

Adolescent Mentoring



Study of High School Restructuring

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In mentoring, a nonparental adult provides friendship and support to a young person. Mentoring has become a popular issue, bolstered by the support of political leaders, including Presidents George H. Bush and George W. Bush, who have extolled the virtues of voluntarism as a remedy to troubling social problems that challenge adolescents' successful transitions into adulthood. These and other appeals for adults to become actively involved in civic life have not fallen on deaf ears, as witnessed by the development of

mentoring programs at the local and national level. Programs such as America's Promise, the National Mentoring Partnership, and Peer Resources Network have emerged alongside the premier mentoring organization, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, Inc. (BBBS). The irony of these appeals is that the most sought-after volunteers—personally stable, middle-class professionals—are the same people who are challenged to find sufficient time to meet the parenting demands and responsibilities of their own families.

The Need for Mentoring

The potential of mentor relationships increases when considered in the context of young people's social environment. As a result of work obligations and the increasingly common single-parent household, very few teens spend much time with their parents. Geographic separations from extended family are also common; thus, grandparents and other relatives are not available to play significant supporting roles in children's socialization as they may have in the past.

In addition to decreased extended family support, the emergence of a sizeable African American middle class and opportunities to move out of socioeconomically mixed but racially segregated neighborhoods have combined to isolate many low-income African American youth (Wilson, 1980). No longer

are African American teachers, doctors, and business owners the natural mentors who informally nurtured, guided, and encouraged young people who, in previous generations, were their neighbors.

Given the potential for mentoring to provide greater support for youth development, educators have high hopes for such support to students' family, social, and educational success (Dondero, 1997; Tierney & Grossman, 2000), because schooling is youth's primary sphere of activity outside of the family. Is mentoring a viable strategy for improving high school students' educational outcomes? This paper will review recent empirical literature on youth mentoring, with a focus on how such mentoring impacts adolescent (ages 10–18) students' academic success.

Positive Effects of Mentoring

Academic Achievement

The quality of mentoring makes a difference: Effectively mentored students have lower dropout rates and higher GPAs than poorly mentored

Studies of the effects of mentoring are fairly recent and few in number. Among the earliest studies of the effects on at-risk youth, Slicker and Palmer (1993) studied 86 tenth-grade students in a large, suburban, Texas school district. The district served a community that was racially and socioeconomically diverse. Because the program was school based, its mentors were limited to adult school personnel. Using pre- and post-testing after 6 months of participation, Slicker and Palmer initially found no difference in dropout rates, self-concept, or academic achievement between mentored students and the control group. However, a review of mentor logs showed variations in the quality of mentoring that students received. Some mentors met with students often, whereas others met infrequently; the actual time spent with students also varied greatly. As a result, the data were subdivided into two categories reflecting the quality of mentoring: whether students were effectively or ineffectively mentored. The

post hoc analysis showed that effectively mentored students tended toward lower dropout rates than ineffectively mentored students, and that their grade-point averages were higher. No difference was found in students' self-concepts.

Slicker and Palmer's (1993) early study suggested that the quality of mentoring makes a difference, and that academic achievement and dropout rates can be influenced by effective mentoring efforts. It also suggested that other adult school personnel, in addition to school counselors, can be effective mentors.

Similarly, a recent study of boys in BBBS programs found that mentored boys made significantly higher academic gains than did boys who were wait-listed for a mentor (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). This study differed from previous research by administering individual achievement tests, rather than using grade-point average as an academic measure, and also by controlling for students' cognitive ability.

Improved Behaviors and Life Aspirations

Mentored students are less likely to

- Carry a weapon
- Start using drugs
- Hit someone
- Skip school
- Drop out of school

Research by Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, and Bontemp (2000) supports the use of mentors as a strategy to reduce certain adolescent risk-taking behaviors. In a study of suburban adolescents with mixed socioeconomic backgrounds, the researchers found that adolescents with mentors were significantly less likely to engage in the following health-risk behaviors: (a) carrying a weapon, (b) using illicit drugs in the past 30 days, (c) smoking more than five cigarettes per day, and (d) engaging in sex with more than one partner in the past 6 months. However, the study found no significant difference in teens' alcohol use.

Grossman and Tierney's (1998) impact study of the BBBS program found that mentoring had a significant positive effect on the behavior of participating youth ages 10–16. Data showed that these students were less likely to (a) start using drugs or alcohol, (b) hit someone, or (c) skip school. Students also reported feeling more confident about school performance and that their family relationships improved.

The positive effects of mentoring can also be seen in students' sense of self-efficacy in their hopes for the future. Economically disadvantaged students in a formal mentoring program demonstrated improved

educational and occupational aspirations if they were mentored for more than one year (Lee & Cramond, 1999), which has been linked to a lower probability of dropping out of school. This study also emphasized that to make a significant difference, mentors needed to sustain a commitment to the child for at least one year.

Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri (2002) examined the effects of mentoring

on youth found to be at-risk of juvenile delinquency or mental illness. Pre- and post-treatment surveys of parents, teachers, and youth showed significant positive improvement in problem behaviors for the intervention group. Keating et al. noted that such improvements could be combined with other assistance, as many youth were also in family or school counseling.

The mentoring relationship should last for at least one year.

