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research

in action

Fostering Close and Effective Relationships
in Youth Mentoring Programs

About the Research in Action Series

Overview

Last year, MENTOR released the *National Agenda for Action: How to Close America's Mentoring Gap*. Representing the collective wisdom of the mentoring field, the *Agenda* articulates five key strategies and action items necessary to move the field forward and truly close the mentoring gap. In an effort to address one of these critical strategies—elevating the role of research—MENTOR created the Research and Policy Council, an advisory group composed of the nation's leading mentoring researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

In September 2006, MENTOR convened the first meeting of the Research and Policy Council with the goal of increasing the connection and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to strengthen the practice of youth mentoring. The *Research in Action* series is the first product to evolve from the work of the Council—taking current mentoring research and translating it into useful, user-friendly materials for mentoring practitioners.

With research articles written by leading scholars, the series includes ten issues on some of the most pressing topics facing the youth mentoring field:

- Issue 1: Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development
- Issue 2: Effectiveness of Mentoring Program Practices
- Issue 3: Program Staff in Youth Mentoring Programs: Qualifications, Training, and Retention
- Issue 4: Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs**
- Issue 5: Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End
- Issue 6: School-Based Mentoring
- Issue 7: Cross-Age Peer Mentoring
- Issue 8: Mentoring Across Generations: Engaging Age 50+ Adults as Mentors
- Issue 9: Youth Mentoring: Do Race and Ethnicity Really Matter?
- Issue 10: Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

Using the Series

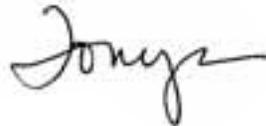
Each issue in the series is designed to make the scholarly research accessible to and relevant for practitioners and is composed of three sections:

1. **Research:** a peer-reviewed article, written by a leading researcher, summarizing the latest research available on the topic and its implications for the field;
2. **Action:** a tool, activity, template, or resource, created by MENTOR, with concrete suggestions on how practitioners can incorporate the research findings into mentoring programs; and
3. **Resources:** a list of additional resources on the topic for further research.

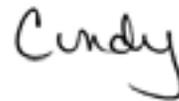
As you read the series, we invite you to study each section and consider what you can do to effectively link mentoring research with program practice. Please join us in thanking Dr. Jean Rhodes for graciously contributing her time and expertise as executive editor of the series and author of this article.



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Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs

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“As soon as we met, I knew Patricia would be perfect to discuss feelings and problems with, the things a teenager can’t always talk about with family. It was the first time that both of us had been involved in anything like this. We hit it off right away.”

— Ruth, in Barrett, Annis, & Riffey, 2004

Successful mentors seem to understand and appreciate their mentees, entering their worlds to uncover their unique strengths and capabilities. This sort of empathy and sensitivity goes a long way toward facilitating close relationships, as does the mentee’s willingness to fully engage in the mentoring experience. And, since initial resistances may be strong, and trust and understanding tend to deepen with time, successful relationships also require consistency and persistence. In this report, I describe a range of factors that can facilitate the formation of close, enduring, and, ultimately, effective mentor-youth ties. Although few researchers have focused specifically on the dynamics of successful mentoring relationships, findings across several studies offer helpful clues (Spencer, 2006). The studies vary in their rigor and applicability to mentoring. Hence, the recommendations and conclusions represent informed judgments that are in need of more extensive investigation.

Characteristics of Effective Relationships

Researchers have identified a range of factors that appear to be associated with stronger relationships. Volunteers who have had prior experience in informal or formal helping roles or occupations, for example, seem to be at an advantage (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002), as do those who are sensitive to the socioeconomic and cultural influences in youths’ lives (Hirsch, 2005). A basic sense of efficacy on the part of the mentor, even in the face of complicated situations and new experiences, is another commonality of successful relationships (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Hirsch, 2005; Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002). Additionally, effective volunteers appear to be better able to model and encourage skills and positive behaviors (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2005) and to discourage negative behaviors (e.g., substance use) (Beam, Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, & Chen, 2002).

