

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children need positive relationships with caring adults. Parents generally fill this central need, but many children benefit from relationships with other adults to supplement—or in some cases, substitute for—relationships with their parents. Therefore, the mentoring of youth by adults is one of the more promising program approaches intended to promote positive youth outcomes. The mid- to late 1980s saw the number of mentoring programs grow as the need for caring relationships between at-risk youth and adults became more obvious, and the shortcomings of some traditional programs and services for young people became more apparent.

This synthesis examines the role that mentoring plays in helping youth develop a broad array of strengths and capacities in the following three domains of child well-being: education and cognitive attainment; health and safety; and social and emotional well-being. It is also worthwhile to consider the influence of mentoring on a fourth domain, self-sufficiency, as youth age into the early adult years. This report seeks to answer the following questions: What do mentoring programs look like? How do mentoring programs contribute to youth development (i.e., what resources do mentoring programs provide that support youth development)? What youth outcomes can we realistically expect mentoring programs to achieve? What are the characteristics of effective mentoring?

The programs in this report have all undergone evaluation. Our main goal is to include program evaluations that use a rigorous experimental methodology to test for the impact of program participation on youth outcomes. Those with rigorous experimental evaluations provide evidence that mentoring can lead to positive development. For our examination of the program elements associated with positive outcomes, we turn to both experimental and non-experimental studies. The experimentally evaluated programs referred to in this report are: Across Ages, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, The Buddy System, Building Essential Life Options Through New Goals (BELONG), and Career Beginnings. The non-experimental studies are: Campus Partners in Learning, Hospital Youth Mentoring Program, and Linking Lifetimes. Two additional programs are quasi-experimental: Raising Ambition Instills Self-Esteem (RAISE) and Sponsor-A-Scholar.

I. General Description of Mentoring Programs

Many of the rigorously evaluated programs have this in common: Mentoring is one component of a comprehensive intervention. Warm and close relationships with caring adults, supervision, and positive role models are the common resources and investments — or "inputs" — that mentoring interventions contribute to youth development. However, programs have varying components that also contribute to youth development, such as life skills training, academic tutoring, financial aid for college, and a community service requirement.

Mentors are often recruited from the community. Mentees are always at-risk youth. In accordance with "best practices," the evaluated programs all provide training and support for the mentoring relationship. Activities can be structured or unstructured, and revolve around both academic and social events. Most programs have guidelines for the expected frequency of mentor-mentee contact.

II. Youth Outcomes Associated with Mentoring Programs

Overall, youth participating in mentoring relationships improved on some important educational measures. Program evaluations consistently show that youth participating in mentoring programs have fewer unexcused absences from school than do similar youth not participating in mentoring programs. Youth participating in mentoring programs also had better attitudes and behaviors at school and have better chances of attending college. Further evaluation is needed to confirm whether mentoring improves grades.

Mentoring shows promise in helping youth develop healthy and safe behaviors. Compared with non-participants, youth who participate in programs that include mentoring have less drug and alcohol use (especially among minority youth) and – in some but not all studies -- fewer delinquent behaviors.

Mentoring improves a number of social and behavioral outcomes, although the effects are sometimes indirect. It is not clear from the research that mentoring improves young people's perception of their worth. However, research suggests that youth improve in this outcome because mentoring improves parental relationships, which improves youths' self-worth. In addition to experiencing improved relationships with parents, youth participating in mentoring had more emotional support from peers and more positive attitudes toward their elders and toward helping others.

The impact of mentoring programs on young adult self-sufficiency has not been well researched. The only study that addressed the effect of mentoring on young adult self-sufficiency shows that both youth who participated in a program with mentoring and those who did not have similar levels of employment and "productive activity" one year after high school (possibly due to higher percentages of experimental youth attending post-secondary education).

III. Implementation Characteristics that Promote or Weaken the Effectiveness of Mentoring Approach

Program practices and participant characteristics associated with youth outcomes.

Non-experimental analyses, while not as definitive as experimental evaluations, offer insights about program practices and characteristics associated with positive outcomes. Generally, significant positive effects of mentoring increase with relationship duration, with best results for relationships lasting more than 12 months. Short-lived relationships, on the other hand, have the potential to harm children. Other

characteristics associated with better youth outcomes include: frequent contact, youth-centered mentor-mentee relationships, and the mentee's positive perception of the mentoring relationship. Cross-race matches are as successful as same-race matches. Finally, mentees who are the most disadvantaged or at-risk are especially likely to gain from mentoring programs.

Characteristics shaping longer-lasting or higher quality relationships.

Regrettably, few studies use an experimental design to evaluate which program characteristics result in quality mentor-mentee relationships. However, evidence from less rigorous research methods indicate that the following program characteristics may promote higher-quality mentoring relationships: structure and planning, pre-match training, post-match training and support, supervision of the match, consideration of mentor/mentee interests in the matching process, social and academic activities (especially social, as such activities apparently help build trust), and adopting a youth-driven or "developmental" approach to the relationship. Cross-race matching appears to produce quality relationships as effectively as same-race matching.

IV. Unanswered Questions.

A number of well-designed program evaluations indicate that mentoring programs are beneficial to at-risk youth. Given accumulating evidence about the effectiveness of these programs, as well as the current widespread interest in initiating mentoring programs, further research in several areas would be particularly helpful to those seeking to implement such programs.

First, we need research that evaluates and compares variations in mentoring programs. Many of the programs reviewed here target adolescent youth for one-on-one mentoring as one of a variety of program supports. It would be useful to compare the impacts of different program components, models of mentoring relationships, and characteristics of participants, using an experimental design.

Second, we need to understand which program practices encourage adults to volunteer as mentors and to be effective mentors. We have learned that effective mentoring makes great demands on mentors and program structure. Effective mentors commit to a long-term mentoring relationship, have frequent and regular contact with their mentees, and participate in ongoing training and communication with program directors. Some potential mentors – college students, for example – may have difficulty meeting these requirements. Worthwhile mentors from the community may turn away from the time commitment of effective mentoring. *Should we simply discount these groups as a source of mentors?* Can we apply the "best practices" concepts learned thus far to research the trade-offs and benefits of different program practices? Could increased program structure or more frequent meetings supplement short-term mentoring relationships to compensate for their brevity? We have yet to learn the answers to these questions.

Finally, this mentoring synthesis identifies program practices that are associated with positive youth outcomes and quality mentoring relationships, but it also raises additional questions related to youth outcomes. Rigorous research exploring the measurement of *quality* mentoring and standards for best practices, the cost of mentoring programs, and the amount of training and on-going support of mentors necessary to achieve good outcomes can provide a host of practical suggestions and guidance to mentoring programs and their volunteers.