

INTRODUCTION

Mentors have always been assets to young people when they are experiencing periods of stress, depression, anxiety, or even more serious mental health challenges. Inherent in the role of “mentor” is the idea that this person is there for a youth through the good and the bad, but especially in times when life feels overwhelming or hopeless. Some of the earliest studies of youth mentoring programs in the United States document that not only can mentoring programs provide meaningful services to youth with a variety of mental health needs¹ and circumstances, but that they can provide meaningful support and reductions in symptoms of depression² and other mental health conditions.

This support has never been needed more for the nation’s children than today. One recent study found that over 25% of high school students reported declines in their mental health due to the pandemic.³ Another 2021 study found that two-thirds of all high school students felt like they were unable to cope with sources of stress in their lives.⁴ This impact has been even more profound on vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ youth, who have experienced extremely high rates of anxiety (73%) and depression (67%) during the pandemic. This pandemic has also had a negative impact on younger children, with 22% of parents of elementary-age children reporting worsening of their child’s mental and emotional health.⁵ Even 47% of the parents of *preschoolers* indicated that they were more concerned about their child’s social and emotional development.⁶ America’s youth were struggling with their mental health long before this pandemic hit — for example, the suicide rate for youth ages 10-24 increased by 60% between 2007 and 2018,⁷ with more recent data suggesting that rates for both boys and girls have increased during the pandemic.⁸ And with the nation’s system of mental health providers stretched thin during the pandemic, these challenges have only deepened for all young people and especially those from already-marginalized communities.

This crisis offers the nation’s adults a meaningful opportunity to step up and support the mental health and development of young people in this critical moment. The mentoring movement is well-positioned to step in and help young people reconnect to their schools, their communities, and their futures. Prior research on the intersection of mentoring and mental health suggests this will be a valuable and impactful form of support.

MAJOR RESEARCH FINDINGS

There have been several major meta-analyses and research syntheses on the topic of mentoring and mental health outcomes for youth.

- A 2016 evidence review by the National Mentoring Resource Center concluded

that mentoring programs specifically designed for youth with mental health challenges have demonstrated **meaningful positive impacts on mental health symptoms** and academic success of participating youth.

- Similarly, a 2013 meta-analysis⁹ of 14 evaluations of mental-health focused mentoring programs found a small-to-moderate effect across a variety of outcomes, including **internalizing and externalizing mental health symptoms, interpersonal relationships, and academic outcomes**. The meta-analysis concludes that “mentoring programs that target youth with emotional and behavioral problems are viable candidates for serving as alternative or adjunctive interventions to improve the current mental healthcare service delivery system.”
- An earlier meta-analysis¹⁰ reached a similar conclusion, noting that mentoring services had a small positive impact on youths’ internalizing and externalizing mental health symptoms, while also finding that mentoring these children **reduced the stress experienced by their parents**, suggesting that mentoring can be an asset to the families of youth with mental health needs.
- Leading mentoring scholar Jean Rhodes noted in her recent book, *Older and Wiser: New Ideas for Youth Mentoring in the 21st Century*, that the young people signing up for mentoring services already exhibit drastically elevated levels of mental health needs¹¹ and that parents often turn to mentoring in lieu of traditional mental health services. Fortunately, there is considerable research that trained paraprofessionals, such as volunteer mentors, can deliver lighter mental health interventions — often as effectively as professionals can.¹²

Research suggests that this type of specialized mentoring support, in which mentors are trained to support evidence-based interventions, can yield the strongest results.¹³ Other mentoring researchers have concluded that using the nation’s mentors in this way “could simultaneously **increase the number of youth receiving evidence-based mental health services** and reduce the burden on existing systems of care.”¹⁴

REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAMS FROM THE FIELD

Below we highlight just a few of the program models that illustrate how these services can be structured and the impact that they can have on young people.