The mentor’s influence can be subtle, however, requiring the right blend of support, structure, and guidance. In their influential study, Morrow and Styles (1995) found that mentoring relationships tended to fall into two broad categories, labeled developmental and prescriptive. Satisfied pairs—defined by feelings of liking, attachment to, and

commonality with the other member—were determined to be more “developmental” or youth-focused. Prescriptive pairs, on the other hand, were characterized by adult-governed goals, no adjustment of expectations on the part of the adult, and a lack of consistent support from the adult. Along similar lines, Sipe (1998) synthesized the literature on mentoring and concluded that successful mentors tended to be a steady and involved presence in the youths’ lives, respecting the youths’ viewpoints, and seeking supervision from support staff when needed.

This more collaborative approach is consistent with other research, suggesting a supportive approach, balanced with encouragement to achieve longer-term goals and expectations. In a study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne (2004), found that relationships distinguished themselves on the basis of the support, structure, and activity that mentors provided. Mentees who characterized their relationships as “moderate” in levels of activity and structure reported the largest number of benefits relative to a control group, including decreased alienation from parents, decreased conflict with friends, and an improved sense of self-worth and school competence. These mentors seem to share certain similarities with effective parents, who provide opportunities for enjoyable shared activities while setting high standards (Steinberg et al., 1995). Interestingly, no benefits were evident for unconditionally supportive relationships, thus suggesting a need for mentors to be more than simply “good friends.”

Importantly, however, mentees seem to benefit from being actively involved in determining goals and activities. Relationships in which the youth and mentor jointly decide on activities and goals, as opposed to being driven primarily by the interests or expectations of the mentor, have been found to predict greater relationship quality and duration (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Styles & Morrow, 1992) as well as improvements in how youth experience their relationships with other adults (Karcher, Roy-Carlson, Benne, Gil-Hernandez, Allen, & Gomez, 2006a). Helping youth to set and work toward goals, then providing the support and scaffolding to foster achievement, appears to be beneficial (Balcazar, Davies, Viggers, & Tranter, in press; Balcazar, Keys, & Garate, 1995; Davidson & Redner, 1988; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2005), especially if the goals are agreed upon by mentor and youth in accordance with the youth-centered approach described above (Larose, Chaloux, Monaghan, & Tarabulsky, 2006). Within this general framework, mentors who remain flexible to the needs and developmental stage of their mentees appear to have more success. Of course, good mentors take their cues from their protégés to strike a comfortable balance among having fun, working toward practical goals, and exploring emotions.

Mentee Involvement Success

Mentees share some responsibility for the success of the relationship. From the outset, mentees should be provided with realistic expectations regarding what their mentors can (and cannot) do, and their own role in maintaining the relationship should be emphasized. They should be encouraged to take active ownership of the process. Although some youth may be initially passive or even resistant, with case management and mentor perseverance they may become more cooperative and take more initiative. Nonetheless, mentors should remain sympathetic to the fact that some adolescents in mentoring programs have weathered difficulties and separations in other important relationships in their lives, and this complicates their capacity to form trusting bonds with mentors. As one mentor noted:

“Things were awkward at first. Becky was too smart to be won over easily, and gaining her trust was going to take work. Years of being rejected had taught her to protect herself from pain; I was warned that getting her to open up might take a while. She pushed at me, and I was hurt. But I was stubborn, so I stayed. And then one day, as we were about to cross a street, she took my hand. I knew I was in.”

— Becky, in Barrett et al., 2004

Beyond this initial resistance, many mentors and youth encounter occasional conflict and disappointment as the relationship progresses. Indeed, as with any close bond, a mentor-mentee relationship is not necessarily free of difficulties. Lüscher and Pillemer (1998), for example, have argued that close intergenerational relationships are often laced with tension and conflict as the need for autonomy or self-fulfillment can conflict with needs for closeness or help. Yet conflict, and its successful resolution, can help individuals understand their differences and move forward toward goals (Jordan, 1991).

Persistence and Duration

Mentors and youth who can ride out the occasional storms, or other times when the mentoring relationship feels awkward or unrewarding, appear to be more likely to yield the benefits of the relationship. Studies of both informal and formal mentoring ties highlight the significance of how often mentors and youth spend time together (Blakely, Menon, & Jones, 1995; DuBois & Neville, 1997; DuBois, Neville, et al., 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Freedman, 1988; Herrera et al., 2000; McLearn, Colasanto, & Schoen, 1998; Parra et al., 2002). Moreover, several studies suggest that those youth with the longest matches receive the most benefits from mentoring (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, 2004; Karcher et al., 2006a; Lee & Cramond,

1999; Opinion Research Centre, 1995). Others have also found evidence of apparent positive effects for longer matches and negative effects for matches ending prematurely (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, 2005; Slicker & Palmer, 1993).

