

Mentoring: Special People Providing Special Assistance

Providing children and adolescents with a mentor, particularly children and adolescents deemed at-risk, has been supported and encouraged over the past two decades by such various entities as the U.S. Department of Education (Cannata et al., 2005), the Center for Health Communication of the Harvard School of Public Health, as well as the largest and most well-known mentoring program, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS). Although it has been generally accepted that it is essential for youth to have a caring adult in their lives, the “mentoring movement” escalated with the publication in the 1990s of several research studies with positive outcomes for youth mentored by non-related adults, including the oft-cited Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program (Tierney et al., 1995; DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Mentoring programs have grown markedly as increasing numbers of children and youth have entered into relationships with a non-related adult over the past decade (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

Mentoring can be traced back to the character Mentor in Homer’s *Odyssey*, who was known as a trusted, wise friend. Traditionally, youth mentor programs such as BBBS operated in the community for children from single-parent households, primarily middle and early high school-age youth, ages 10-16. However, mentoring programs have also been established in business and school settings, including the South Carolina Department of Education Mentor Program which pairs experienced teachers with new teachers.

The positive effects shown in the BBBS community-based mentor program have led to mentor programs being developed for many different groups such as adjudicated and/or depressed youth, minority youth, youth in single-parent households and other special populations (Bauldry, 2006; Sipe, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). New mentoring practices have emerged in an attempt to meet the need to provide a mentor for all identified at-risk children and youth, such as group and e-mentoring (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

The study of BBBS, which stimulated the growth of mentoring programs, was an in-depth study of 959 youth, ages 10-16, at eight BBBS sites around the country. Youth who applied for a mentor were randomly assigned a mentor or served in the control group. In addition to reporting better relationships with their families and peers, data analyzed after 18 months found that mentored youth were:

- 46 per cent less likely to engage in antisocial activities
- 27 per cent less likely to initiate alcohol use
- 32 per cent less likely to hit someone
- 52 per cent less likely to have unexcused absences from school.

The analysis of various programs and outcomes

showed that certain conditions yielded more positive results. These conditions were frequent, consistent contact between mentor and youth, non-prescriptive relationships, and programmatic structures such as effective mentor screening, training, supervision and support (Tierney et al., 1995, rev. 2000). These conditions have been adopted as effective practices by many mentor programs.

An increasing emphasis on improving academic achievement of children and youth, along with program managers’ challenges to provide mentors for identified children and concerns for cost and liability, led to more programs, including the majority of BBBS programs becoming school-based (Herrera et al., 2007). School-based programs are very popular because they are seen as inherently positive by parents and schools, as they provide an extra caring person for the child. School-based mentoring programs operated by BBBS now serve 126,000 children nationwide. Ten agencies participated in the most recent impact study of these programs with youth, grades four through nine, in more than 70 schools nationwide (Herrera et al., 2007). Youth, teachers, and mentors were surveyed at the beginning of the program (Fall 2004), at the end of that aca-

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demical year (Spring 2005), and again in Fall 2005. Researchers also interviewed key school personnel, including principals and counselors, and collected program cost assessments. They found that programs varied widely in structure and procedures, including a wide range of volunteer ages, matching decisions, and meeting protocols, for example, whether they met individually or in a group setting. They also found that, although mentoring occurred in a school setting, academic improvement was not the primary focus for most programs. However, the school setting clearly did lend itself to the majority of matches engaging in some academic activities. The schools served were identified as low-income, with 80 percent of the children participating identified as receiving free or reduced lunch. Since household economic income has been found to be a key factor in academic success (Desimone, 1999), this group is important to reach. Seventy-seven percent of participants had difficulties in one of the following risk areas: academic performance, school behaviors (including attendance and conduct) and relationships.

Since relationships are seen as the vehicle for change in mentoring programs (Rhodes et al., 2000), it is significant to note that youth continued to report feeling close to their mentor,

despite the shortened span of time for the relationship to develop, while mentors did not report the closeness found in the earlier community-based study. The mentors themselves were very different from those found in a typical community-based program, with older youth serving as mentors: half were high school students and an additional twenty percent were college students.

Positive outcomes for children such as improved academic performance, including the quality of class work and homework completions, and improved attendance and disciplinary records were reported by teachers. Children reported feeling more confident about school and liked having someone they could talk to and look up to in addition to their parent. Consistent with the earlier study, longer matches with strong relationships yielded the most positive results. In fact, youth whose relationships did not continue into the second year fared worse than non-mentored peers on several measures (Herrera, et al., 2007).

In a review of 55 mentoring research studies, DuBois et al. (2002) found a modest positive benefit for average youth. Those programs that used "effective practices," which had a strong theoretical underpinning and were based on empirical evidence such as the BBBS studies, had the most positive effect. More positive effects for children and youth experiencing environmental risk factors than individual factors alone, such as academic achievement, were also found. The fact that poorly implemented programs can have not just a neutral effect, but a negative effect, was also noted.

A study of six colleges which operated mentoring programs for at-risk children and youth found that significant administrative support is critical when engaging college students as mentors with children, so that consistent, positive relationships can develop (Tierney & Branch, 1992).

Karcher (2005) found in a study of connectedness with mentored elementary children that mentors' attendance positively affected children's social skills, self-management and self-esteem, and that mentored children felt more connected to school and their parents. Negative effects were also found if the mentor's attendance was inconsistent, which reinforces the need for programs to focus on methods of encouraging strong, consistent relationships.

Most mentoring programs have focused on adolescents, but, many new programs are focusing on younger children. Cavell and Smith (DuBois & Karcher, 2005) encourage such programs to focus on children with identified risk factors, hypothesizing that these efforts might prevent more serious, internalized challenges from developing in adolescence. They also note that limitations due to children's cognitive abilities might restrict their ability to benefit from some mentoring activities, although not enough is known about what is needed for change to occur. For example, positive benefits have been reported from regular lunch-time visits to high-risk children although these visits had been intended as the control for the study.

Given the number of mentoring programs for children and youth, practitioners, researchers and funders are urging continuing research on mentoring, especially given the number of programs attempting to serve diverse populations in diverse settings (Karcher et al., 2006). "We must find out why different types of mentoring are effective for some, but not others, and how we can strengthen and improve mentoring efforts based on this understanding" (MENTOR, 2006). While there is no doubt that quality programs are needed, and that many children need assistance that they do not regularly receive, it is essential that the programs available meet the high expectations that they have been developed to achieve.

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