

# Youth Mentoring and Resilience: Implications for Practice

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*Despite findings indicating the importance of non-parental adults in the lives of youth, there is little research on these relationships, including those that occur in the context of youth mentoring. Compounding this problem is a positive slant taken towards youth mentoring in the media, often unsubstantiated by empirical evidence. This article outlines the research on youth mentoring by focusing on comprehensive literature reviews and evaluations of factors that influence the effectiveness and closeness of mentoring relationships. Review articles come to different conclusions about mentoring, in part because of differential emphasis on particular research findings. Further research indicates the importance of relationship duration and structure, as well as mentor skills, on youth outcomes. Implications for youth mentoring practices, including utilizing empirically-based mentor training, program implementation and evaluation of services, reducing volunteer attrition, and connecting youth mentoring with other services, are discussed.*

## Introduction

Researchers focusing on a variety of situations, including war, natural disasters, family violence, extreme poverty, and parental mental illness, have uncovered traits, conditions, and situations that enable vulnerable children and youth to achieve healthy outcomes despite these profound risks (Masten, 2001). Consistently, three clusters of protective factors have been recognized as fostering psychological resilience: (1) characteristics of the individual, such as intelligence and an appealing disposition; (2) characteristics of the family, such as its consistent and close relationships and socioeconomic advantages; and (3) characteristics of the community, such as bonds to non-related adults who are positive role models, connections with community organizations, and good schools (Masten & Coatworth, 1998). Although the influence of the first two types of factors in this triad of protective factors has been fairly well established, relatively few studies have focused specifically

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on the protective qualities of support outside the family (Garmezy, 1985). Indeed, the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development programs indexed over 600 sessions on parents, but only 10 sessions on youth mentoring.

This focus suggests a bias in western culture that may help explain the relatively scant attention that has been afforded to mentoring relationships by researchers. Nonetheless, in a study of urban youth with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, 82% reported having a non-parent adult who they could count on and who was a significant influence on them (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). In another study, almost 54% of youth surveyed indicated they had a natural mentor, and those with mentors reported engaging in fewer problem behaviors and having more positive attitudes toward school (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Yet, because parents are considered solely responsible for their children, the involvement of other adults is often met with suspicion and discomfort and, within the scholarly literature on child development, attention to maternal influences during early childhood has dominated developmental psychology. By contrast, there are few theoretical frameworks to guide research questions on the influence of adults who are not parents. Nor do we have an adequate theory about the influence of adults throughout the life span, not just during early childhood.

Compounding these problems for researchers is the hyperbole that often surrounds mentoring programs. Unsubstantiated claims about mentoring's effectiveness have lent a patina of superficiality to the field that discourages investigators from pursuing serious studies. And when researchers do persevere to undertake complex analyses, the "good-news-only" mentality within the media tends to undermine the impact of any legitimate empirical findings they may report. Mentoring strikes deep emotional chords and has attracted powerful constituents who tend to look to evaluations to confirm what they intuitively hold to be true. As such, the field of youth mentoring has, to a certain extent, taken on a public life of its own—a life that is, at times, removed from empirical and theoretical grounding. A relatively small base of evidence for quality mentoring programs has spawned decreasingly intensive approaches, which are rapidly eclipsing their predecessors. These newer programs tend to be relatively small and diversified, with less reliance on traditional community-based approaches.

Yet it is important to keep in mind just how mentoring relationships impact youth, and to accurately assess what mentoring can, and cannot do, to facilitate youth development. Such knowledge would help create more effective mentoring programs. So what do we know about youth mentoring?

A meta-analysis conducted by DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) represents the most scientifically rigorous verdict on the effectiveness of youth mentoring, but was reached over five years ago and distilled 55 evaluations. The researchers began by identifying all of the relevant studies on the topic. To be included in the analyses, studies had to meet several criteria. First, the evaluated program needed to include a one-to-one relationship in which an older, more experienced mentor was paired with a younger (under 19 years old) mentee. Second, the study had to examine empirically the effects of participation in a mentoring program, by pre-