- **Great Life Mentoring** is a program that’s been providing supportive mentoring relationships to youth receiving services from Columbia County (WA) Mental Health Services for several decades. In this program, youth receiving clinical support are also provided with a mentor who supports their engagement in the services and offers a caring relationship and social-emotional support. A study of the program’s outcomes found that youth in Great Life Mentoring had significantly better ratings of adaptive functioning and were far less likely to leave treatment prematurely than a comparison group of non-mentored youth. Impressively, the average match length in the program was over 3 years.¹⁵

- An evaluation of the **Eye to Eye** program, which pairs elementary and middle school youth with LD/ADHD with mentors in high school or college who also have LD/ADHD, found significant gains on symptoms of depression, self-esteem, and interpersonal relations, compared to similar youth not in the program.¹⁶ This program demonstrates that near peers can, with the right structure scaffolding their experience, be as effective as adults in providing this mentoring support.
- Studies of the **Big Brothers Big Sisters** program model have found meaningful impacts around youth mental health. One Canadian study¹⁷ found that “mentored youths ... reported significantly fewer behavioral problems and fewer symptoms of depression and social anxiety than did nonmentored youths.” Mentored “Littles” also demonstrated increased coping skills, with youth who received a full year of mentoring showing the strongest mental health benefits.
- The **Role of Risk study**, which also involved a number of Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies among other providers, determined that not only could mentoring programs provide meaningful services to youth with serious mental health needs and other elevated risk factors, but that the strongest and most consistent finding for participating youth was a reduction in their depressive symptoms.¹⁸
- An evaluation of the **Fostering Healthy Futures** program, which provides clinical supports and mentoring to youth recently placed in the foster care system, found significant impact in reducing mental health symptomatology, especially trauma symptoms, and increasing mental health service utilization.¹⁹
- A recent study of the **Mentor-UP** program, which offers school- and community-based mentoring over eight months to youth with hyperactivity and inattention problems in Italy, found that mentored youth experienced significant reductions on both of those issues compared to unmentored youth.²⁰
- Both the one-to-one and group versions of the **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances** have proven to produce meaningful results for those young people, with multiple studies highlighting improvements in internalized and externalized mental health symptoms, social problem solving, social skills, and parent reports of reduced stress.
- An evaluation of the **Rochester Resilience Project**, which used highly-trained paraprofessional mentors in elementary schools, found that participating youth showed improvements in behavioral, social-emotional, and learning problems compared to a control group of youth with similar mental health needs.²¹ The program had a statistically significant, positive effect on children’s task orientation, behavior control, assertiveness, and peer social skills.
- Lastly, the **Youth-Nominated Support Team** model, which has been provided to youth who have already attempted suicide, has proven to be a promising group mentoring approach for

reducing future deaths, particularly those resulting from drug overdoses.²²

PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

In looking across the research on effective mentoring interventions, there are several programmatic features that make these interventions successful:

- ***Providing mentoring to youth most likely to benefit*** - These interventions tended to be most effective when youth had mild to moderate mental health symptoms. Programs have also experienced difficulties offering mentoring to youth who have experienced extreme trauma that makes it challenging for them to form strong relationships with mentors.
- ***Providing robust mentor training*** - This is true both in programs where mentors are delivering some form of mental health intervention themselves

and in program models where mentors are working alongside clinicians to offer “supportive accountability” relationships that enhance treatment participation.

- ***Involving parents and caregivers directly*** - The work of mentors can not only be reinforced at home by parents and other caregivers, but in many cases, those caregivers also directly benefitted from the mentoring provided to the child in the form of decreased stress and increased feelings of support.
- ***Offering mentoring consistently*** - It is important for these young people to have consistent, long-term mentors who can understand their challenges, work closely with the family, shift their focus as the youth’s needs change, and provide a source of stability in a life with potentially many service providers coming and going.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

The research cited in this document demonstrates that mentors can have a meaningful positive impact on mental health symptoms and other factors. Mentoring is an innovative, evidence-based practice and, uniquely, is both a prevention and intervention strategy that can support young people of all demographics and backgrounds in all aspects of their lives. Mentors can even, when trained properly, deliver effective light mental health interventions - which has important implications at a time when there is unprecedented need for mental health supports for youth.

There are many paths forward to ensure that all youth in this country have a relationship with an adult that they can turn to when times are tough. MENTOR advocates for and supports legislation and policies that expand the quantity and quality of mentoring relationships across the country. Ultimately, to cultivate the strongest relationships and most effective outcomes for youth, intentional private and public investment into communities and programs is required.

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CITATIONS

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