Regular contact has also been indirectly linked to positive youth outcomes via its role in affording other desirable processes to take root in the mentoring relationship. For example, regular meetings often lead to engagement in beneficial activities (Parra et al., 2002), the provision of emotional and instrumental support (Herrera et al., 2000), and a deeper integration of the adult into the youth's social network (DuBois, Neville, et al., 2002). A recent evaluation of school-based mentoring programs also demonstrated that youth in the longest matches demonstrated more improvement than the average non-mentored youth on a range of school-related outcomes (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007).

Although rarely considered in youth mentoring, longer and stronger relationships are often mutually beneficial. Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that mentors stand nothing to gain. When mentors do not derive benefits, relationships are at greater risk for early termination (Snyder, Clary, & Stukas, 2000). One-sided relationships drain mentors of enthusiasm and leave mentees feeling burdened by the imbalance. Alternatively, when mentees see that admired adults find it personally rewarding to spend time with them, they feel a new surge of self-worth and empowerment. As one mentor wrote to her mentee:

"You've taught me some very big lessons—about love, about strength of character, about dedication, and about myself. I was so afraid when we first met that you would reject me, that I would fail. But you helped me overcome my fears when you let me into your life."

—Arlene, in Barrett, et al., 2004

Practical Implications

As the above review has made clear, mentors and youth are likely to encounter both rewards and challenges in the formation and development of their relationship. Match support is thus essential for mentors and youth, particularly during the early, more fragile stages of the relationship. Programs that offer adequate infrastructure increase the likelihood that close relationships will be forged and endure during difficult periods (DuBois et al., 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2002). In fact, program practices that support the mentor and relationship (i.e., training mentors, offering structured activities for

mentors and youth, having high expectations for frequency of contact, and monitoring overall program implementation) produce stronger positive effects (DuBois et al., 2002). These practices, which speak to a program's ability to not only match mentors and youth but also sustain those matches, converge with the beneficial practices identified by other researchers (Herrera et al., 2000; Herrera et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Every mentoring relationship is different—a unique blend of the volunteer's and youth's experiences, personalities, and circumstances. Success requires motivation, commitment, and flexibility on the part of the adult and youth, along with concerted effort on the part of the program to support each match in all of its complexity. The guidelines and suggestions that are presented here and elsewhere are likely to be most effective when they are used not strictly, but as a framework that leaves room for volunteers' intuitive wisdom and youths' developmental needs.

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Notes

Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs

Research suggests that the benefits for youth participating in mentoring relationships are strongly related to the degree of closeness that is formed between mentors and mentees. However, many mentoring programs struggle to cultivate these types of relationships in their programs. In her article, Dr. Rhodes describes the importance of fostering relationships that are built on trust, offer support, and engage mentors and mentees in mutually enjoyable activities. This action section provides two tangible tools that programs can use to encourage closer, more effective relationships between mentors and mentees. The first tool is a series of questions that programs can ask mentors and mentees during supervision to assess the degree of closeness and strength of the mentoring relationships. The second tool is a pledge that programs can use before matching to help mentors understand and reflect on the commitment they are about to make.

Supervision Questions for Mentors

Frequency: How often do you meet with your mentee?	
<p>Rationale:</p> <p>Successful mentoring relationships are built on consistent and frequent match meetings. This question will help programs learn more about the regularity of match contact and identify if either the mentor or mentee is having difficulty meeting the match commitment.</p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that mentors are screened for their ability to meet the program's requirements for match meetings. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a mentor job description and contract that describes required commitment for mentoring. <input type="checkbox"/> Sponsor program-wide events that can help mentors and mentees meet consistently and frequently. For school-based mentoring programs, these events can be used to promote contact during summer months.

Support: How are you building a trusting and supportive relationship with your mentee?

Rationale:

Effective mentors build trust with their mentees by offering support and encouragement. Programs can use this question to assess the closeness of the mentoring relationship and the degree of support that mentors offer mentees. If, for example, the mentor knows about a particular challenge the mentee is facing it may demonstrate that the mentee feels comfortable discussing personal or difficult issues with the mentor. This comfort level is important to developing a close relationship.