Potential Pitfalls of Mentoring

Mentoring is not always successful. Marc Freedman's work presented a balanced view frequently referenced in mentoring literature. In *The Kindness of Strangers*, Freedman (1993) wrote about successful, formally arranged mentoring relationships, using many examples from programs targeting disadvantaged youth throughout America. Freedman tempered these success stories, however, with frank excerpts of the comments of mentors and protégés whose experiences were disappointing. He recommended that the mentoring movement be regarded as highlighting and partially meeting a need for a more comprehensive societal response to the structural isolation of youth, especially those in urban, inner-city communities (Freedman, p. 109).

Jean Rhodes' observations on the risks of mentoring also serve as ballast for the popularity of and enthusiasm for mentoring as a facile solution to the isolation of youth. In *Stand by Me*, Rhodes (2002) related the painful effect of a mentor's neglect on a child, particularly during adolescence, when emotions are often difficult to manage. She further quoted Downey and Feldman (1996):

If adolescents have identified with their mentor and have begun to value the relationship, they are apt to feel profound disappointment if the relationship does

not progress. Feelings of rejection and disappointment, in turn, can lead to a host of negative emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. (p. 59)

Some studies have found that mentoring resulted in little or no significant differences between control and intervention groups. Such results were found in a 4-year project (Royse, 1998) developed for African American teens 14–16 years old in female-headed households, who were below grade level in reading, math, and science. With college-educated African American men serving as community volunteers over one year (median 15 months), Royse found no appreciable effects on the variables of self-esteem, attitudes toward drugs and alcohol, grades, school attendance, and disciplinary infractions. Royse concluded that although mentoring appears to do no harm, older adolescents may have more difficulty benefiting from mentoring than do grade-school students. He recommended a longitudinal study comparing the groups on the variables of well-being, self-sufficiency, and adult accomplishments.

In the most comprehensive study to date Dubois, Holloway et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analysis on 55 evaluations of the effects of youth-mentoring programs. For average youth, mentoring programs were found to be only modestly beneficial.

The work reported here is an outgrowth of the larger Houston A+ Challenge initiative.

At-risk youth appeared to benefit most, particularly when strong relationships were formed between mentor and protégé. Such relationships appeared to be related to the level of program support to mentors when negotiating difficulties in establishing trust and comfort. Although this support was important, program staff favored providing administrative preparations—volunteer screening, training, and matching (71%)—over ongoing program support for existing matches (23%). The researchers suggested that programs recognize that

youth with significant or multiple personal or environmental challenges need more intervention than volunteers can be expected to provide, and that programs identify sources for obtaining additional help. Despite the findings, DuBois, Holloway, et al. strongly supported mentoring as a preventive intervention for youth. They also stressed the importance of giving more attention to developing relationships, which need regular contact over a long period.

Successful programs

- *Screen prospective mentors*
- *Identify mentors in helping professions*
- *Provide prematch and ongoing training*
- *Specify clear expectations of frequency of contact and duration of the relationship*
- *Offer mentoring activities outside of school*

Characteristics of Successful Programs

DuBois, Neville, Parra, and Pugh-Lilly (2002) identified 13 theory-based best practices that were commonly suggested in the mentoring literature. Among these were screening of prospective mentors, both prematch and ongoing training for mentors, and follow-up support for mentors. Additionally, successful administrative programs specified clear expectations of mentors regarding both the frequency of their contact with protégés and the duration of the mentor–protégé relationship.

According to the results of the meta-analysis of mentoring programs conducted

by DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002), the following empirically based best practices predicted stronger outcomes: (a) identifying mentors whose backgrounds were in helping roles or professions and (b) mentoring activities in community, workplace, or other settings outside of school. Structured activities for mentors and youth, monitoring of program implementation, expectations regarding the frequency of contact with protégés, ongoing training of mentors, and parent support or involvement were significant both in theory and in practice.

Conclusion

The few independent research studies on the effects of formal mentoring on adolescents have indicated the need for further investigation of these complex relationships beyond counts of pairings made. Plenty of instructional information is available for those interested in implementing programs. However, little in-depth information explains the interpersonal exchanges that make these relationships work between two people. The research studies finding that mentoring made no significant difference suggested that more sensitive tools may need to be developed to measure the variables studied. Additionally, studies of

successful mentoring relationships have not investigated differences with those that did not form a durable bond. Data regarding matches that ended may not be available for follow-up studies.

Because of the high visibility and public acceptance of mentoring, it is still a worthwhile effort, particularly for improving the lives of disadvantaged youth. However, mentoring programs clearly only work well when they include mentor training and relationships of at least one year. Moreover, mentoring is clearly not the sole solution for the larger societal problems that have created the need for them.

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About Our Organization...

The Houston A+ Challenge received funding from the Carnegie Corporation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support a 5-year initiative to work with 24 large high schools in the Houston Independent School District engaged in a student-focused, whole-school change effort. The initiative, called Houston Schools for a New Society, redesigns high schools into small, theme-based academies to produce graduates ready for the demands of the 21st century.

The central goal of the challenge is to determine whether it is possible to develop and to institutionalize high school reform nationally by investing in specific urban areas through intensive intervention. The HA+C strategy undertakes work in four areas:

1. Restructure large comprehensive high schools into small learning communities.
2. Install a literacy framework across the core curriculum.
3. Create an adult advocacy program to mentor and to help each high school student.
4. Create new knowledge about the challenges and issues related to the restructuring of high schools in urban areas.

We have designed an evaluation program to learn from the HA+C experience to promote further high school improvement in Houston and other urban school districts across the country.

Study of High School Restructuring



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We're on the Web!

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