingly seen as important contexts for positive youth development. Such programs can provide youth with a sense of safety, adult guidance, and opportunities to take initiative and engage in prosocial activities. Youth who participate in community programs are not isolated, unsupervised, or on the streets with peers. Participants in such programs often describe them as safe havens from the pressures of the streets—places where adolescents feel comfortable expressing themselves and letting down their guard (Hirsch, et al., 2000). Providing youth with supervision and guidance beyond the narrow confines of the school day is a necessary response to the changing needs and configuration of American families.

Conclusion

Changes in families, work demands, and communities have left many adolescents without the adult supports that were available just a few decades ago. Both natural and assigned mentors have the potential to modify, or even reverse, the negative developmental trajectories of at-risk youth set in place by these changes. Although researchers, practitioners, and policy makers should acknowledge the potential benefits of both natural and assigned mentoring, we should be aware of its limitations. Mentoring programs are not a substitute for a caring family, community support, or a concerted youth policy agenda. With this in mind, we should ensure that mentor programs are adequately implemented and evaluated, while broadening our efforts to strengthen the caring capacity of adolescents' families, schools, and communities.

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