Strategies:

- Provide opportunities for new mentors to learn from experienced mentors about building trust and offering support to mentees.
- Use matching strategies that focus on similarity of interests and personality between mentors and mentees.
- Provide training for mentors that includes active listening, information about the mentor/mentee relationship cycle, issues that youth in your program face, and trust building.

Structure: How do you spend time with your mentee?

Rationale:

The dynamics between mentors and mentees are very important in predicting positive outcomes for youth. Relationships that are youth-focused and youth-driven are more effective than those that are centered on the mentor. This question provides programs with insight into relationship dynamics through better understanding of the types of activities that mentors and mentees do together and the decision-making process for selecting those activities.

Strategies:

- Develop a resource book of activities that mentors and mentees can do together.
- Provide training to mentors about the differences between prescriptive and developmental approaches to working with youth.
- Observe matches and offer feedback to mentors on strategies to build trust, strengthen the relationship, and overcome any challenges.
- Develop a library of games and equipment that mentors and mentees can check out and use during their time together.

Guidance: How do you provide guidance to your mentee?

Rationale:

Effective mentors act as positive role models and help guide youth as they navigate their worlds. Research suggests that unconditionally supportive relationships, without guidance and structure, do not result in youth benefits. This question can help programs assess the ways in which mentors provide their mentees with tools and resources to achieve goals and solve problems.

Strategies:

- As program staff, model positive behaviors to your mentors and mentees.
- Have mentors recite a pledge that demonstrates their commitment to role modeling positive behaviors.
- Encourage mentors to demonstrate compassion and positive behavior when they are in public with their mentee.
- Provide mentors with training on goal setting with youth. Stress the importance of honoring youth-initiated (and not mentor-directed) goals.

Mentor Efficacy: How confident do you feel in your role as a mentor?

Rationale:

A mentor's belief in his or her ability to be effective is a key indicator of future success. Programs can use this question to assess how their mentors are feeling about their role and identify areas of concern. Are mentors prepared for their roles? In what ways has the relationship met their expectations? Do they feel like they have the necessary skills and support to be effective? What can the program do to make them feel more comfortable?

Strategies:

- Provide high-quality initial and ongoing training for mentors.
- Develop a proactive approach to mentor support by reaching out to them instead of waiting to be contacted.
- Offer mentor support groups to facilitate sharing of common experiences and group problem-solving.
- Recognize mentors for their successes as well as their continued commitment to mentees.
- Use screening questions that assess the level of support mentors need to feel confident in their new roles.

Supervision Questions for Mentees

Frequency: How often do you meet with your mentor?

Rationale:

Successful mentoring relationships are built on consistent and frequent match meetings. This question provides insight into the mentee's perception of the match. Are they meeting regularly? Is the mentor dependable and consistent?

Strategies:

- Offer mentee orientation and training that include information about the program's requirements.
- Have mentees sign a contract that describes their commitment to the program.
- Use screening techniques to ensure the eligibility and appropriateness of mentees.
- Provide recognition to mentees who are regularly meeting with mentors.
- Sponsor program-wide events that can help mentors and mentees meet consistently and frequently. For school-based mentoring programs, these events can be used to promote contact during summer months.

Support: How does your mentor support you?

Rationale:

In order to build trust, mentees must feel safe and supported by their mentors. This question offers mentees an important opportunity to think about and share how their mentors have encouraged them. Has the mentor been available for help during a difficult time? If the mentee was upset or worried about something, would they talk about it with their mentor?

Strategies:

- Make sure to give mentees a realistic description of what a mentor is and is not before they are matched.
- Offer structured opportunities for mentors and mentees to build trust through program-sponsored activities.
- Relay important information about the mentee's circumstances to his/her mentor.
- Provide training for mentees on communication skills and relationship building.

Structure: What do you and your mentor do together?

Rationale:

In successful mentoring relationships, mentees feel empowered and included. Mentors and mentees should mutually agree on activities that promote closeness and growth. This question provides information about mentees' perceptions of the relationship dynamics and their feelings about their relationships.

Strategies:

- Provide mentees with activity guides and resources for time spent with their mentors.
- Offer training to mentees about how to make decisions in their relationship with a mentor.
- Sponsor program-wide activities that are fun for mentors and mentees.