program versus post-program comparisons of the same group of youth, or by comparisons between one group of youth receiving mentoring and another group not receiving mentoring. After identifying relevant studies, the researchers summarized the results of each study and then calculated effect sizes across the entire group of studies. The favorable effects of mentoring programs were found to hold true across relatively diverse types of program samples, including programs in which mentoring was provided alone or in conjunction with other services. Positive effects were found both in programs that had general goals and in those with more focused goals, and held up for youth of varying backgrounds and demographic characteristics. Among the small number of studies that included follow-up assessments, the benefits of mentoring appeared to extend a year or more beyond the end of a youth's participation in the program. As DuBois, Holloway, *et al.* (2002) note, however, the magnitude of these effects on the average youth participating in a mentoring program was quite modest. Although there was considerable variation across studies, the effect size across the samples was relatively small (0.14), particularly in comparison with the effect sizes that have been found in meta-analyses of other prevention programs for children and adolescents (see, e.g., Durlak & Wells, 1997; Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). Notably, however, the study found relationship longevity and closeness, clear expectations, a focus on instrumental goals, and ongoing support to volunteer mentors, led to particular effects on youth outcomes. These and other factors will be discussed in the following section.

#### *Understanding Variation*

Several lines of research have investigated factors that influence the variation in closeness and effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Relationship duration, for example, appears to be a key determinant of effectiveness. In a secondary analysis of data from the pivotal Big Brothers Big Sisters of America study of community-based mentoring (Grossman & Tierney, 1998), Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that positive effects on youth outcomes became progressively stronger as relationships persisted for longer periods of time. Natural mentoring relationships that endure for multiple years have also shown the strongest effects (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003; McLearn, Colasanto, & Schoen, 1998; Werner, 1995). Duration alone is not sufficient, however, as a relationship could be long-lasting yet participants may meet only sporadically. Regular contact over time is important, and can enhance the mentee's feelings of security and attachment in the mentoring and other important relationships (Keller, 2005; Rhodes, 2005).

Several additional factors associated with better outcomes include the background characteristics of the mentor and the effectiveness of the mentor in addressing the developmental needs of the child, including prior experience in helping roles or occupations (DuBois, Holloway, *et al.*, 2002), an ability to demonstrate appreciation of salient socioeconomic and cultural influences in the youth's life (Hirsch, 2005), and a sense of efficacy for being able to mentor young people (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Hirsch, 2005; Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005; Parra, DuBois,

Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002). The ability to model relevant behaviors, such as skills required for job performance in work settings, appears to be of further benefit (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2005), as does refraining from actions (e.g., substance use) that may encourage youth to adopt unhealthy behaviours (Beam, Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, & Chen, 2002).

Moreover, relationships that are youth-centred, as opposed to being driven primarily by the interests or expectations of the mentor (sometimes also referred to as prescriptive), have been found to predict greater relationship quality and duration (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Styles & Morrow, 1992). A youth-driven approach, however, needs to be balanced with structure and goals. Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne (2004), for example, found that outcomes were most favourable when youth reported experiencing both structure and support from their mentors. By contrast, no benefits were evident for an unconditionally supportive relationship type, thus suggesting a need for mentors to be more than simply “good friends.” Attunement to the needs and interests of the youth and the ability to adapt his or her approach accordingly are also important indicators of relationship effectiveness (Pryce, 2006; Spencer, 2006).

### **Implications for Youth Mentoring Practice**

As the above review has made clear, youth mentoring relationships are not consistent in their effects. Variation among mentoring relationships is influenced by program characteristics, relationship duration and structure, and mentor skills. To better serve youth, mentoring programs must be conceptualized, designed, and implemented effectively in order to produce consistent and positive outcomes (Weissberg, Caplan, & Sivo, 1989). Unfortunately, standards for identifying effective programs and policies are in short supply. Evaluations that employ sound measures and rigorous methods are needed to determine the efficacy of the various approaches to mentoring (Flay *et al.*, 2005). Several high-quality random assignment evaluations of community-based and school-based programs are currently underway: Friends of the Children (Grossman, in press), the National Guard Youth Challenge program (Brock, in press), Big Brothers Big Sisters of America school-based mentoring programs (Herrera *et al.*, 2007), the Peer Mentoring Program (Karcher, in press), and the US Department of Education Student Mentoring Program (Bernstein & Hunt, in press). Their findings will fall on fertile soil and provide grist for subsequent meta-analyses and secondary analyses. Once identified, the most efficacious approaches should be carefully disseminated through manuals appropriate for training, and be supported through ample, ongoing supervision (Flay *et al.*, 2005). In the meantime, the findings compiled above suggest a range of strategies that could significantly advance the field.

