



Research Corner: *Keeping Matches Together*

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Background

Most staff can easily point to the "magical matches" in their programs-pairs in which a mentor's support and guidance has enabled a young person to overcome very difficult circumstances. These relationships are usually characterized by regular meetings over relatively long periods of time, and mutual benefits. But did you know that as many as half of volunteer mentoring relationships terminate within the first few months?

This fact sheet will focus on the promise of longer lasting relationships-and the pitfalls of sooner-than-expected terminations. It also will provide several suggestions for encouraging longevity and managing losses:

- Unexpected terminations can occur for a wide variety of reasons, many of which are beyond the mentors' control (e.g., competing relationships, sabotage from friends or family, graduations, moving, parental remarriage).
- On the other hand, volunteers sometimes decide to terminate relationships.
- Mentors may quit because they fear that they are being ineffective and do not want to risk failure or because they perceive a lack of effort or appreciation on the part of their mentee.
- Mentors might gradually turn away because they find that the personal investment required to work with troubled adolescents exceeds their expectations, particularly if involvement is drawing them away from work and family obligations. Moreover, they are not always aware of the many resources that are available to help them - through services in the community at large or through the mentoring program that matched them - and thus see all of the youth's issues as falling within their purview.
- For still other mentors, the difficult circumstance or neediness of their mentees can ignite painful or unwelcome memories and overwhelm their capacity to help. Whatever the reasons, early terminations should be taken seriously and handled with care.³

Research

Jean Grossman and I analyzed data from the national Big Brothers Big Sisters study, examining whether the effects of mentoring relationships varied as a function of their duration. First, we categorized the mentored youth into groups depending on how long their matches lasted. Despite the year-long commitment that was made by the youth and volunteers, 19% of the

relationships terminated within 6 months and an additional 36% remained within seven to eleven months. Forty-five percent of the pairs remained together for 12 months or more.

- Youth who were in matches that terminated within the first six months suffered larger drops in feelings of self-worth and perceived scholastic competence than youth who had never been matched with a mentor (controls).
- On the other hand, youth who were in matches that lasted more than twelve months reported significantly higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance, and scholastic competence; they also reported that their relationship with their parents had improved, that school had become more rewarding, and that both their drug and alcohol use had declined!

Along similar lines, Ellen Slicker and Douglas Palmer found that students who were "effectively mentored" (as measured by the quality and length of the relationship) had better academic outcomes than controls, whereas those whose relationships terminated prematurely experienced a significant decline in self-concept when compared with the students who were not mentored at all.⁵

Findings David DuBois and colleagues support this pattern.⁶

- They used a Meta-Analysis to review 55 evaluations of youth mentoring programs.

There was substantial variation in program effectiveness across studies:

- Stronger effects emerged among those youth who had closer mentoring relationships, as measured by frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and longevity.
- Program practices that ensured longevity included:
 - Training for mentors;
 - Structured activities for mentors and youth;
 - Expectations for frequency of contact;
 - Support and involvement of parents; and
 - Monitoring of overall program implementation.

These findings converge with other studies. Cynthia Sipe, for example, reviewed the literature on mentoring and found three features that are essential to the success of any mentoring program:

- Screening;
- Orientation and training; and
- Support and supervision.

She concluded that programs that missed one or more of these three features had greater difficulty sustaining relationships.⁷

Additional Considerations

Although we have focused on the potential difficulties that arise with early terminations, it is important to note that short-term relationships and prematurely terminated relationships are not uniformly difficult for young people.

- Some mentoring programs coincide with school calendars or have tightly stipulated endpoints that mentors and youth can anticipate from the start. In these instances, short-term relationships are unlikely to be as disappointing to youth. The unanticipated terminations are likely to be difficult for some youth.
- Just because a negative outcome is correlated with an early termination does not necessarily mean that the termination caused the outcome. The same factors that account for a youth's difficulties (e.g., unstable family situations, psychosocial or behavioral problems) might also lead to the termination.

Implications of findings

The best way to ensure that a mentoring relationship will run its full course is to carefully screen, train and support both the mentee and the mentor.

- Careful attention should be paid to whether or not mentees can make a commitment to and benefit from a mentoring relationship. In our study of relationship duration, we found several factors that were predictive of early termination.

For example, relationships with youth who had sustained emotional, sexual, or physical abuse were more likely to terminate prematurely. The challenges associated with mentoring adolescents who have been maltreated are substantial and, at least in the early stages of the relationship, often accompanied by fewer rewards. Program staff should provide close supervision to matches with such youth so that problems can be detected early.

Several studies suggest that youth who are vulnerable, but have not yet succumbed to relatively severe problems, are most likely to stick with and derive benefits from a mentor.

- Mentors should be provided with a realistic sense of what will be expected of them and the opportunity to reflect on whether they can meet the schedule and duration requirements. It is better to enlist fewer committed volunteers upfront than larger numbers who will not give it their full effort or will prematurely drop out.
- Relationships often progress through somewhat predictable phases including initial introductions, relationship building, growth, maturation and termination. An awareness of these stages can help program staff to gauge their level of involvement, predict periods of instability and assess progress.⁸

In addition to one-to-one contact with professional staff, brown bag lunches and other group activities can give mentors the opportunity to share their experiences with others.

Mentors should be made aware of the full range of resources - be they staff people within the organization or community-based resources - to which they can avail themselves in addressing youth's needs.

Because it is impossible for program staff to predetermine the course of relationships, during the screening and orientation process, they should make volunteers aware of the potential vulnerabilities adolescents face regarding loss and introduce strategies volunteers can use to handle terminations.

- Mentors who anticipate that they will need to initiate a termination should provide ample forewarning to their mentees.
- Adolescents should be permitted to grieve the loss, and subsequent matches should be construed as new opportunities as opposed to replacement of former mentors.

Additional research on the role of relationship duration and suggestions for how to handle terminations can also be found in my new book

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674007379/mentoringorg-20/103-3052847-9569460>) .

One factor that many program staff consider when attempting to make lasting matches is race. Is it o.k. to make cross-race matches?- or are same-race matches always preferable?

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