Guidance: What have you learned from your mentor?

Rationale:

Mentors can be important guides and role models for mentees. However, the mentee decides what he/she has learned from the good intentions of the mentor. Therefore, by asking this question, programs can gain a better understanding of how the guidance of mentors has filtered down into the learning of mentees. Programs can also tailor this question to better understand if the mentor has helped the mentee achieve a goal (e.g., how did your mentor help you to make the basketball team? In what ways did your mentor inspire you to do better in school?)

Strategies:

- Provide training for mentor-mentee pairs on goal-setting.
- Give mentees opportunities to reflect on their growth.
- Encourage mentors and mentees to keep portfolios of their time together.

Mentee Engagement: How comfortable do you feel asking for help from your mentor (e.g. schoolwork, relationships, family, and problems)?

Rationale:

In order to fully gain access to the important benefits of mentoring, mentees must feel comfortable enough to ask their mentors for help, guidance, and assistance. This question provides insight into the degree of trust in the relationship and the willingness and ability of the mentee to reach out to ask for help.

Strategies:

- Conduct a mentee orientation and training, which includes information about the role of the mentor.
- Teach mentees to ask for help through training, role playing, or stories from former mentees in the program that have benefited from mentoring.
- Encourage mentors to model the desired behavior by asking for help, admitting to mentees when they don't know the answer, and working with others to find a solution.

The Mentor's Pledge

I commit to making a difference;
to support, guide, and be a role model.

I commit to being consistent;
to be a steady figure over time, to be persistent, and to help another persevere.

I commit to encouraging another;
by listening, by understanding, by fostering strengths, and by showing empathy.

I commit to building a mutual relationship;
to enter the world of someone else, to hear about new dreams and challenges, to share
my own stories, and to respect the differences between us.

I commit to asking for assistance;
when I need my own support, when the struggles of a child are bigger than I can handle,
when I am unsure.

I commit to recognizing;
that change often comes in small steps that barely leave footprints, that victories are
often unseen or unspoken, and that obstacles will always be present.

I commit to remaining sympathetic;
to the storms weathered, to the adversity faced, and to the experiences that occurred
long before this child entered my life.

I commit to realizing;
that my actions carry new weight and responsibility, that my role can never be taken
lightly, that my life will also change with this experience.

I commit to being a mentor.

Notes

Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs

MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. The leader in expanding the power of mentoring to millions of young Americans that want and need adult mentors. www.mentoring.org

- Keeping Matches Together, article from Research Corner.
www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner/keeping_matches_together.php
- Learn to Mentor Toolkit—A Resource and Training Guide for New Mentors
apps.mentoring.org/training/TMT/Mentor_training_toolkit.pdf
- Mentee Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet
www.mentoring.org/program_staff/eeptoolkit/operations/orientation/mentee_roles_responsibilities.doc
- Mentor Guidelines and Code of Conduct
www.mentoring.org/program_staff/eeptoolkit/operations/orientation/mentor_code_of_conduct.doc
- Ongoing Support and Supervision
www.mentoring.org/program_staff/support/ongoing_support_supervision_and_monitoring.php

Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota. State Mentoring Partnership that provides support and advocacy for mentoring efforts in the state of Minnesota. www.mentoringworks.org

- Tools for Mentoring Adolescents: Let's Get Real: Promoting Positive, Honest, Communication with your Mentee
www.mentoringworks.org/sites/a234b4c8-ec92-4a0c-8351-434a90b6c1cc/uploads/TMA-_5_Let_s_Get_Real-_Positive_Communication.pdf

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory - National Mentoring Center. National organization that provides training and technical assistance to youth mentoring programs. www.nwrel.org/mentoring

- Supporting Mentors, Technical assistance packet.
www.nwrel.org/mentoring/pdf/packsix.pdf
- Training New Mentees
www.nwrel.org/mentoring/pdf/training_new_mentees.pdf

Notes

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MENTOR is leading the national movement to connect young Americans to the power of mentoring. As a national advocate and expert resource for mentoring, in concert with a nationwide network of state and local *Mentoring Partnerships*, MENTOR delivers the research, policy recommendations, and practical performance tools needed to help make quality mentoring a reality for more of America's youth.

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