#### *Develop and Empirically Validate Training Protocols*

No matter how well a mentoring program is designed and conceptualized, it will not achieve its potential benefits if implementers lack the training and organizational

support to carry them out with fidelity (Durlak & Wells, 1997). As mentoring continues to expand, it will be important to incorporate evidence-based practices into training and replication manuals, which specify the content and sequencing of various components. Careful documentation of implementation will enable practitioners to know what shortcomings to address if interventions fail to achieve desired outcomes. This training should be informed by observations and research, with a particular eye toward what constitutes high-quality mentoring relationships. Pre-match and ongoing trainings should include coverage of such topics as the importance of consistency, handling terminations, ethical quandaries, advocacy on behalf the child, gifts and money, working with the child's family/school, and diversity issues. Attention to training other relevant parties (i.e., the caseworkers, mentees) and guidance around the kind of relationships that agencies and program staff should establish with parents is also needed. Several important considerations, including a well-delineated, guiding conceptual framework, a user-friendly interface, and well-coordinated links to national-practice networks, would help to ensure widespread and consistent utilization of training materials. Along these lines, programs should more effectively capitalize on the Internet as a portal for initial and ongoing training and evaluation. The flexibility, convenience, and interactive nature of this medium, particularly in the context of a volunteer effort that is inherently decentralized, has yet to be fully realized.

#### *Reduce Volunteer Attrition*

A lack of systematic standards for training and support might help to explain the growing difficulties with volunteer retention, a particularly troubling trend given the adverse effects associated with breakdowns of relationships (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Indeed, high rates of volunteer attrition represent a major drain on staff and financial resources in mentoring programs, particularly given the effort involved in recruiting, screening, training, and matching volunteers. To reduce attrition, programs should set reasonable goals regarding the number of youth they intend to serve, and seek out technical assistance when needed. Previous research sheds little light onto the subtle dynamics and vulnerabilities that could jeopardize the bond. Yet mentors and youth often experience difficulties and disappointment, particularly during the first few months of the match, which forecast premature terminations (Rhodes, 2002). A series of exploratory interviews with volunteers and youth in successful and terminated relationships (Spencer, 2006) revealed that unfulfilled expectations, disappointment, pragmatic concerns, and common frustrations often emerge in the early, vulnerable stages. Research (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Kalbfleisch, 2002) has further suggested that difficulties often arise from such failings as the misuse of power (e.g., exploitation), inappropriate boundaries, (e.g., breaching confidentiality, improper disclosures), and communication breakdowns (e.g., breaking commitments). The growing body of research on volunteer and employee recruitment and retention (e.g., Branham, 2006; Stukas, Daly, & Clary, 2006; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999) as well as ongoing qualitative inquiry into the factors

underlying mentor attrition (Philip, 2003; Spencer, 2006) should be brought to bear on this issue. Research on the motivation of mentors, the benefits that they derive, and the qualities of enduring and effective matches are also likely to be beneficial in this regard (Stukas *et al.*, 2006). Within this context, it will be important to explore optimal strategies for balancing the needs of children for intensity with the time constraints and interests of volunteers. Studies that enable programs to separate the absolutely necessary inputs from those that are merely recommended will foster better decision-making in this regard. With better attention to retention, volunteers are likely to reap more benefits (Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007) and programs will be relieved of some of the pressure to recruit new volunteers.

#### *Connect Mentoring with Other Youth Settings*

Caring adult–youth relationships have never been the sole province of mentoring programs. After-school programs, summer camps, competitive sports teams, church youth groups, and other settings represent rich contexts for the formation of strong intergenerational ties (Foster-Bey, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Adults in these settings are often afforded ongoing opportunities to engage youth in the sorts of informal conversations and enjoyable activities that can give rise to close bonds (Rhodes, 2004). Developing and evaluating strategies that facilitate skillful, intentional mentoring and determining how to encourage youth to recruit adults represent promising new directions for policy with potentially far-reaching implications (Clary & Rhodes, 2006; Larson, 2006; Smith & Smoll, 2002). We can also learn from the strategies and lessons that have emerged in other youth settings. For example, approaches to assessing program characteristics, youth–adult engagement, and implementation issues related to implementation have appeared in the after-school literature (see Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Vandell, Schumow, & Posner, 2005; High Scope, 2007) and could be incorporated into the mentoring assessment and training.

#### **Conclusion**

Much remains to be done to understand the complexities of mentor relationships and to determine the circumstances under which mentoring programs make a difference in the lives of youth. At this stage, we can safely say that mentoring is, by and large, a modestly effective intervention for youth who are already coping relatively well under somewhat difficult circumstances. In some cases it can do more harm than good; in others it can have extraordinarily influential effects. The balance can, and should, be tipped toward the latter. A deeper understanding of mentoring relationships, combined with high quality programs, enriched settings, and a better integration of research and practice, will better position mentoring programs to harness the full potential of youth mentoring.

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